

Special Focus: Buddhism and Resilience

Resilient Relations: Rethinking Truth, Reconciliation, and Justice in Cambodia

Darcie DeAngelo

Binghamton University

In her critique of the Khmer Rouge tribunals, the legal scholar Virginia Hancock suggests that tribunal forms of justice could fail Cambodia. For them to succeed, she recommends that the tribunals account for the fact that Buddhism emphasizes a “community-oriented theory of crimes against humanity,” in that the judges should not understand harm as involving only individual culprits and victims (2008: 88). This individuality, she suggests, does not consider the modes of resilience enacted by Theravada Buddhists. As I will show in this paper, some Cambodians have dealt with violence from the past differently than a strict categorization of perpetrator and victim. Who can be held accountable for that violence if everyone is, at once, perpetrator and victim? Given this mode of being-in-the-world, how do people find resilience in the face of past trauma?

Keywords: relationality, Theravada Buddhism, postwar, resilience, Cambodia

In 2010, when I first visited Cambodia, I lived in the K5 belt, the most densely contaminated minefield in the world at over one thousand landmines per linear mile. I worked with health practitioners who rehabilitated amputees. In the village restaurant, a television stood on a bamboo shelf in the center of a mass of plastic tables. Normally, we watched karaoke videos or soap operas. One day it showed some of the trial of a Khmer Rouge (KR) general. I watched it with a woman in her thirties. The woman, my friend and a partner to one of the staff at the amputee center, shook her head at me and said, “He killed. He should die.”

And then she swiped her finger along her neck to mimic the slitting of the throat.

My friend was happy the KR general was on trial, associating it with a certain model of justice. Such an idea of justice follows the model of a justice based on retributive justice—a perpetrator pays for what they did to victims. There are clear lines to be drawn—someone must be forgiven or punished. Contemporary scholars of mass atrocities and mass atrocity prevention have outlined ways in which justice can be reconfigured to “restorative justice,” as a counter to the ideas of retribution or even tribunal justice, which itself is a “contested concept” characterized by disagreements (Waller

2016). On the ground, though, the people with whom I spoke understand both tribunals and so-called restorative justice models to be based on retribution, as did my friend who suggested the KR general should die.

Moreover, the “truth” in “truth and reconciliation” depends on a consistent and past compartmentalization of those who abused human rights and those whose human rights were violated. A tribunal for crimes against humanity is meant to enforce this idea of justice in a way that is considered “transitional justice” but not “restorative justice.” Indeed, the trial of the KR general was part of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). The ECCC, as described in its pamphlet, is a hybrid UN and Cambodian tribunal dedicated to trying the ones “most responsible” for the violence committed during the KR regime. The ECCC is modeled on other hybrid international courts which themselves parallel the ideologies of truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs). However, such tribunals are meant to bring a form of criminal justice retribution to those who perpetrated atrocities. They are not based on restorative justice models.¹ They arise after the litigation of such crimes as “transitional justice.” Both hybrid courts and TRCs, though, depend on the individual subject at its center. Both are implemented throughout the world as the *de facto* procedure for dealing with atrocities and war crimes, from civil wars to colonial subjugation.

Scholars have described friction between local models of reconciliation and the global commissions to address crimes against humanity after war or violence (Hinton 2010). The anthropologist Ronald Niezen describes frictions in his analysis of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), he says, “was limited by its mandate to... ‘survivor centric’ or (comparatively) ‘victim centric’ forms of inquiry” (Niezen 2017). By this he suggests that the TRC in Canada was focused not on retribution, since punitive measures were beyond the scope of its purview, but rather that it was an attempt to bring attention to harms perpetrated and the dignity of the victims.

“Indignation,” Neizen suggests, is integral to the Western history of thought about injustice and is useful as a means to evoke “[the preservation] of the self and society from contamination” (16). Here, the self and society are given concepts dependent on a sense of individual personhood which can be “contaminated.” As scholars of Southeast Asia have pointed out (Thompson 2004; Klima 2002), such concepts may differ in Cambodia’s context. Often victims are qualified by how *resilient* they are in the face of violence and tragedy. Perhaps without the logic of taken-for-granted concepts, *resilience* as a category becomes less about *self* and *society* and more about relations between people.

