*LIFE AFTER COLLECTIVE DEATH IN SOUTH EAST ASIA: PART 1 – THE (RE-)FABRICATION OF SOCIAL BONDS*

# Introduction

*Anne Yvonne Guillou and Silvia Vignato*

**Author details:** Anne Yvonne Guillou and Silvia Vignato are the Guest Editors of this special issue. Dr Guillou is an anthropologist and tenured researcher at Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CASE), Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 190 avenue de France, 75244 Paris Cedex 13, France. E-mail: anne.guillou@case.cnrs.fr. Dr Vignato is an anthropologist and tenured researcher in Dipartimento di Scienze Umane per la Formazione 'Riccardo Massa', Università di Milano-Bicocca, Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo 1, 20126 Milano, Italy. E-mail: silvia.vignato@unimib.it.

In the decades leading up to 2012, South East Asia has not only experienced civil wars, but has also seen a number of major 'natural' disasters (typhoons, earthquakes, floods and tsunamis). 'Life after Collective Death in South East Asia' is a two-part collection of papers – each part comprising a special issue of *South East Asia Research* (the second will appear in June 2013) – which examines the aftermath of the immense collective deaths caused by such events from a mid-term perspective.[1] We look into how South East Asian societies adapt in the aftermath of environmental, social and human destruction; and we examine the processes these societies go through in order to make sense of the disasters they have faced and to cope with the destruction they have endured. On a personal level, this is both painful and exciting work. While engaging with mental and physical suffering, the researchers whose work is showcased in this volume have also encountered peoples and groups with the capacity to overcome such suffering. Hence we focus as much on this vitality as we do on death.[2]

Anthony Oliver-Smith suggests that catastrophes offer opportunities for thought

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[1]   The authors who contributed to this issue conducted their fieldwork research over a period ranging from a few weeks to more than 30 years after massive destruction occurred. Monica Lindberg Falk witnessed the devastation caused by the 2004 tsunami in the province of Phang Nga a few weeks after it hit the western coast of Thailand. Silvia Vignato arrived in Aceh (North Sumatra) in 2008, three years after the tsunami and after the peace agreement that put an end to over 30 years of civil war between the independent guerrillas and the Indonesian army. Anne Y. Guillou and Judy Ledgerwwood have been conducting research with Cambodians since the late 1980s, and Céline Pierdet since the late 1990s – more than 10 and 20 years respectively after the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–79) had been overthrown by the Vietnamese army (although the civil war ended only in 1998 after Pol Pot's death). Heonik Kwon began his field research in the villages of central Vietnam in the mid-1990s, almost 20 years after the North Vietnamese entered Saigon and effected the US evacuation from Vietnam in April 1975, bringing a 20-year conflict to a close.

[2]   We wish to thank Matteo Alcano for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this introduction.

(Oliver-Smith, 2002, p 23). Indeed, the aftermath of a disaster provides social scientists with a sharp lens through which to examine the society that has experienced it. In reconstruction, something fundamental is at stake. When the destruction of human beings and their environment occurs on a grand scale, whatever the cause, people experience the unthinkable and face the unforeseeable (Clavandier, 2004). Various examples from the region of South East Asia clearly demonstrate this. In Cambodia, abrupt regime changes meant that anyone could be accused of being a capitalist and deported, tortured and slaughtered by the Khmer Rouge. In Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, people, homes and possessions were suddenly swept away by a 30-metre-high tidal wave. Vietnamese villagers experienced a realization that American bombs could set them aflame. In Aceh, the rebellion was repressed with an increasing violence that seemed to be without end. In each of these cases human beings were left with the impression that humanity, as they knew it, was disappearing and that anything might happen.

Yet, not exactly *any*thing happened when the catastrophes were over. Each local society used or facilitated specific tools of recovery. Attempts to restore political, symbolic, social, bodily and psychological orders were deployed at several different levels and spanned different periods of time. International agencies supplied emergency goods and skilled staff; state authorities organized domestic relief operations; religious institutions, kinship-based groups and various spontaneous local associations mobilized resources and provided support and help. In contemporary South East Asian countries, the processes of recovery are the result of a variety of external and internal forces, the product of worldwide, regional and local networks and interconnections. They bring out the liveliest and most fundamental institutions and references in a society. The survivors and their descendants participate in the reproduction or creation of old and new social bonds, specific to their society or group, and include the experience of the catastrophe itself.

