

Narratives of violence: Mobilising historical dialogue for conflict transformation in contemporary politics

Abstract

Reconciliation efforts that enable divided societies to live together democratically and without violence rest on the ability of even the most ideologically steadfast individuals and groups to transform their view of themselves, of others, and of themselves in relationship with others. The particular ambition in post-conflict societies is to democratize history, countering narratives controlled by elites with narratives that reflect the lives of poor, marginalized, and oppressed groups, revealing history as another domain of contestation that might be addressed through a dialogical engagement between lived experience and official discourse. Historical dialogue projects are thought to facilitate the emergence of counter-narratives of collective memory that in turn may contest hegemonic and institutionalized accounts of a nation's history. These counter-narratives refuse to allow past injustice to be excused as incidental to the nation-building agenda. Without such acknowledgment it is thought impossible to achieve democratic inclusion.

This paper is concerned with the ways in which historical dialogue projects work to mobilise the collective memory of violence in deeply divided societies, either towards reconciliation and conflict transformation or towards the renewed escalation of violent conflict. It conceptualises the collective nature of such dialogue projects as involving what we term an *agonistic collective identity*—that is, a collective identity that maintains political space sufficient for ongoing democratic contestation among social groups. We argue that, in seeking to bridge the gap between individual and collective experience, historical dialogue projects may provide important opportunities for divided groups to explore attitudes about the historical experiences that continue to polarize them, with potentially transformative effects. We draw from specific regional examples to illustrate these claims.

Introduction

Political actors in pursuit of conflict transformation and historical justice often promote the practice of historical dialogue. In societies divided by civil war, or those transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy or colonialism to postcolonialism, such dialogue seeks to bridge the gap between individual and collective experience, providing opportunities for divided groups to explore attitudes about the historical experiences that continue to polarize them. Historical dialogue projects are primarily concerned with improving the quality of political discourse, particularly in these deeply divided societies, creating what Harold Saunders (2001: 6, 9) has described as a 'public peace process' through which groups of citizens can design and participate in programmes for 'changing conflictual relationships in ways that create the capacities to build the practices, processes and structures of peace.' Through 'engaging in incessant discourse about the world that lies between former enemies' it is hoped that the capacity to share understanding about this world might become possible (Schaap 2005: 84).

This focus on dialogue chimes with much research on the escalation and de-escalation of conflict. Such research is concerned with identifying patterns of violence and the heterogeneous motivations and experiences of violence for a multitude of conflict actors, and how these link with the past and converge in episodes of violence, rather than a primary focus on underlying conflict causes. While both strands of conflict research inevitably seek insight into how to prevent, mitigate, or resolve violence, and how societies divided by violence might forge a more stable pathway forward, a focus on causes has less scope to accommodate the varied perceptions, experiences, and traumatic memories of violence that inform the capacity and willingness of actors to support or participate in conflict transformation processes.

In 'post'-conflict contexts, efforts at conflict transformation often strive for consensus between protagonists on the perceived causes of violent conflict, considering this to be the most effective means of addressing past tensions and establishing new forward-looking social and institutional arrangements. In many instances this will

involve processes of negotiation between conflicting parties designed to reach agreement on ‘what happened in the conflict’ or what factors were ‘behind the conflict’, often with the aim of holding parties accountable for past actions. Examples include many of the instruments from the transitional justice ‘toolkit’, including formalised deliberations, peace agreements, truth commissions, trials, and other efforts that pursue a degree of consensus among parties on both the causes of conflict, and the most appropriate forms of redress for its consequences.

We agree that such processes may be an important component of peacebuilding efforts aimed at developing new institutional designs and broad policies concerned with conflict management. However, we also contend that an emphasis on both consensus and institutional responses may be problematic for three key reasons. First, such approaches assume that achieving a consensus on ‘what happened’ and ‘why’ is possible, when in many divided societies this is patently not so. This is particularly the case for peacebuilding efforts that focus on nation-building which, in ‘post’-conflict contexts, seek to replace social divisions with a shared sense of nationhood. Such initiatives—dominated by the desire to ‘move on’ from the past and look to the future—often fuel the creation of exclusionary, predominantly elite-driven narratives of historical violence. In such cases, the multiple and contested narratives of past violence, particularly those of the poor and marginalised, can be subsumed or concealed, with discontent left smouldering to reignite at some future point. In the worst cases, an insistence that deep intractable disagreement must be ‘resolved’ into a single narrative of historical violence may in fact re-escalate the conflict and send parties back to the battlefields (Woodward 2007; Little 2014). This is particularly likely to be the case if the stakes are high in terms of how power and resources are to be (re)distributed among conflicting parties in future ‘post’-conflict institutional arrangements.