This paper considers how philosophies of Theravada Buddhism on the ground counter the tribunal model with its taken-for-granted foundations of self and society, drawing from ethnographic fieldwork among deminers and other survivors of the KR era. It answers a call from the anthropologist, Kelly Gillespie, who reflects on ways in which ethnographers are ethically obliged to offer insights into institutional forms of justice (Gillespie 2017). Gillespie’s critique elaborates on her

¹ I am not, however, suggesting that restorative justice TRCs are based upon a Buddhist model of distributed accountability nor that they would better serve Cambodia. Rather, I am pointing out that the mediation of post-conflict relations on the ground in Cambodia work differently than both individual-oriented TRCs and tribunals.

reluctance to provide expert witness accounts for a South African commission on policing in Cape Town since using ethnography may put her informants at risk in the service of an institution of governance like the Commission (69–70). Following this, while I am offering evidence of the disjuncture between Buddhist and colonial legacies the ECCC may provoke, I am not suggesting that people on the ground in Cambodia refuse to acknowledge tribunal justice or individual accountability. Rather, I portray ethnographic observations of how some people understood selfhood that seemed more in keeping with a Buddhist concepts that undermine individual accountability and divisions between perpetrators and victims.

My informants used Buddhist concepts like *metta* to understand former enemies, both as a means to forgive and seek forgiveness. While *metta* is not identical with the doctrinal tenet of no-self, it underpins what the legal scholar, Virginia Hancock (2008) defines as a different “theory of crimes” that depends on community relations and shared accountability. I will not be drawing from Buddhist concepts my informants did not mention like *samsara* (the cycle of reincarnation). Instead, I focus on my informants’ definitions of *metta*, which I elicited in interviews and everyday conversations. I came to understand that *metta* represented a mode of relatedness (Govindrajan 2019) and mutual accountability that differed from individual accountability that premise an individualized self.

The methods of ethnographic fieldwork give authority over concepts to my informants. While I reference philosophical origins of ideas in Theravada Buddhism, I am interested in how these get carried by lay practitioners (Cassaniti 2015; Kent 2010) in Cambodia and how they move in a postwar context. This paper focuses on how my Cambodian informants understood and explained modes of mediation after war—its focus is on the perspectives of survivors of the KR and the post-KR period. First, it will delve into the history of conflicts in Cambodia which will provide some background information on my informants and how they perceive their own histories. Their stories to me are not meant to be taken as the only perspectives about the histories of conflict, but the paper’s guiding principle takes the expertise of my informants seriously. With their stories of *metta* and relations with their enemies, I suggest that Theravada Buddhist practices and discourses allow for alternatives to tribunal forms of post-conflict relations.

In terms of resilience, this article takes on relations that must be repaired in the aftermath of civil war. Repairing relations after war have been understood to indicate “community resilience” (Nuwayhid et al. 2011). The survivors of the KR and post-KR periods who were my informants had dealt with multiple conscriptions where their community relations were destabilized by war. An historical background will detail these in the section **Disrupted Relations. Insolubilities** uncovers a genealogy of the mismatch between Buddhist understandings of relations and colonial forms of justice and memorialization, from a colonial court case to contemporary cases of how to memorialize genocidal victims. In **Please pity-love [me]**, I lay out Khmer grammatical and Buddhist forms of expressions of relationality as exemplified by the Buddhist concept, *metta*, with a definition based on what Cambodians told me it meant and how it influenced their relations with former enemies. In the following three sections, I provide examples where *metta* mediated potential conflicts: **Perpetrators and Victims** portrays the personal stories of a friend and her husband; **Handlers and Animals**

discusses how *metta* was used to create team cohesion on a demining platoon composed of political rivals and former enemies; and **Activists and Police** describes how some political conflicts and even violence becomes subsumed (not always for the benefit of empowering people) through expressions of *metta* that appeal to Cambodian nationalism. In my conclusion, I consider how on-the-ground understandings of *metta* work when it comes to repaired relations after civil war. I connect this to a Cambodian Buddhist Patriarch and KR refugee, the Venerable Maha Ghosanada, who evoked *metta* as a transformative action that ends enmities.

Disrupted Relations

Cambodian history is often approached first through a story of the KR and their eventual defeat in 1979. Scholars describe the ousting of Pol Pot in 1979 as “an occupation” (Chanda 1989; French 1994; Clayton 1999; Peou 2017). Cambodians with whom I worked, generally speaking, also called it an “occupation.” Such a problematic framework lends itself to Khmer nationalism that depends on anti-Vietnamese rhetoric. The purpose of this paper is to not adhere to these as authoritative truths, but to examine perspectives of my Cambodian informants and how they used Buddhist principles of no-self through *metta* as a means to repair relations disrupted by civil wars.

After 1979, the Vietnamese military along with the newly minted People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) army conscripted Cambodian villagers at the borders to keep the KR at bay. 30-35,000 KR troops waged guerrilla warfare in the northwest of the country (Slocomb 2001). The PRK called attackers “bandits” (Chanda 1989), but they considered themselves anti-Vietnamese forces. During the 1980s, the KR joined forces with the royalist Cambodian party (National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC)) and the Republican Kampuchean People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF). This coalition waged war at the borders that led to constant aggression in the northwestern provinces of the country (Slocomb 2001).