Catastrophes and recoveries in South East Asia are, as a result, a critical theoretical tool with which to analyse broader contemporary political, social and individual matters.

## 'Natural' versus 'armed' destruction: a theoretical option

We have chosen, in this special issue, to consider the aftermath of both 'natural' disasters and 'man-made' wars and slaughter. By emphasizing the sameness of violence in collective deaths rather than focusing on their different causes, we are not downplaying historical responsibilities. We are neither claiming indifference to criminal proceedings – specifically organized in post-genocide Cambodia – nor favouring a general absolution of the American forces in Vietnam or the Indonesian Army in Aceh. Our choice is to look at the vulnerable and the wounded, and at what constitutes vulnerability in their eyes. Our emphasis is on local experiences, often silenced by dominant discourses on suffering, bereavement and justice. It has been repeatedly observed that 'natural' catastrophes are not at all natural, and that disasters are processual phenomena, in which death happens as a consequence of natural events 'in the context of a historically produced pattern of "vulnerability"' (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 2002, pp 3–5). As this process is historically produced, vulnerability implies responsibilities.

The consideration of past responsibilities, as related to present opportunities,

appears to be an important feature in the aftermath of wars and 'natural' disasters alike, and is a recurrent topic in the papers presented in this issue. For instance, Monica Lindberg Falk shows that both on an intimate and an economic level, the consequences of the tsunami in Thailand have been more severe and of longer duration for the most vulnerable (women, temporary residents and migrants). Lindberg Falk further demonstrates that, in the long term, poverty and disaster have played an equally destructive role for the people of Phang Nga. In a very different context, Céline Pierdet underlines the link between politics and the capacity of the hydraulic environmental setting of Phnom Penh to face an unprecedented flood. In her analysis, there is no discontinuity between a major political event (decolonization), a genocide (during the Khmer Rouge regime) and a natural event (flood).

Causes and patterns of vulnerability overlap. In contemporary South East Asia, many episodes of destruction are interrelated within and beyond the region. On a national and global level, as well as on a more local level, political decisions are taken in the light of highly mediatized collective death. The two tsunamis that hit Asia are a good example of this resonance through space and time. The Indian Ocean tsunami elicited a global response of help and raised the most impressive amount of money in the history of international aid. In contrast, because the tsunami that hit Japan in 2011 damaged the Fukushima nuclear plant, the event challenged the world's attitude to the production of nuclear energy. The same distant natural phenomenon that, in 2004, had affected the West only via television coverage, menaces the audience in a straightforward manner and makes the whole world more vulnerable. Conversely, in Aceh the mass graves rapidly dug to accommodate the 2004 tsunami dead today underline the lack of similar collective treatment for the dead of the civil conflict, whose number is so far still uncertain. In fact, the Acehnese case is quite singular – the region was hit by the tsunami at a time when the long civil conflict was finding its diplomatic solution – demonstrating with clarity what had been described in anthropological literature on social suffering and structural violence. Destructive phenomena have a cumulative effect, as Paul Farmer (2004) has highlighted: Farmer points to the case of colonial domination and poverty determining the spread of HIV in Haiti long before the earthquake brought further destruction to the island.

Other issues call for the exposure of environmental catastrophes and armed conflicts to the same theoretical sets of questions. When analysing processes of recovery, we chose to focus on local categories of perception and action. In this sense, collective death has proved an effective local category, often as meaningful to people as a categorization of the disaster according to causes and responsibilities. In many of the papers in this special issue, survivors use the category to gain a better understanding of the present, to deal with the pain and the suffering and to think about present recovery, providing answers about how an individual can help her or his dead brothers, sisters, parents and children to have a better future life. It enables people to feel better, to be healthier and more effective in their lives. It subsequently matches vital, pragmatic questions (How can I be cured of this sickness? Why did my neighbours get financial support from a specific NGO and not me? How can I get married? How can I make an income?) with their specific understandings, which are highly relevant for the survivors.

Conversely, it appeared that the existential or teleological meanings of the

destruction (Why me? Why us? Why my children and not the neighbours'? How has my life changed since the catastrophe? Should I have behaved differently?) were not so strongly emphasized and were instead framed in rather general terms related to religious world views. These views, like the doctrines of *karma* and the *dukkha* in Theravada Buddhism or that of personal obedience to the Prophet's precepts in Islam, do not often provide a more precise explanation.