Second, attributing accountability is implicit in reaching a consensus about ‘what happened’ and ‘why’, and may discourage parties to the conflict from coming to the table at the outset. Attributing accountability is at odds with the fact that the distinction between victims and perpetrators in many conflicts is fluid, particularly as conflicts widen and escalate. During periods of violent conflict, citizens may also

become combatants, perpetrating violence against others in the name of their cause, and creating the need for post-violence strategy to 'contend with the detritus' (Daly and Sarkin 2007: 9). Further, in many cases the majority of the population may be thought of as 'bystanders', a group seen to have helped abusive governments to retain power through passive inaction rather than active collaboration. Bystanders are thought to carry a particular form of responsibility, one that cannot translate into guilt in the judicial sense, but whose existence allows both elites and other citizens to distance themselves from their moral obligations (Verdeja 2009: 152). Yet it is often the case, that just as processes such as truth commissions create particular types of victims, they also draw attention away from a sense of wider social accountability for the structures and institutions that supported past wrongs (Miller 2008: 285). As Miller has pointed out, transitional institutions tend to become definitional, delimiting the range of past violations as well as determining the victims and perpetrators (Miller 2008: 291). Beyond such definitions, however, memories of violence remain highly contested, and informed by the salient aspects of group and individual identities that have emerged from complex socio-political, cultural, and historical contexts, and from the conflict itself.

Third, peacebuilding efforts that focus on the construction of transitional institutions may be less likely to focus on the *relational* aspects of conflict at the social level. These are the aspects of conflict concerned with the transformation of relationships among people, which encompass the psychological forces and identity dimensions of conflict. Relational dimensions of conflict are often historically embedded, and shape the likelihood of future contestation and reprisals for triggering actions that invoke historical memory of violence and trauma. Tropp (2012: 4) and Maddison (2015), among others, highlight the importance for contemporary conflict transformation of focusing on the underlying psychological and sociological needs that animate conflictual relations. It is in practices of relational engagement that attempt to address these needs that we can most clearly see the requirements for agonistic processes able to support difficult, ongoing conversations about the past. The relational aspects of conflict in themselves embody dimensions of power and

antagonism that can inform contemporary collective identities (cf. Mouffe 2007) and link historical violence and tensions to contemporary social relations and politics.

It is in light of these concerns with other transitional institutions that this paper draws on the lessons from research on conflict dynamics that identifies a continuity between past and present in conflict mobilisation processes and violent contestation, and that identifies the heterogeneous experiences of violence and conflict often under collective identity frames (Tambiah 1996; Kalyvas 2006). Seeking to understand the plural experiences of conflict and historical memory of violence is inherent in what we identify as agonistic forms of historical dialogue.

In what follows, we argue that practices of historical dialogue that actively foreground the memory and expression of multiple narratives and experiences of violence can potentially have transformative effects. We begin by outlining an ideal model for the practice of historical dialogue, underscoring the need for sustained, intensive, relational engagement. We build on the approach outlined by Maddison (2014) to include a consideration of the need for institutional support for dialogue processes, and a consideration of the temporal aspects of these efforts. We also make reference to the literature on conflict dynamics in order to better understand the relational aspects of conflict escalation. We then apply and extend this ideal type through a review of some of the conflicts and dialogue processes in Indonesia and Cambodia, each of which have a post-authoritarian dimension as well as intergroup dimensions to historical violence.

The paper concludes that for dialogue processes that tackle the relational aspects of conflict to be effective, they must be locally owned, engage with conflict dynamics, and provides space for varied individual and collective experiences of conflict to be explored. Contributing to this effectiveness is wider social and institutional support that signals a willingness to create space for sustained, intensive engagement over time that may facilitate better understanding of the 'other' and their experience in conflict. The absence of local ownership of agonistic dialogue processes, perceptions that such efforts are either 'top down', externally imposed or controlled by the state, and efforts that ignore history, are likely to render such dialogue less effective.