The growing resistance to the PRK government led to a PRK slogan that “Every Citizen is a Revolutionary Fighter,” referring to it as a revolution against the KR regime. This campaign was a militarization of a citizenry as a nation-building project (Slocomb 2001). Like most military groups on the ground, conscripted villagers played defense games, fought sporadic battles, and worked on infrastructure projects like bridges. One such infrastructure projects (Kim 2016) included the completion of the now the densest minefield in the world, the K5 belt. The Vietnamese General Lê Duc Anh, one of the leaders responsible for the ousting of Pol Pot, had proposed this plan, calling it a plan to install a “bamboo wall” (Slocomb 2001: 198) of landmines to seal the border between Thailand and Cambodia. The people forced to do so—many of whom were my informants—were former soldiers who had been conscripted now a second time by the Vietnamese forces after having been conscripted by the KR armies during the 1970s.

Many of my informants in Cambodia portrayed anger as my friend did about the KR, a genocidal regime that ended in 1979 after the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and deposed them. This anger often led to them discussing anger at the Vietnamese deposition afterward and the contemporary Cambodian government. A deminer told me in 2015, “This country could go to war very easily.”

But living in the aftermath of civil war with multiple military conscriptions is living among people who have fought battles on multiple sides of multiple wars. When studying those formerly conscripted, I noticed that living and working with former enemies softened their righteousness of anger because no one was blameless after such confused violence and loyalties. I spent over 14 months in Cambodia with survivors of these wars. I learned about enemies who had to relate to each other. As I will show, they related to each other by expressing Buddhist ideas of accountability and love that undermined strict definitions of individual subjecthood. In so doing, they showed that something beyond concepts of truth and reconciliation work among postwar relations on the ground through their relational expressions of shared pity and love.

Insolubilities

The contrast between different approaches to reconciliation after Cambodia's civil war can be seen in its infamous court, the ECCC. I attended one session of the ECCC in 2013. The ECCC was a response to the written request by the Co-Prime Ministers of Cambodia, elected in the first free election in the 1990s. Rather than hold an international tribunal, which has been applied in other cases to try violations of international law such as Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Sierra Leone, the ECCC represents a hybrid court where both international law and Cambodian law are applied with both international and Cambodian judges.

The court was set up like a stage. We were the audience. In front of us, the court was protected by plexiglass walls. Behind these walls were a judge on a high bench, a witness before him on a folding chair, and, on either side, two lawyers ready to face each other.

The actors behind plexiglass were writing notes and waiting for people to sit. Villagers had been bussed in for free to witness the trial. I saw old women and men with missing teeth and many middle-aged people wearing *kroma*. My Khmer friend, Sopheap, an older woman who did not think the trial was necessary, had suggested that they had come only for the free lunch. She did not enter with us. She did not explain why she did not want to go inside but it seemed to upset her. The villagers' faces, as far as I could tell, looked grim.

They had offered foreigners headphones for when languages switched from English to French. Through loudspeakers would come Khmer translations. While the judge at center stage spoke Khmer, the lawyers spoke French and English. The day I visited they were questioning an expert witness, an older white man who had been a journalist under the KR regime.

The justice carried out by the court has been controversial—with the defense arguing that the current Cambodian government had leaders just as guilty of the crimes accused. One of the Khmer defense attorneys, who had been a high school student of one of the accused, Nuon Chea, told the press: "These hearings are about one government, and that government isn't only Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan." (Otis 2013). The defense has called on those in the current government to the stand with no success. This defense relies here on the idea of distributed accountability for crimes rather than individualizing the crimes of the KR government. Here the disconnect between an individualized sense of justice versus a distributed accountability becomes clear.

When I asked Sopheap why she had refused to enter, she said that “we didn’t need it.” She did not say anything else, but I knew she was a supporter of the majority party and the majority party had sometimes critiqued the trial. At the same time, I was surprised because she had also suffered under the KR.

Sopheap had described to me being tied with her wrists together and locked in a small room. While she had been lonely and sick, most of her stories of that time comes from her hunger. She describes how painful the emptiness in her stomach was and how she wept because of how hungry she had been. Her stories from the KR depict gnawing pressures of emptiness in her belly. What remains unspoken about other forms of violence can be imagined when she explains that her current spouse was the result of a forced marriage to a KR soldier.

How can Sopheap insist that Cambodia does not need the ECCC while having suffered so much? How is her opinion so different from my friend in her thirties who suffered less but still wishes revenge upon those who had killed during the KR? The answer eludes me because Sopheap refused to answer any follow up questions about this and I could not ethically press her, but part of this may lie in the fact that her postwar life is entangled with her former enemies. A former soldier, a spouse who had been forced upon her, has been her husband for more than forty years. She repeated to me that she loved her husband, sometimes saying that she felt *metta* for him. *Metta* is translated as “compassion” in English, but when Sopheap defined it for me she would say, “pity,” or “pity-love,” which, from her definitions showed me that she understood her connection to her husband in a way that evoked vernacular Cambodian understandings of the Buddhist tenet of *no-self*, which I elaborate on below.