In this issue, Heonik Kwon shows that modern-day Vietnamese villagers are greatly concerned with the ghosts of those who died an untimely and violent death far from home – regardless of which flag they were handling during the war. The ghosts' restless ailment has become a central category of suffering (and therefore, of healing) for the villagers. Kwon likens it to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which has become the collective medicalized notion enabling post-war Americans to think about the experience of the Vietnam War. Similar observations can be found in the other articles presented here. Silvia Vignato describes an Acehnese institution for poor or orphaned children where the victims of the civil conflict, of the tsunami and of general social distress are all assimilated by orphans. They are dwelling in the same condition, and even though each child's status is inscribed in her or his record, their healing is seen as similarly dependent on the correct performance of Islamic devotion.

## Observing states from a village backyard: a methodological choice

The second important methodological and theoretical choice that characterizes this volume concerns fieldwork and types of observation. We have privileged micro-level and localized analyses based on daily observations in sites such as Buddhist monasteries, orphanages, villages and homes – or dykes.[3] These places matter because they are the very sites of both the destruction and the 'regeneration' of life, as Bloch and Parry (1982) have brilliantly phrased it: the site where memories are embodied, entangled in daily words and gestures and becoming part of mythological narratives (Graeber, 1997; Bell, 2005). All our contributions point to such micro-processes and to the local stories that revolve around them. In Vignato's article, we read about the daily fabrication of a shared memory for the institutionalized children in post-conflict Aceh. Guillou describes children's games using the skulls that have surfaced over covered-up mass graves. Lindberg Falk gives intimate attention to the lonely, tsunami-affected Thai women.

Nevertheless, throughout the issue, larger scales of analysis do appear, if only in the background. Indeed, from the grass-roots level, there is a repeated acknowledgment that the state plays an important role at all the levels of the rebuilding process, from the production of official narratives of the catastrophes to the organization of both emergency and long-term help for the victims.[4] From its very beginning, the whole process of post-disaster reconstruction intrinsically stands as a crucial political moment for the states involved, due to the massive scale of deaths that threaten to endanger state stability and legitimacy. In this respect, the study of the 'days (and years) after' paves the way to a broader political anthro-

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[3]    Apart from Pierdet, who is a geographer, all the other authors are anthropologists. This surely explains such a  methodological option as an intrinsic choice of the discipline.

[4]    The aid to the survivors will be specifically addressed in Part 2 of 'Life After Collective Death in South East Asia', to be published in June 2013.

pology of South East Asia that goes beyond a limited (albeit rich) analysis of commemorative politics (Nora, 1983, 1986, 1992; Gillis, 1994). In the Cambodian and Vietnamese cases particularly, the contemporary states were constituted in direct reference to the Khmer Rouge genocide and to the American War respectively. The official commemorations of the dead are a highly political issue, and the analysis of the change that these mortuary rituals are undergoing cannot but address larger political transformations. Indeed, in his contribution to this issue, Heonik Kwon describes the articulation between small funerary cults and major issues concerning Vietnamese national and international policies.[5] Anne Y. Guillou shows that in Cambodia the same dynamics found in Vietnam characterize the state memorials of the genocide. With their ability to make observations at the village level, both Kwon and Guillou are in a position to emphasize how state memorials were undervalued in the 1990s.

It is in this methodological light that we can now turn to a few basic themes that have appeared as leitmotifs in the research presented in this issue of *South East Asia Research*.

### *Rupture and continuity in the aftermath of mass destruction*

In the issue, we deal with the new patterns that some South East Asian societies have developed following various types of catastrophe. According to some researchers, a system's 'resilience is built on that system's ability to alter non essential attributes' (Manyena, 2006, p 439). In this sense, we observe what is seen as essential and what is seen as liable to be altered or abandoned, both in local discourses and in practice.

Beneath this observation lies a broader question: do all societies 'recover', or do some merely capitulate and disappear following a major catastrophe? Do all retrieve vitality? Do they all regenerate life in the presence of death? In 1976, Marshall Sahlins argued that if Fijian society was confronted with a further strain, it would be liable to transform into a radically different – but not totally alien – pattern, due to the existing society already containing the rules of its own transformation (Sahlins, 1976, pp 42–43). We wonder whether the same can be said of the social groups and the states we examine here. It is an interrogation about the persistence, the transformation or the disappearance of kinship and political structures, of patterns in everyday interaction, of constellations of feelings, of symbolic landscapes, of gender ideologies, of positive models of life.