Conceptualising agonistic historical dialogue

The question of how to reckon with violence, and the legacy of anger and loss that remains in its aftermath, remains far from settled. Transitional justice and conflict transformation measures, according to Hirsch (2012: 79) 'all too often fail to achieve the standard of reconciliation set for themselves'. Conflict transformation requires multiple, complementary, and mutually reinforcing efforts that redress the relational and other aspects of conflict in divided and post-authoritarian societies. Reconciliation efforts that enable divided societies to live together democratically and without violence rest on the ability of even the most ideologically steadfast individuals and groups to transform their view of themselves, of others, and of themselves in relationship with others. Historical dialogue—that is, dialogue about past violence—is, we argue, critical to these efforts.

In situations where there is radical disagreement and where deep, identity-based differences continue to define relationships, it is acutely important to understand the relational aspects of conflict. For some scholars of peacebuilding, such as John Paul Lederach (2005: 34-5) relational concerns are at the centre of reconciliation efforts, with the goal of allowing people in even the most divided societies to imagine themselves in relationship with one another, creating a new social context in which cycles of violence might be broken. It is in practices of relational engagement that we can most clearly see the requirements for agonistic processes able to support difficult, ongoing conversations about the past. Finding ways for conflict actors to live together, without subsuming their multiple and varied experiences of past episodes of violence within a single narrative, is about transforming the understanding of the relational aspects of prior violent conflict and understanding the experience and attitudes of the 'other'.

The goal of discerning or constructing a singular, consensual 'truth' about the past remains central to many conflict transformation efforts. David Crocker, for example, contends that without 'some agreement about what happened and why', former enemies are unlikely to be reconciled (Crocker 2000: 101). Contesting this view is the recognition that no 'truth' of past atrocity and injustice—indeed, no history at all—

will ever be stable or uncontested, as the conflict dynamics literature illustrates below. To assume otherwise is to misread the way in which political conflicts are (re)produced in public narratives, as Little (2014: 12-3) suggests:

Disparate details and events tend to get brought together into a single narrative to provide a unified story that pushes contradictions and complexities to one side lest they interrupt the flow of the narrative. But the reality ... is that singular narratives of complex conflicts are never universally consensual and lead us towards an unnecessarily limited range of potential political strategies for managing conflict situations.

Thus, in contrast to efforts that seek consensus on 'what happened' in conflict, or on its underlying causes, we emphasise the importance of often complementary conflict transformation projects in 'post'-conflict societies that create the space for *agonistic* and *relational* dialogue between social actors, focused on the memory of past violence. That is, we propose forms of historical dialogue that democratise versions of history through agonistic processes of engagement designed to re-humanise the other, and to minimise the opportunities of triggering actions re-escalating conflict, while maintaining—and even expanding—space for a diversity of conflicting views.

Key to this form of dialogue is proactively foregrounding the historical memory of violence, and allowing for the varied and multiple narratives and experiences of both individuals and groups (as well as the varied experiences of individuals within groups) to be expressed. Parties agree to come to the table to discuss an event, not to necessarily agree on a version of an event. We therefore define historical dialogue for conflict transformation as dialogue that opens rather than closes conversations about historical violence and the relational aspects of past conflict. We conceptualise the collective nature of such dialogue projects as involving what we term an *agonistic collective identity*—that is, a collective identity that maintains political space sufficient for ongoing democratic contestation among social groups. Agonism *engages* conflict dynamics rather than repressing such dynamics and their relational aspects. In this sense, we argue that such agonistic processes of historical dialogue provide important opportunities for divided groups to explore attitudes about the

historical experiences that continue to polarize them, with potentially transformative effects.