In a critique of the ECCC, Hancock suggests that tribunal forms of justice could fail Cambodia. For them to succeed, she recommends that tribunals account for the fact that Buddhism emphasizes a “community-oriented theory of crimes against humanity,” in that judges should not understand harm as involving individual culprits and victims (2008: 88). This individuality, she suggests, does not integrate modes of community resilience enacted by Theravada Buddhists. Her thesis draws from legal scholarship and historical cases in Cambodia.

Sokhieng Au, an historian of medicine in French Colonial Cambodia, would call such clashing theories of crime “cultural insolubilities” that are caused by conflicting understandings about power and selves (Au 2012).² Insolubilities, she says, are moments when conflicting networks, such as the Cambodian colonial subjects and the French colonists, were forced to interact with each other through economic, historical, or other kinds of necessity, but could not be “smoothly integrated because they would lose internal coherence” (Au 2012: 2).

In one such case, Cambodians beat a corrupt French tax collector. The King decreed that the village be fined and give merit every year on the date of the tax collector’s murder. The King did not single out individual agents and his punishment conflicted with the French colonial solution, which was to punish individual criminals in a trial (Chandler 1982). This case shows that a Cambodian

² Au avoids the use of “incommensurable,” as that implies a lack of capacity for people to understand the logics of another. Rather, insoluble suggests that the logics and networks cannot accommodate each other/coexist.

governance favored more distributed accountability, which clashed with individualism represented by the French manner of justice. In addition, the Cambodian king evoked Buddhist practice call upon karmic connections between the living and the dead, that is, the perpetrators and the victim.

While this case shows a past where local Buddhist ideas contradicted foreign colonial practices, more contemporary cases also show conflicts between different modes of post-conflict practices among Cambodians themselves. The archaeologist, Ashley Thompson, describes a case in the 1990s, in which the Cambodian government, ruled jointly by Vietnamese and Cambodian people after ousting the KR, came into conflict with Buddhist monks and other Cambodians over how to commemorate the dead of the KR. Should the dead be documented, so as to archive and never forget the violence? The remains of humans, unmarked and buried, could be used as evidence. This idea of human corpses as evidence conflicted with Buddhist commemorations of the dead, which demanded that the bodies be cremated, allowing the spirits of the dead to move on (Thompson 2013).

The two conflicting modes of memorialization resulted in a compromise manifested by killing fields outside Battambang and Phnom Penh which held bodies of anonymous victims of the KR. In both places, local Cambodians will tell you that the spirits used to wail and bring misfortune to those who walked across the fields.

Today, skulls stare at visitors through glass windows of a pagoda built for them. The pagoda calms the spirits and the glass archives the dead. These two modes, one that emphasizes impermanence and one that emphasizes justice, reflect insolubilities. Theravada Buddhist practices of cremation draw from theories of no-self, where spirits (which people simultaneously defined as entities that have no-self and also as people who could not be reincarnated because they did not realize they had no-self)³ are honored via neglect or cremation (Thompson 2013) and the glass doors appease those who want the bodies to be counted. Such a juxtaposition parallels the mismatch between Buddhist modes of relationality and tribunal forms of justice.

Spiritual practices on the ground offer alternatives for how people hold others accountable and how to commemorate the dead of civil war. Both the historical case study of Chandler (1989) and the contemporary case study of memorialization (Thompson 2013) depict modes of community relations that reflect different understandings of accountability based on vernacular philosophies of Buddhism.

³ The syncretic vernacular understandings of traditional village animism as commensurable with Theravada Buddhism have been explored elsewhere (Choulean 2004; Choulean and Thompson 2005). In my experience, informants held seemingly contradictory philosophical tenets as being logically cohesive such as Buddha being called “the manager of all the spirits.” These spirits were described by the same people as being at once diffuse and personless and connected to living things through *sorsai* and the porousness of human bodies and also angry and needing appeasement in ways that Buddha would not ask for because Buddha understood no-self. It was not uncommon for me to meet Buddhist monks who have or make *yantra* tattoos to allow spirits to enter them—especially in villages—even though these beliefs are taboo for strict Buddhists and are considered the magic of the *kru khmer*, the animist shamans (DeAngelo 2019).