For the authors of the papers in this issue, such questioning is an implicit theme rather than an explicit theoretical concern. Our fieldwork data have led us to concentrate on three main sets of meaningful ideas: resilience; the permanence of a few clearly identified elements (institutions such as the Koranic schools in Aceh described by Vignato; people such as the *mae chi* and *bhikkuni* in Thailand described by Lindberg Falk; rituals such as the funerary rituals described by Ledgerwood, Guillou and Kwon; and architectural structures as in Pierdet); and the active strategy of resignifying catastrophe, or parts of it, as a tool of transformation.

### *Social devices of resilience, or vital strategies of reconstruction.* The idea of
resilience has been increasingly invoked by the specific branch of multidisciplinary

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5   See also Kwon's previous work on war heroes' worship, 2008.

research called 'disaster studies' when describing and analysing the aftermath of catastrophes.[6] Broadly speaking, resilience denotes all the processes that take place within a person or a group aiming to overcome destruction, finding a certain balance and planning the future – including the prevention of further catastrophes. In the science of materials, where it was originally defined, the concept of resilience refers to the measurable capacity of a material to absorb a shock and then, upon unloading, to recover its original shape. Within social sciences, the term stays rather vague, caught between being 'a goal that we should strive to achieve or a quality that we should try to attain' (Manyena, 2006, p 439).[7] We use it here as a general category by which to define the processes contained in post-disaster recovery in which a strong element of agency is implied. When we initially conceived the panel that later developed into the current special issue,[8] this conceptual rendering of resilience helped us to focus on the vital potential of individuals and structures rather than on the assessment of risk, destruction and aid. Moreover, because pioneer studies using the idea of resilience were carried out in the domain of psychology (Werner and Smith, 1982), we could better relate individual or collective reactions to catastrophe, especially when they were found not to overlap. More often than referring to the actual quality of resilience, we have described the strategies and the social devices that produce it, envisaging them as the basic vital elements of the societies we have studied.

Because we have favoured a micro-scale approach, several articles bring out detailed patterns of resilience that otherwise go unnoticed in non-ethnographical research. Vignato describes how in Aceh the Islamic residential schools have turned out to be useful and effective shelters for children affected either by the tsunami or the conflict, and how the children themselves use the school to deal with their difficult memories and their present conditions. Lindberg Falk details the patient work of the *bhikkuni*, home by home, in post-tsunami Phang Nga. Guillou observes the cycle of re-treatment of the dead in post-genocide Cambodia, and, in describing the general attitude towards ceremonies and memorials, relates the discussion to some minor cases, such as restless souls who want to see their last movie.

Two authors, Monica Lindberg Falk and Céline Pierdet, have openly confronted the idea of resilience with their fieldwork data. Lindberg Falk takes into account two social factors – religion and gender – in attempting to pinpoint their role in helping or preventing recovery after the 2004 tsunami in Thailand. She finds that the Buddhist institutions have, in this case, provided an effective source of resilience. Focusing on a spatial model, Pierdet evaluates the interplay of institutional, social and technical factors in determining the capacity of the Phnom Penh hydraulic system to face human extermination, floods and epidemics. She emphasizes *inter*

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[6]   See, for example, *Disasters*, a journal that began publication in 1977. We also acknowledge a new journal called the *International Journal of Disaster Resilience in the Built Environment*.

[7]   Resilience proves to be a 'lens' or an 'entry point' through which to understand catastrophes, rather than a 'paradigm' for action (Manyena, 2006, p 436).

[8]   Several of the papers presented here were first discussed in the panel 'Victims, survivors, mourners, re-constructors: South East Asian responses to massive social destruction' at the EUROSEAS Conference in Göteborg, 26–28 August 2010. We gratefully acknowledge all the participants in this panel whose papers and comments have been useful when preparing this special issue. We are especially indebted to Rachel Harrison and Monica Lindberg Falk who encouraged us to prepare this special issue following the conference.

*alia* that the instability of the system of dykes allowed it to be left unguarded and fully opened during the Khmer Rouge regime without deteriorating beyond repair. In this respect, the instability itself, when articulated in the model 'kernel/periphery', can be seen as a resilience factor. A more rigidly structured system might not have been able to safeguard and transform itself.