Drawing on theories of agonistic democracy, Maddison (2015: 1014) defines agonistic dialogue as involving 'sustained, intensive relational work' that creates and holds open 'the political space in which people in divided and post-violent conflict societies can engage across difference with a view to transforming their relationships'. She proposes that the ideal type of agonistic dialogue is *sustained* over time (not a one off event), in order to encourage relationship building and the series of interactions necessary to potentially build trust between conflict actors. She also contends that the dialogue should be *intensive*, to express a fuller range of emotions and to 'see beyond group boundaries to both structural conditions and intergroup concerns' (Schoem et al., 2001, p.6), and engage with *relational* dimensions of conflict, which this paper identifies as an important aspect of conflict dynamics. The mechanism for delivering agonistic dialogue, according to Maddison (2015), should be highly structured in establishing the rules of engagement and building in structured activities that illustrate a process of critical engagement. Finally, she suggests that agonistic dialogue mechanisms are ideally best *facilitated* by skilled enablers (often from the different cultural or identity groups participating in the dialogue) in order to create a safer space for engagement.

Building on this conceptualisation of dialogue, we now also suggest the importance of institutional *support* for agonistic historical dialogue processes (as opposed to the creation of transitional justice institutions) as well as considering the temporal aspects of when and for how long dialogue takes place. Research from social psychology explores many of Allport's (1954) famous theories on social interaction and intergroup contact for reducing prejudice. He argues that contact between the members of groups, and the conditions under which this contact occurs, may change perceptions (by, for example, contradicting negative stereotypes) and can potentially lead to a change in behaviour. This is part of what agonistic historical dialogue processes aim to achieve through facilitated, sustained, relational dialogue.

However, it is evident that there are risks involved in bringing conflict actors together to engage with the past when memories of violence are particularly traumatic, particularly in the immediate aftermath of conflict. While much research confirms Allport's theories of the benefits of social interaction (for an overview see Tausch et al. [2005]) in everyday situations, research also indicates that in situations of conflict there are additional considerations. For example, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) find that intergroup contact has negative effects on attitudes in situations of high anxiety or threat, or if stereotypes are confirmed during this contact. Moreover, the reproduction of negative and socially unacceptable traits ascribed to groups through stereotypes may lead to pre-emptive violent action (Quattrone and Jones 1980). While we concede these risks are real, we argue that such risks are also present in other peacebuilding processes, including deliberations seeking to find consensus on historical violence that risk subsuming some narratives and experiences of violence.

Allport (1954) argues that the best effects of interaction are more likely in situations that include equal status between people involved in the interaction, cooperation towards a common goal,¹ and institutional support for positive intergroup interactions. While the structured and facilitated historical dialogue processes that are proposed in Maddison's ideal type of agonistic dialogue can seek to create equal status and cooperation towards a common goal, institutional support is not *necessarily* accommodated in the approach (although expert facilitation does tend to assume an institutional basis for dialogue). In building on this approach we argue that for historical dialogue processes to avoid further escalating tensions and to have wider transformative effects, underlying institutional support—either from the state (as neutral supporter rather than owner of the process), or a third party such as non-partisan civil society organisations or domestic/international institutions outside of the conflict, and preferably both—is a requirement.

It should be noted, however, that state support for projects aimed at positive intergroup interaction is potentially highly problematic. Diprose (2011) finds that

¹ Allport (1954) contends that the first two features of his theory (equal status and working towards a common goal) are most likely to be achieved through friendships.

when one group is perceived to dominate or to be marginalised from the state, then state institutions are likely to disrupt rather than enable dialogical engagement. Perceived favouritism on the part of the state may reinforce negative stereotypes through implicitly or overtly privileging the narrative of one group over another, or even the official view of the state, undermining other forms of positive social relations. If the state is a main protagonist or perpetrator of violence in conflicts, as has been the case in many authoritarian states in Asia and elsewhere, then state-dominated dialogue processes that favour a dominant discourse pose a particular risk for agonistic dialogue and are likely to fail at the outset, if not fuel further violence. Equally, however, if the state supports but does not institute agonistic dialogue processes, particularly in 'post'-conflict contexts where the state has been a protagonist in conflict, then this can signal the opening up of space for multiple narratives of conflict, and greater engagement between conflict actors. What is crucial for effective historical dialogue work is that such processes are not controlled by state actors, but by people acting together to create spaces for engagement.

Potentially far more important than state support, as we note from cases in the Asia Pacific discussed later in this paper, is the need for culturally sensitive, relevant, and appropriate institutions that are *grounded in local experiences* and practices of engagement rather than the imposition of Western institutional norms in the mode of the liberal peace. For participants in historical dialogue to engage in and trust that the processes might be meaningful and transformative in dealing with traumatic experiences of the past, it is vital that the modes of dialogue resonate with participants and their views of the world which are informed by cultural values, local contexts and institutional practices, rather than being based on imposed, external and sometimes unfamiliar norms. Indeed, the most effective forms of agonistic historical dialogue have emerged when local communities and organisations *act together* to create and sustain these processes.