Please pity-love [me]

The way I understand how the Theravada Buddhist philosophies that undermine individual selfhood is best portrayed in the ways in which Cambodians I knew defined and expressed the word, *metta*. This is a word that will be familiar to a person with even a casual knowledge of Buddhist practice. *Metta* is one of the four “immeasurables” of Buddhism. Immeasurables are also called the “four sublime abodes” or the “four boundless states” that is, states of being (Obeyesekere 2002: 179, 388). They are immeasurable in that they cross boundaries between living things because all entities have the potential to achieve these states and they are unquantifiable. Through meditation, “four boundless states” allow practitioners to come closer to enlightenment (Nyanatiloka 1967: 64). They include: *metta* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *motita* (loving joy) and *aphika* (equanimity).⁴ English speakers translate *metta* to “loving-kindness,” but this translation omits valences that *metta* has for a Khmer speaker.

When I ask what *metta* meant in Khmer, strangers and confidants alike answered, “*Metta* means *anet-sralanh* (pity-love).”

Beyond its overtly religious meaning, the word *metta* is common in Khmer—performers say it when they announce a play or a dance on stage—they greet the audience before the spectacle begins, “*Som metta*.” That is, “Please pity-love [me].”⁵

Metta’s everyday usage belies its powerful effects. *Metta* transforms the parties involved, by entangling speaker and listener. This transformation blurs subject-object distinctions so that the simple act of *metta* blurs who pities whom and who loves whom. “Loving kindness,” the standard translation, fails to capture this blurring of subject positions and the sense of pity that colors the way Cambodians I knew understood and defined *metta*.

As Felicity Aulino (2012, 2019) has pointed out in her anthropological study on Thailand’s changing elder care services, in English pity emphasizes hierarchy, not intimate love. This differs from how *metta* or even pity operated in her fieldsite. Aulino describes how *metta* seemed to reinforce a karmic hierarchy along with intimacy between caregivers and those to whom they offer care. She describes her shock when a caregiver translated *metta* as pity because, for Aulino, pity transforms love into something that is different from love. She notes, as an explanation of this shock, that even “the term pity (*songsan*) itself cannot necessarily be taken as an exact translation of the English” (2012: 110).

It is this moment in Aulino’s ethnography that I relate to so well. *Metta* has confused me, too, because I had not thought about pity as connected to love before going to Cambodia.⁶ To understand pity-love in the ways that Cambodians expressed it to me, I had to take ambiguous subjects and objects seriously. In other words, I had to think with Khmer speech when it did not differentiate

⁴ Transliterations from Khmer.

⁵ Whenever the Khmer has a dropped pronoun, I will reference the pronoun in brackets though it means that the pronoun has not been expressed explicitly.

⁶ According to the conceptual historian, Niklas Luhmann, the English word *love* came to be associated with romance only in 19th century Europe, when it became integral to the concepts of an individualistic self and therefore tied to subject-object agency (Luhmann 1986).

between subject pronouns and object pronouns, especially with words like *metta*. Such reciprocity in pity-love transforms the relationship between subject and object perspectives.

Central, then, to my understanding of *metta* in Khmer is a peculiarity of grammar: the tendency for Khmer speakers to drop pronouns. “Pro-drop” languages do not clarify pronouns, instead they often have verbal agreement patterns to pronounce the subjects, such as Spanish and Italian, where speakers differentiate subjects as first, second, and third person via verb conjugation. Khmer is considered a “radical pro-drop” language, that is, it has no verb agreement to indicate who is the subject of a sentence (Simpson 2005). While I am not claiming, as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would, that the grammar of the speaker limits conceptual categories of the speaker, I am suggesting here that the grammatical structure of a radical pronoun drop allows for a linguistic representation that resonates with Cambodian lay understandings of Buddhist no-self. Lay understandings portray mutual accountability when it comes to past harm and potential conflict between people, which I will describe in a few examples below.

Daily small talk where no subjects and objects are clarified except through tone of voice lead to potential double meanings and jokes, but I also found that double meanings had implications with regard to *metta* for transforming enemies. A monk told me that *metta*, or pity-love, is a love that “can turn a cruel person kind.” A deminer told me that, “if you want to kill someone, you have *metta*, and it makes you not kill.” According to this definition, to profess *metta* allows Cambodians who have once been cruel to become kind.

Because pronouns are not pronounced, when someone professes *metta*, they imply that either party, including the speaker, can become kind. It is the reciprocal aspect of *metta* that communicates relational feelings of pity and love and which I allude to as resonant with Buddhist understandings of repaired relations through no-self. In these instances, *metta* involves sympathy and kinship for others when cruelty may or may not have been involved. *Metta* speaks to the in-betweenness of a relation, an actual grammatical method in the language for the blurring of subject and object perspectives which allows perpetrators to become kind because they are also victims.

Perpetrators and victims

My friend Sopheap invites me to a café. We find a plush white couch next to a jewel-toned wall. Once we sit down with our coffee, I notice that Sopheap has stopped smiling.

“How are you?” I ask.

Sopheap looks away from me. She lowers her voice and begins to whisper.