All the articles point to a fabrication or re-fabrication of social bonds as a key characteristic of the social devices of resilience. This can happen as part of the provision of aid, when a previously less relevant institution takes on new roles – in the work of actualizing rituals or in striving for modernization and efficiency in a complex system of drainage. If, as Pierdet's conclusions indicate, a system or structure – whether social or architectural – is resilient when it is able to 'function' after destruction, and if this means that it retains or creates specific principles of action, then it is important to address the issue of rupture and continuity.

*The permanence of social structures.*   Reflecting on the issue of resilience, the researcher encounters the difficulty of stating what has changed and what has remained unchanged following massive destruction, especially when 20 or 30 years have passed since the end of the catastrophe. In contemporary South East Asia, we see people at work, dreaming of their own future and watching from a distance the destruction they, their parents or their grandparents have endured. What has changed? In Thailand, former tsunami-hit areas have developed into tourist sites or are striving to do so. In Aceh, the international aid-built villages created after the tsunami have sometimes assembled people along wholly casual lines. Are these deep changes? In Cambodia, humanitarians claim that domestic violence and alcoholism have dramatically increased since the end of the Pol Pot regime; in the absence of evidence, is this, first, to be believed and, second, to be considered a dramatic change? To what extent and in what respects are these societies different from before, and to what extent have they sought difference?

All the contributors to this issue analyse this topic and most often focus on continuity. Authors underline that, after a disaster, several structures – we use this term in a rather functionalist sense – change some or most of their features while keeping their specificity. Some changes were analysed in the field of religious structures. Monica Lindberg Falk shows how the Thai Buddhist *sangha* network mobilized on material and spiritual issues almost instantaneously after the tsunami. It provided shelter to survivors as well as to corpses before cremation, along with administering sermons so as to relieve the suffering of mourners in accordance with the Buddhist core beliefs. Lindberg Falk also points to the role undertaken by female monks (not recognized by the Thai *sangha*) and 'nuns' [*mae chi*] in this relief effort, and how it could potentially modify the situation of women in the Buddhist gendered order. Silvia Vignato describes how in Aceh an old network of residential Koranic schools [*dayah*] occupies a position between its vocation to charity and the idea of a modern, orthodox Islamic educational system. They now shelter poor children, all labelled 'victims of civil war' and orphans in order to fit the international aid categories, attracting funds and therefore respecting the Islamic moral precept of charity.

Céline Pierdet focuses on material structures and shows how the old hydraulic

system of dykes in Phnom Penh was reused in various coherent or random ways until it gained its present effectiveness in protecting the city from destructive floods.

Finally, contributions on Cambodia and Vietnam consider ritual structures. Anne Y. Guillou shows how the Khmer religious system and its local agencies (including agents such as informal mediums) offer a coherent ensemble of spirit cults and Theravada Buddhism, enabling Khmer villagers to establish an indispensable link with the anonymous dead of the mass graves dug all over the country by the Pol Pot regime. In Judy Ledgerwood's paper, we see how a major annual ceremony of commemoration has resumed since the Pol Pot years. On a spiritual and genealogical level, the ceremony retains its traditional meaning and efficiency (sending Buddhist merit to the dead). On a more social level, its symbolic function (that is, staging the strength and the reciprocity of the patron–client relationship) has changed in accordance with the deep changes of contemporary Khmer society. In Vietnam, Heonik Kwon argues that, for the villagers, the cults of the ancestors have provided a major way of approaching the past and developing categories to think about the war.

*Catastrophe as a tool of transformation.*   As is implicit in the idea of resilience as a goal, we see that catastrophes offer an opportunity for transformations that social actors might have wanted to pursue regardless of the catastrophe itself. Post-war Aceh is a perfect example of this. One of the consequences of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding has been to allow Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam to become the only province in Indonesia to be entirely ruled by Syariat, or Islamic Law. Not everyone who had actively taken part in the conflict would agree to this, but after the law was declared officially, no 'good Muslim' could sensibly oppose it. An office for the implementation of Syariat was set up and a conscious effort to transform Aceh into a perfect Islamic society is currently being carried out by some. This is seen as a bettering of the former condition. In much the same way, some people who were reconstructing villages in Aceh, post-tsunami, thought they would take the chance to have better conditions than before.