A further dimension of Maddison's model of agonistic dialogue that we seek to extend pertains to the importance of the temporal aspects of any dialogue processes. Considering the timing and duration of dialogical engagement in 'post'-conflicts is essential, we argue that agonistic historical dialogue is most appropriate when the

timing is such that there is willingness on the part of the major parties of the conflict to end violent confrontations and seek alternative arrangements to manage differences, and as such there is the possibility of a meaningful relational engagement at the grassroots level. This is particularly likely to be the case when tensions have begun to deescalate, there are signs of wider social and institutional support for conflict transformation processes, and these have emerged in such a way that dialogical forums will not be misconstrued or hijacked as a part of an ongoing conflict narrative. That is, timing is contingent on a shift in the conflict discourse among warring parties towards the intention of seeking alternative, non-violent pathways in conflict management. This 'ripeness' for agonistic engagement in the relational aspects of conflict may be signalled when large-scale confrontations have ended or extensive covert operations and hostilities have begun to dissipate. Other indications of 'ripeness' include the spaces opened by formal negotiations for peace, investigations into atrocities, hearings, and when other such mechanisms that seek a (re)negotiation of the distribution of power and resources have commenced. These mechanisms, even when protracted, signal that there is a space for grass-roots initiatives to safely emerge.

The significance of conflict dynamics

In attempting to develop the more robust conceptualisation of agonistic historical dialogue outlined above we have sought to learn from the literature on conflict dynamics and the processes of escalation that incorporate the relational aspects of conflict. There is significant and highly debated research on violent conflict that seeks to identify patterns of violence and its causes², particularly the causes of the onset of

² See for example studies that seek to identify causes based on patterns of civil war such as Collier and Hoeffler (1998, 2001) on 'greed' and opportunities for enrichment; Fearon and Laitin (2003) on poverty and political instability and Goldstone et al. (2005) on political regimes among others; Ballentine and Sherman (2003) and Arnsperger and Zartman (2005) on resource endowments for financing but not explaining rebellions; Gurr (1970) on relative deprivation and Gurr (2000) on the treatment or 'grievances' of minorities; Østby (2008) and Stewart (2008) among others on horizontal inequalities (both as incentives mobilise to address inequalities or protect the group privileges); Snyder and Tilly (1972) and Tilly (1975)

civil war. However, Woodward (2007) argues that debates assessing the success or failure of 'peacemaking' interventions in internal conflicts, particularly external interventions, are preoccupied with the degree to which interventions effectively address conflict *causes*. She suggests that 'The politics of the immediate post-war period is suffused with (if not actually driven by) a continuing contest over interpretations, relative responsibilities and guilt, and search for external support for one origin and cause over others' (Woodward 2007: 156).

Yet despite this contest over interpretation and responsibility, everyday intercommunal relationships sustain a diverse set of views about the history of particular conflicts, often for generations after the violence has ended (Maddison 2014: 6). What research on the dynamics of conflicts discussed below makes clear is that the diversity of *views about* the history of a conflict arises from a diversity of *experiences of* that conflict. Understanding this diversity underscores the argument that seeking consensus about what happened and why and who is accountable is unlikely to be effective, and may in fact prohibit engagement in peace processes for group members for whom these distinctions are not clear. For example, the punishment of particular acts ascribed to particular groups or individuals may be understood as a political choice rather than a factual determination, meaning that many survivors will find it difficult to embrace the project of peace rather than a return to conflict (Pankhurst, 1999: 242). Indeed, participation in processes that seek consensus on the causes of conflict may in fact fuel further conflict (Woodward 2007).

In the scholarship on the dynamics of conflict and violence it is well established that in communal conflicts, riots, and even civil war, violence does not occur everywhere and at all times, and participation, and the motivations for this, are not uniform over space and time (Kalyvas 2006, Tajima 2014, Weinstein 2007, Diprose 2011), even though actions may be aligned under metaframes of identity allegiance (Kalyvas 2006). Motivations for participation in conflict change (Weinstein and Humphreys

on resource mobilisation and opportunity structures; Homer-Dixon (1994) and Nafziger and Auvinen (2002) on environmental pressures and land scarcity, among others.