“You know, before my husband, I had a boyfriend. We wanted to get married.”

During the KR, Sopheap and her boyfriend had asked the soldiers to give them permission to marry. The soldiers refused. This was common under since the KR organization that ruled the country attempted to separate families and loved ones to impose loyalty (Bultmann 2015). Instead, the soldiers separated the two, sending her boyfriend far away to a different camp.

At the café Sopheap tells me that her current marriage is a forced marriage. The Khmer Rouge, in addition to holding her prisoner and starving her, forced her to marry her current husband who had been a soldier. But this was at the end of the KR. Their first year of marriage was after the KR was ousted. That year, her husband contracted HIV from an affair. Since his diagnosis, Sopheap has lived with her husband “as a sister,” which, she clarifies, means that they are celibate with each other. She knows, though, that he continues other affairs regularly.

She recounts the event that has made her want to reveal these things to me: she recently discovered that her boyfriend has survived the KR. It has been over thirty years since they had been separated by the soldiers. She told her husband that she was visiting her sister, but this was a lie, she went to visit her old boyfriend, her beloved.

Somehow, her husband found out about her visit. The day before coming to the café, Sopheap and he had argued all day long. While Sopheap does not detail her visit to her lover to me, she shudders at her husband’s fury. To her, she explains to me, his anger illuminates his hypocrisy, a double standard that allows him to have long-term affairs while she is forbidden from them. In response, during their row, she threatened him with a divorce. But, she says to me, after that, he began to cry.

“And then, I felt such great *metta* for him.”

My friend explains that his tears move her, and she feels *metta* for him. When she sees my confusion, she says, “*Metta*, great pity.” This definition confuses me more. She explains in English, “Once I was so sad and then I called my husband and he took care of me. *Metta*.”

My friend’s depiction of her husband’s pity and love for her entangled with pity and love for her husband are deeply personal. According to her explanation, *metta* was her pity-love for her husband’s sadness at a divorce that was echoed across time for his pity-love for her depression. My confusion about pity mixed with love and how these two emotions could be reciprocal comes from the connotations pity and love have in English. That is, pity is most often associated with power dynamics and pathos. Love, as Wendy Brown has theorized, is almost diametrically opposed to pity in this sense—it could never be associated with hierarchy because love itself is supposed to dismantle power dynamics and do away with perceived flaws (Brown 2005: 30). Pity, for those whose subjecthood depends on individual, autonomous power (Luhmann 1986), indicates an object that is quite flawed in that it is weak, or at least unfortunate enough to deserve pity. In a context where individual autonomy is highly valued, the misfortunate are often held personally accountable for their own suffering. But perhaps the idea that being pitiful implies being hopelessly flawed is not consistent across time and space. Or, perhaps hierarchy is less problematic for love in Southeast Asia (Aulino 2019: 131). Key to understanding *metta* in the way that my informants defined it for me in Cambodia, is that it is not a universal assumption that pity, love, and hierarchy produce objects.

My informants, like Sopheap, have difficult histories. In Cambodia, former enemies are now “intimate” with each other (Theidon 2012: 25). Sopheap cares for her husband—she gets him HIV medications without letting anyone know of his condition and she often speaks with pride about his important job. From her perspective, he also cares for her. She told me that he had saved her life. If

your enemies are intimate, like Sopheap whose husband was forced upon her but also loves her, then what shape does your love take? I think the answer lies in the subject-object conflation *metta* Sopheap uses to define the pity-love that existed between him and her. *Metta* entangles Sopheap and her husband together, bound together by pity and love and a shared sense of agency, undermining individual selfhood.

Handlers and animals

I heard deminers profess *metta* for animals who helped them detect landmines with scent detection. Handlers spoke of their animals with *anet* (pity), *sralanh* (love), and *metta* (pity-love) fairly frequently. When they defined *metta* for me as *anet-sralanh*, I began to ask: “Please tell me the difference between *metta*, *sralanh*, and *anet*.”

Chamroeun furrowed his brows because the question seemed to him to have come from nowhere. We had gone from talking about his past as a child during the KR and his first time finding a landmine to questions about Khmer words for love. “It would be better if you ask a monk,” he said, but he tried to explain anyway.

“The word *sralanh*, we can take care of something, for example, I *sralanh* rats, I take care of the rats. I give them food, I take care of everything. *Anet*, for example, something we want to kill normally, we have *anet* and then we don’t want to hurt them. *Metta* and *anet* is the same.” He paused and then said: “*Anet* and *sralanh*, it’s the same word, *metta* and *anet* is a little different.”

“But can you explain how *anet* and *sralanh* are the same and also you say *anet* and *metta* are the same?”