The desire to change can take different forms. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge genocide is sometimes seen as being inserted into a more global stream of decadence that began with the Siamese invasion of Angkor during the fourteenth century – believed to have been foretold by a Buddhist prophecy called *puthtomniey*. Many Cambodians believe that the cycle is not yet complete. Indeed, they see their country as becoming weaker and weaker in comparison with their neighbours; hence their anxiety when any border conflict happens, as was evident recently in the case of Thailand regarding the Preah Vihear temple complex.

This helps us to avoid essentializing catastrophes. Even though it is not possible to understand the societies in which we have carried out fieldwork beyond their relationship to their tragic past, this is not the only force at work in the present. Judy Ledgerwood shows that in Cambodia the process of globalization of its markets and workers, alongside the socioeconomic transformation that this entails, is as important as genocide in determining new patterns of social relationships such as patron–client obligations. Lindberg Falk suggests that tourism is a magic word for Thai coastal development, regardless of the tsunami and its consequences. And Aceh participates in a multifaceted Islamic movement that concerns the whole of Indonesia alongside the rest of the world.

## What the collective dead do to the living

### *Collective death as a threat to the socio-cosmic order*

Death and its influence on the living are of course major themes in all the articles in this special issue, despite the fact that only three authors (Kwon, Ledgerwood and Guillou) address funerary rituals directly. If a key characteristic of resilient devices is seen in the fabrication of social bonds, we must acknowledge that an important part of these bonds is concerned with or rooted in the relationship to past death.

In his seminal analysis of death rituals, Robert Hertz (1907) stresses that any human death threatens the feeling of integrity of an entire social group. Ritual treatment of the body, says Hertz, is carried out in order to create the vision of a socialized future offering some relief of such fear. From this perspective, an episode of collective death appears more threatening for the group than any individual loss, as it points precisely to the condition of finitude as a social subject. Gaëlle Clavandier suggests that we consider collective death as a specific category, given its status as an occurrence 'that produces a large amount of victims, is crystallized into an event and requires a specific ritual treatment and memorialization' (Clavandier, 2004, p 186; our translation). She argues that, whatever the cause, a large number of dead bodies, seen together, touches fundamental political and moral issues and elicits strong individual and social emotions. Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009, pp 7–8) call empathy for big tragedies one of the strongest contemporary political emotions. From this perspective, wars, mafia slaughters, earthquakes and ecological disasters appear to have a similar status.[9]

This approach centred on the symbolic power of a collective death is in tune with many of our South East Asian ethnographical experiences and observations of life after disasters. During our respective periods of fieldwork, we had to acknowledge the tenacity of trauma, the 'untamed force of the original event, that which escapes the entextualization or objectification and so needs to be attempted again and again' (Antze and Lambek, 1996, p xii). By dropping the etic classification of disasters based on their origin, the emic view of the 'painful memories' (Graeber, 1997) was allowed to surface with strength. The past, according to Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (1996, p xxi) is 'like the dreamtime of Aboriginal Australians, the past imperfect' – unfinished by definition, demanding attention. All the strategies of resilience described in this issue attempt to do the work of conceiving the present and the future while perfecting the past, putting order into the bereavement.

Collective death is always a violent death. The body – or rather the bodies – and the corpses play a big role in this ceaseless activity of ritual reassessment of violence. Death is a social process. Both Arnold Van Gennep (1909) and Robert Hertz (1907) show that the decay of the body is a necessary and effective symbolic support for the work of mourning. In the cases of collective death observed by the authors of the papers in this issue, the decay of the body is also relevant, even

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[9]   Even though Clavandier underlines the historical and epistemological difference between massive death (when the end of life occurs in the same lapse of time: wars, catastrophes, slaughters) and mere collective death (when the end of life occurs in separate space and time, but is constructed as a collective fact, such as in epidemics or drug abuse), she shows similarities in the social treatment of these two categories.

though (or even because) it does not follow the usual orderly process. Dead bodies come back and need to be addressed over and over according to different categories following the death rituals that have (or have not) been performed[10] – rotting corpses in mass graves, bones, cremated ashes, ghosts or ancestors. They come back in dreams and in mediumistic sessions. The dead bodies are in the present as the dead have a 'future' in the world of the living.