2005), recruitment patterns and strategies of rebel and other organisations change (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007; Lichbach 1994), narratives and explanations of conflict evolve (Tambiah 1996), and can also be reinterpreted 'post'-conflict (Brass 1997). The distinction between victims and perpetrators is diluted over the life of the conflict as it escalates, particularly in protracted civil wars and in repeated episodes of violence (Mamdani 2001; Eppel 2009; Cohen, Green and Wood 2013). As Woodward (2007) argues, root causes become less and less significant in terms of understanding the conflict, as dynamics today may be causes tomorrow. Thus, achieving consensus on what happened and why in peacebuilding projects may be an unattainable goal or even trigger further conflict.

One study on participation that is particularly useful for understanding the heterogeneous motivations for participating in conflict—which in turn informs the multiple individual and group narratives of conflict—is the work of Kalyvas (2006) on the civil war in Greece. In his study, Kalyvas examines a multitude of agents and their actions, both in places where violence did and did not break out. He not only finds that the levels of violence during the civil war varied over space and time, but also that different people and groups engaged in violence during the civil war in different ways, with different motivations, and at different times; all under the larger narrative of allegiance to one side or the other. Albeit unsurprising, what is clear from such research is that groups (or collectivities of groups) have heterogeneous memberships whose experience of violence varies.

How people organise under discursive frames for collective violence is the focus of phenomenologists (cf. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001) and collective action theorists concerned with conflict escalation processes. Historical antecedents and political contests shape the salience of identity groupings (Tambiah 1996; Wilkinson 2009), (Posner 2004) and can change over the life of a conflict (Tambiah 1996; Brubaker 2004). For example, Wilkinson (2009: 272) argues that in India, mobilising along linguistic group lines is declining as it is a less salient identity cleavage compared with religious identities. The reason that one cleavage was more salient than the other, Wilkinson contends, pertains to historical antecedents such as colonial divide and rule policies along religious lines, and state policies of accommodating claims made

on linguistic not religious lines. Mamdani (2001) also argues that many internal conflicts, especially in Africa in the mid-late twentieth century, were coloured by the identity politics of the past. Group identities produced and entrenched under colonialism were reproduced in post-colonial states. As such, there are links between the historical practices of inequity and injustice, and the more recent political battles for power, access, control, and retribution.

Violent mobilisation may also *produce* group differentiation as incidents of collective action are categorised or explained in ethnic or other group terms (Brubaker 2004). How actions and narratives are framed using identity categories during and after incidents of violent conflict can create feedback loops that shape subsequent experience. Identity is also understood by as 'contingent, relational, and open to upheaval and change' (Chakravarti, 2012: 11).

Research on the micro dynamics of conflict and conflict escalation identifies the increased risk of violence when discourse on historical episodes of violence or contestation are evoked in contemporary provocative actions that endeavour to link past and present and deepen divides through triggering actions (Tambiah 1996; Diprose 2011). Triggering actions have the effect of symbolically deepening identity divides (Appadurai 2006; Tambiah 1996), particularly through invoking historical memory of the relational aspects of violence. Such triggering actions include the desecration of identity symbols and other slurs against identity groups (Brass 1997), the threat of violence (Richards 2005), public symbols, inflammatory slogans, the reification of group leaders, public speeches and other discourse that focuses attention on identity difference (Tambiah 1996). By invoking identity symbols, sharpening or shaping perceptions of identity divides, and influencing identity allegiance in social relations these triggers become important aspects of conflict mobilisation processes that invite violent group reprisals.

What the research on conflict dynamics highlights is that heterogeneous experiences of violence, and the relationship between historical violence and contemporary action, both shape the relational dimension of conflict. Seeking to achieve consensus about accountability or on a single cause potentially disguises multiple narratives,

memories, and experiences of conflict. Studies of conflict (de)escalation and the dynamics of violence over the life of historical violence and conflict or interrelated conflicts (see for example Das 2001; Spencer 2000; Zurbuchen 2005; Coppel 2006, and McGregor 2013 among others) seek to unpack these multiple and sometimes contradictory narratives. These narratives are framed by both variable individual experiences, and membership of salient identity groups that themselves change over space and time and are shaped by contexts and past experiences of violence. It is in light of these insights that we consider how historical dialogue has been engaged (or not) in two Asian locations.