“*Sralanh*, for example, I *sralanh* the rats. I take good care of the rats, I give food, exercise, etc., this activity we call *sralanh*. *Anet* there’s something we have, a spirit, if they’re sick, we have *anet* for them and we bring them to the hospital for a doctor to check things. This activity we call *anet*. *Metta*, it’s a little bit similar to *anet*. It’s just used in a different place. *Metta* we use for the Buddha—it’s the same meaning as *anet*.”

In several places during our interview, Chamroeun explained that *sralanh* is the same as *anet* and that *metta* is the same as *anet*. Note that this translates to: love is the same as pity and pity-love is the same as pity. This sentence would also follow: pity-love is the same as love. And Chamroeun goes back and forth on the words as definitions which are difficult to differentiate because their meanings are not best explicable with language. In addition, his pronouns are ambiguous here so “kill something” can also be translated as “being killed.” This ambiguity is key to understanding the dual meanings of love where a person can both gain protection from other and kindness towards others. I understood *metta* best when I saw how the deminers petted their animals or how they smiled when the animals groomed themselves. I saw how describing *metta* for animals allowed deminers to express love in ways that mediated their own interpersonal conflicts. For the deminers, this idea of a change of heart through love had a particular valence because many have personal histories of being enemies with each other (DeAngelo 2018).

Samboth, a demining supervisor, often complained about and critiqued a high-ranking administrator. He told me that the administrator was corrupt and oversaw a huge scam where he pretended to train mine detection dogs but did not actually train them. I noticed that just after people spoke critically of Cambodia's ruling party or of the bureaucracy that ran the demining operations, they also almost immediately began to speak of love for the mine detection animals. For Samboth, this anger was due to his history of living during the KR—the same administrator had fought in the KR army and Samboth had been chased and hunted by KR soldiers. For him, it was difficult and tense to work with government officials he feared. Shortly after his critique of the administrator and the phony landmine detection, Samboth explained that he used to work with the mine detection dogs. “[I] *metta* the dogs,” he told me. “They were very easy to love.”

“[The administrator's] wife is very good. She had *metta* for one of the dogs because he was old. When they retire the dogs, they euthanize them. But she had *metta* and adopted it as a pet.”

Given that the deminers were former combatants and that they dealt with the physical remnants of wars they themselves had participated in, I found it especially interesting that they professed *metta* for the mine detection animals. This *metta* worked to mediate connections not only with animals but also with other people. Samboth's critique, for example, was quickly followed by a story about the administrator's wife who adopted a dog and his own *metta* for the mine detection dogs. This emotion connected him and the administrator's wife, thereby softening his complaints about the administrator. His *metta* story seemed to offer Samboth a way to make up for criticizing his superior. This *metta* not only alleviated his political criticisms, it also entangled him with the administrator he had just spoken out against by relating him to the administrator's wife.

This love tied people—former enemy combatants—together. One demining supervisor, Seng, who knew English fairly well, would dismiss my questions about *metta* as easy to answer. He shook his head when I told him *metta* confused me.

“*Metta* is easy to understand. *Metta* means, ‘I'm sorry, you're sorry.’” As he said this, he gestured a spread hand in the air between us—indicating himself with the *I* and me with the *you*. To his dismay, this confused me all the more.

“You mean at the same time?”

“Yes, yes. I'm sorry you're sorry. I forgive you, you forgive me.”

Seng conflated subject and object nouns explicitly with *metta* by saying: “*Metta* means I'm sorry, you're sorry.” His repetition of the sorry with “I” or “you” suggested an interchangeability of the “I” and the “you.” That is, it suggested a vernacular understanding of no-self. This was similar to the way Sopheap suggested that her pity for her husband implied its reciprocity: she pitied him when he was crying and he pitied her when she was depressed. This conflation and reciprocity of subject-objects, sometimes handler and animals but also humans and humans, played out in their interdependency on the minefield. *Metta* described an entanglement that made the actual interdependency in their work even more explicit and also mediated potential human conflicts.

Activists and police

On an online video interview with *The Phnom Penh Post*, an anglophone newspaper in Cambodia, a monk activist stands in the Areng Valley. This monk protests the environmental threat of a dam construction. The monk claims, “I just feel with *metta*, you know like compassion, like kindness, to even the police with the gun, we try to have...good communication with them because they are also Cambodian people...” (Boyle 2013: 03:41). The monk uses *metta* to describe how he relates to a person who is supposed to be his enemy. Not only that, his enemy has great power over him, in that the soldiers have already arrested and killed some activists (Soenthrith and Seif 2012). As the monk describes his *metta* for the police, the video shows protesters and police laughing together on camera.