In collective violent death, individualities are smashed. Initially, urgent actions of rescue and rehabilitation for both dead and living individuals are inserted into the wide, historically unavoidable category of 'victims', 'perpetrators' or 'responsible' of a certain event. They are even buried together and unburied according to the classification of their bones – as Guillou demonstrates when describing the memorialization of genocide in Cambodia. At a certain point, though, it is necessary for survivors and descendants to take their dead back to the village, to the kinsgroup, to the parents, to the lover and to the place they belonged to while they were living. This is done materially, by searching for the corpses and transporting them home, or symbolically, by organizing proper individual ceremonies.

Such a ritual 'homecoming' of the dead individuals concerns those who experienced the tsunami in Thailand and Indonesia, Typhoon Nargis in Burma, as well as the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime, of the Vietnamese war and of Acehnese civil conflict. In this special issue, Heonik Kwon draws out the tension between the individual or kinsgroup's ritual freedom and state-organized mourning in contemporary Vietnam. As he has pointed out in his earlier writings, for many Vietnamese, the Vietnam War finally ended around 2000, when they became free to start practising their funerary rites once again. It is a very present-oriented practice. By honouring the 'politically incorrect' dead (the dead who were not former North Vietnamese soldiers), they can strengthen the family group – an increasingly important productive unit, particularly after the end of the American embargo (Kwon, 2008). Anne Y. Guillou details the difficult process of re-appropriation of the land by the formerly deported survivors and their descendants; the *general* dead have to be understood as local spirits haunting fields and trees, whereas domestic funerals are celebrated for each *individually* absent body. Even in the absence of war, integrating the dead into a kinsgroup or a family unit by the sending of merits to them is essential, weaving a social network of relationships which seems indispensable for the most vulnerable Thais hit by the 2004 tsunami, as shown by Monica Lindberg Falk.

## Ritualcide and the regeneration of life

In Cambodia, Judy Ledgerwood notes the deadly blocking power that is held over a social group of what she calls, after Peg Levine (2010), 'ritualcide' – the sudden, imposed suspension of a ritual practice. Ledgerwood describes how re-establishing cyclic, collective death rituals [*phchum ben*] in Khmer society allows for major structural changes, such as the deepening of social disparities between different kinship-based units, the possibility of being more outspoken and openly accepted or even opposed. By owing its own dead, by bringing the violence of

[10]    Antonius Robben (2000) shows this urge in the case of the Argentinian *desaparecidos* and Katherine Verdery (1999) in the case of former socialist leaders in Eastern Europe.

their death back to the kinsgroup, by socializing it (regardless of their position as victims or perpetrators) and thus linking them to the newborn and to a Buddhist cosmology, Khmer society can move on, in whatever direction.

   This openly recalls what Maurice Bloch (1992) has described as 'rebounding violence' – the vitality, the regenerated life that can flow back to society in a specific form after a ritual sacrifice, such as animal slaughter, symbolic wounds, etc, has been duly performed. In this case, the massive number of deaths can be likened on a theoretical level to an enormous sacrifice. Thus, ritual treatment of the dead is necessary in response to the great amount of violence that caused them to die collectively. Ritual is required to ensure the flowing back of an equivalent amount of vitality into an orderly and meaningful society. Silvia Vignato addresses this same issue of sacrifice in a quite literal way. The children whom she describes call themselves victims and joke about being similar to the animals that will subsequently be slaughtered. This ritual activity inscribed in the cosmic vision of Islam helps them, the poor little orphans of war, tsunami and poverty, the society's most fragile children, to eat and to grow into future Acehnese. It is not a purely symbolic action: it is the way the institution of Islam receives food and material help.

   In Monica Lindberg Falk's article we read that for the Thais, like the Khmer and the Vietnamese, the integration of the violent dead into an orderly ancestral landscape is particularly difficult. Lindberg Falk demonstrates that violent death appears to be particularly meaningful for the most vulnerable subjects, often women, as the untimely death of an adult entails the sudden disappearance of a source of economic and moral livelihood, especially for those on whom others relied. In this way, for the Thai survivors of the 2004 tsunami, the haunting spirits of the violently dead match their own haunting fear of an impoverished present and future. The role of the *bikkhuni*, the Buddhist nuns, can be quite successful in giving relief as it addresses both the symbolic and the material (including medical) aspects of people's suffering.