The use of historical dialogue in Indonesia and Cambodia

In much of the literature on historical violence and conflict, and on contemporary conflict transformation and reconciliation efforts, there is a tendency to focus on one specific conflict or period of violence, rather than the extended history of disruption and instability that generally provide the context for specific outbreaks of violence. Thus, in what follows, in both Indonesia and Cambodia we look beyond the most well known periods of violence—the 1965 violence in Indonesia and the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia—to consider other periods of conflict and conflict transformation. In these other events violence manifested in different forms of contestation and different experiences for conflict actors, meaning that they need to be considered in terms of both national and local mobilisation frames and in the wider historical context. We discuss the Indonesian case, which draws on empirical research and the literature, in more depth to draw out the aspects of the framework of agonistic dialogue discussed above, and then use the Cambodian case to reiterate key points and illustrate wider applicability.

Indonesia

In the Indonesian case, we first consider the example of regional violence in the Poso district of Central Sulawesi province, drawing on both the literature and the in-depth fieldwork on communal conflict and peace-building processes conducted by Diprose (2011) between 2005-10. In the period following the end of the 32-year authoritarian rule of the Suharto administration in May 1998, waves of violence in the form of

communal clashes between ethno-religious groups occurred in a number of provinces across Indonesia. These upsurges of violence, punctuated by periods of non-violence underpinned by latent intergroup tensions, began as fissures emerged prior to Suharto's resignation. As processes of democratic reform began to take hold in the years that followed, outbreaks of violence continued, with communal clashes and other insurgent violence occurring in disparate parts of the archipelago. In this sense, while the manifestations of violence had local roots, they converged under larger national frames of contestation and high-stakes efforts to realign power in Indonesian society away from those who had benefitted from the patronage of the authoritarian regime in the past.

In the Poso district, the first outbreak of violence occurred in December 1998, some months after Suharto resigned, with several phases of intergroup fighting occurring between 1998 and 2002 (the initial years of Indonesia's democratic reform).³ During this period, conflict in Poso escalated increasingly along religious identity lines, although the conflict was underpinned by contestation over inequalities, political access and representation (Diprose and Brown 2009; Diprose 2011). In the most intense periods of fighting, people were killed in armed intergroup clashes with combatants wearing symbols signifying one religion or other. Churches and mosques were destroyed and entire villages or neighbourhoods were razed to the ground. The 'repertoires of violence' (cf. Tambiah 1996) drawn on by both sides sought to deepen religious identity divides by using performative actions such as religious slurs, public speeches, and the reification of leaders from religious identity groups. As the conflict escalated, communities became divided along geographical lines as religious groups became increasingly concentrated in particular areas when they took refuge from further attacks. The violence itself not only created categories of allegiance along religious identity lines but also changed the motivations for participation as loss of family members, uncertainty and fear gripped residents.

³ For an overview of the conflict phases during the height and deescalation phases of the conflict see Brown and Diprose (2009).

In the wake of the violence it was clear that both group and individual experiences had shaped varied motivations for both direct participation in the violence, and for the support provided through training, financing and the provision of arms for combatants. Some claimed not to have been participants in the violence, despite the fact that they had provided food and transport for sons and brothers travelling to the battlefields. Indeed, heated public debate emerged in the 'post'-conflict peace-building discourse around who were to be defined as victims and perpetrators and the potential for amnesty from prosecution for acts of violence, including whether state actors should be prosecuted. Such experiences are typical, and underscore the need for agonistic historical dialogue that allows for expression of messy, contested, varied, relational aspects of conflict.

The first efforts at dialogue in the region involved state-sponsored efforts towards a formal peace agreement⁴ when the National Human Rights Commission, together with top security and cabinet officials, initiated the Malino peace process in December 2001. Representatives of both religious communities participated in this process, as well as senior civil servants from the district, provincial and central governments. The agreement that resulted, contained in the Malino Declaration, consisted of ten key points intended to address the proximate causes of the violence by using legal procedures for some prosecutions, recognising pre-conflict rights and ownership of resources, returning Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to their villages, and rehabilitating infrastructure. Although the process involved both state and non-state actors, the peace accord was essentially elite driven and highly contested by a number of actors, particularly those who were sidelined from participating in the process.