Here again, like Sopheap and her husband, *metta* describes pity-love for those who might be seen as an enemy. In particular, the monk recalls a relationality through shared nationalism. This reminds me of Chamroeun the deminer who told me: “*Anet*, for example, something we want to kill normally, we have *anet* and then we don’t want to hurt them. *Metta* and *anet* are the same.” *Metta* and *anet* transform enmity for Chamroeun, which echoes the monk’s remark in making peace with the police. In Eve Monique Zucker’s ethnography of a Cambodian village, former enemies also professed a love for each other that she says, “allows individuals and communities to engage in everyday social life in the present and build a future” (2013: 22). These iterations speak to the potential political and spiritual transformations that *metta* may be enacting. Such sentiments, though, appeal to nationalism as well, so that relationality begins to be limited by political border. When the monk, Samboth, or Sopheap professes *metta*, they defuse a personal or politically tense situation. Such de-escalation, while a means to transform enemies to kin, also suggest that another perspective could reveal entrenched power relations.

Men and Monsters

My demonstration of how Cambodians conflate subject-object perspectives recall ideas of a “porous self” that scholars have found to be a common trope in people’s understandings throughout the region (Eberhardt 2006; Taylor 2007) rather than a Buddhist no-self. On the ground in Cambodia, these two concepts of a porous self and no-self syncretize with each other. People’s bodies and minds are thought to be entangled by *sorsai*, that is, threads with the world (Au 2011). The concept of no-self even suggests another way to describe porous self (Hancock 2008)—there is very little separating me and you and the world. While this is not the academic or doctrinal definition of no-self, it is how Cambodians I knew represented a Buddhist mode of repairing relations. This mode of repair served as an alternative to anger and tribunal processes.

Porousness, though, evokes uneasy implications for human-on-human violence. What does it mean if there is porousness between a murderer and a victim? Specifically, for my informants who must relate to former enemies and for the contemporary political tensions in Cambodia, how does porousness transform enmity in a domestic relationship, in a minefield, and in politics? What if everyone is, at once, perpetrator and victim?

In contrast to porousness, an individualized sense of accountability undergirds international models for justice. The ECCC has attempted to bring Cambodians this individualized sense of justice. In Alexander Laban Hinton's recent book (2016), he asks if Duch, the man who ran the S-21 torture center where over 12,000 people were tortured and killed and who was convicted by the ECCC, was a "Man or Monster?" He answers with the following passage:

Duch the monster or Duch the man. This is the same sort of reductive categorization that took place during [the KR] as people were transformed into "enemies." The title thus suggests a key point: the parallels between what took place at S-21 and the banality of everyday thought, including a "either-or" framing of the question "Man or monster?" (290)

Perpetrator and victim or monster and man are pairs that suggest individualized subjecthood where one person is accountable for their actions. While this individualized subjecthood does not correspond to Theravada Buddhist theories of mind (Cassaniti 2015) or Theravada Buddhist ideals about reconciliation (Hancock 2008), as Hinton points out, part of the KR regime was an "either-or" framing of Khmer revolutionary or anti-revolutionary. By contrast, *metta* and Theravada Buddhist no-self offers alternative framings of mutual accountability. I encountered this in the field: one of the deminers who had suffered in the work camps under the KR regime lit incense at Pol Pot's grave. When I visited the holy Preah Vihear temple, where Thai and Khmer forces stand ready to kill one another if ordered to, soldiers showed me the place where Thai and Khmer forces share holiday celebrations together. *Metta* expresses this relationality between enemies—it is, in fact, a profession of transformative emotions that undermine an individualized self.

When the Venerable Maha Ghosanada, a former KR refugee, returned to Cambodia, he connected *metta* as a means to recall entanglements between enemies. He led refugees on "peace walks" throughout the Cambodian countryside. One route took him and his followers through battlefields (Skidmore 1996). For this walk, he had a prepared a message:

Peace is always a point of arrival and a point of departure. That is why we must always begin again, step by step, and never get discouraged. *Bannha* (wisdom) will be our weapons; *metta* (pity-love) and *karuna* (compassion) our bullets; and *satthi* (mindfulness) our armor. We will walk until Cambodia and the whole world is peaceful. (Santi 1995)

The Venerable Maha Ghosanada uses the word *metta* as a transformative tool. *Metta* is a bullet, an analogy that implies destroying enemies. Unlike bullets that kill enemies, *metta* destroys enemies in another way, by doing away with them through pity-love and, as my Cambodian informants have suggested to me, by doing away with subjecthood itself through its mutual reciprocity. To understand selves as capable of *metta* means to let go of individual selfhood along with righteousness. To let go of the individual, autonomous self, means that the answer to the question "man or monster?" evokes shared suffering and accountabilities.

Such an evocation can also be troubling in its implications. We are all men and we are all monsters at once.

Corresponding Author

Darcie DeAngelo, PhD.
 Charles E. Scheidt Postdoctoral Fellow
 Institute for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention
 4400 Vestal Pkwy E.
 Binghamton, NY 13902
darcie.deangelo@gmail.com

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