*Temporality of remembrance, rituals and commemoration*

It has often been argued that remembering and forgetting are two sides of the same coin, with periods of forgetting inevitably following times of intense commemoration activity. It is a rhythm that is passed from one generation to another, and that is interwoven into evolving socio-political contexts. As we have already seen at a micro-level when dealing with the hidden patterns of resilience, with funerary rites and when questioning the permanence of social and symbolic structures, one of the most important factors of resilience is the capacity of a group or an individual to restore symbolic links between the 'before' and 'after' of any rupture. When gaining a nationwide public perspective, we must take another factor into account. Restoring – or more often creating – links with a 'before' relies on a culturally constructed, then localized and historically determined, idea of what history is or should be (Bloch, 1996). In this respect, researchers have to go far beyond the narrow scene of the catastrophe and look through what 'past', 'memory', 'forgetting' and 'remembering' mean for the people with whom they do their research.[11]

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[11]   The literature on public commemoration is vast (see, for example, Evans and Lunn, 1997; Fussel, 1975; Santino, 2006; Verdery, 1999; Winter, 1995; Winter and Sivan, 1999), although in South East Asia, the 'commemorative fever' (Tai, 2001, p 1, cited by Kwon in this issue) which sprang

In Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand, the completion of collective mourning happens by accumulation, variation and repetition, with similarities due to the cyclic process in which the souls of the dead are supposed to pass through in Buddhism. The ritual approach to collective death is cyclic even outside the Buddhist environment. Thoroughly Islamic Acehnese teenagers meet, in dreams and in collective trances, the spirits of the violent dead whom they themselves have most likely only ever heard about. Many of these spirits are said to be victims of the civil conflict, but others are more traditional phantom-originating dead – such as women who have died in childbirth, or those who were killed by the tsunami – wanting to tell their beloved which mass grave they are buried in. Creating mass graves does not mean terminating a process of mourning, even though, as Clavandier (2004) stresses, official memorialization is a necessary step.

In fact, Clavandier suggests that social and ritual reactions to collective death follow a cross-cultural pattern, an intrinsic rhythm with specific sequences of ritualization. In the time immediately following the event, she argues, representations of the dramatic circumstances go hand in hand with the creation of categories inserted into patterns of action. The victims, the needy, the sick, the poor and the bereaved are then brought on to the scene. This is followed by a second period in which ritual treatment of the dead is carried out and personal mourning is sought. The third epoch, in this author's view, is characterized by memorialization and collective celebration: that is, one might say, it is inscribed in history.

The contributions to this special issue confirm such periodization, but shuffle the order in which it occurs. In the South East Asian countries we have studied, we observed a continuous interaction among the three levels mentioned by Clavandier (actions, individual mourning and collective memorialization) and acknowledged their cyclic replay on different levels and in different forms. If a cyclic treatment of the tragic past is a general feature beyond cultural determinations, then when and how the treatment happens, how successful it is and how resilient the group performing it is, become so specific to each group and each situation as to render any forecast unreliable.

One last aspect must be addressed in a concluding remark – the pertinence of assuming South East Asia to be a meaningful region in the study of catastrophe. In many ways, this echoes a general questioning about why South East Asia should be an area of study, which has been troubling researchers for many years. Anthony Reid maintains that there are similarities across the region that are not due to any one single general feature, but to various overlapping historical landscapes (Reid, 1988, pp 3–6). We can venture to be more specific in our claim for a regional approach.

First, there is a common experience of the same catastrophes. The 2004 tsunami hit Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Many other cyclic disasters, such as floods or typhoons, characterize the whole region. There is a recent common history in geographical and atmospheric catastrophes. Wars and slaughter trace a similar pattern, as the region has lived in a shared colonial and post-colonial context, and more specifically so when we consider the geopolitics of the Cold War.

up after the end of the Cold War still requires thorough study. Rather than contributing to new debates here, we aim simply to create a South East Asian echo and point to further possible directions of research.

Second, there are major religious trends common to the countries and the peoples of South East Asia. They imply the existence of cults concerning local spirits and ancestors embedded in the principal universal religions (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity). This means that, throughout the region, the role played by religious institutions and networks, both in lending material support and in helping symbolic recovery, is fundamental and presents vast areas of specific similarities.

The last observation is that, even though no one disaster has actually been common to the entire region, the troops of experienced relief workers have frequently engaged in the different contexts of the differently ravaged countries.

All this leads to a common, regional frame of responses to massive destructions. Each of the contributions to this special issue of *South East Asia Research* shows what we have called the vitality of the peoples and context hit by various types of mass destruction. By underlining this aspect, we hope that we have seized something of the vitality of contemporary South East Asia outside any tragic event.

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