To follow up the peace agreement, working groups were created to monitor and help implement various aspects of the ten points outlined in the Malino Declaration. Working groups were created at the provincial, district, and sub-district levels to focus on peace and reconciliation, economic rehabilitation, education, and spiritual welfare. However, according to many different Muslim and Christian interviewees,

⁴ One prior attempt by the state to create a peace agreement failed in 2000.

villagers still considered these groups to be top down, and in some cases ineffective. Agreed work commenced slowly and did not sufficiently involve grassroots members of the community, often focusing on one-off events that did not provide space to build trust and improve relations among former warring parties.

Despite these shortcomings, however, the Malino Declaration, subsequent security operations, and working group efforts themselves all signalled both *institutional support* for efforts at conflict transformation in the region, and *ripeness* for relational engagement. Together these processes they signalled a shift towards greater willingness to engage in seeking alternative, non-violent pathways in conflict management. Unlike earlier phases of the conflict, where inaction by security forces and the perception that prosecutions were one-sided had indicated that there were wider interests in maintaining, if not fuelling the conflict (Diprose 2011), this time both sides had engaged in more institutionalised negotiated peace-building efforts, and state actions indicated support for an end to the violence. However, these state-sponsored efforts alone were insufficient in for dealing with the relational aspects of conflict.

To fill this space, another form of dialogue also began to emerge. For several years, many civil society organisations worked to build peace from the bottom up, by facilitating repeated meetings between ex-combatants and community members to discuss their experience of the conflict, and by facilitating visits between both communities to share their stories and work together on rebuilding destroyed religious buildings and other property (in some cases together with the Malino working groups and in others separately). Interviews with ex-combatants on both sides of the conflict revealed the ways in which peace-building and human rights organisations in the region were increasingly able to incorporate ex-combatants into their activities. In turn, these ex-combatants worked to discourage other combatants from taking up arms, particularly when inciting incidents of targeted violence occurred. Civil society organisations facilitated many different kinds of inter-religious forums, discussions and activities, joint anti-corruption campaigns, and oversaw the

return of small numbers of IDPs to their former homes. There were also significant meetings between Christian and Muslim leaders, particularly prior to the district head elections in 2005, with candidates establishing Muslim-Christian pairings to contest the elections as a conflict prevention measure (Brown and Diprose 2009).

Interviews with actors in these civil society organisations revealed the difficult but productive dialogue between warring parties that took place over several years. These meetings were heavily facilitated, often involving equal numbers of participants from the conflict groups. Equal space was given to participants to tell their stories and experiences and they also participated in joint reconstruction activities. In relating their experiences, there was mutual recognition of loss, fear, and hardship among participants, creating what Lederach (2005) would identify as points of intersection among divided groups. Many on both sides had joined the conflict to seek protection and training, or after family members were killed, whereas for others status and popularity or payments were gained through their participation in the conflict. The facilitators of these meetings told of their exhaustion in seeking to maintain intensive dialogue in the face of ongoing bombings, beheadings, and other actions that sought to trigger group reprisals, but there were no intergroup reprisals of the likes of the first years of the conflict.

Some participants in these dialogues were able to identify shared moments when, in the midst of intergroup clashes when each had their gun aimed at the other, they had each chosen not to pull the trigger. Gradually, through a process of dialogue that supported multiple narratives of the conflict, and in which combatants and bystanders could reflect on the past in terms of both their individual and group experiences, new understandings emerged. Combatants on both sides, civil society dialogue facilitators, and others all conveyed their sense of the ways the process of dialogue had enabled both sides to identify some of the political aspects of mobilisation processes such as payments for participation, calls from the leadership to defend their group at key political moments, and other similar instances. This insight helped groups suffering from conflict fatigue to resist reengaging in conflict in the midst of new conflict triggering actions.

The following quote is typical of the views espoused in interviews:

Government efforts were not particularly successful as they were too top down. They failed completely with the Sintuwu Maroso Reconciliation (*Rujuk Sintuwu Maroso*) effort, which they [government and leaders] tried to implement in August 2000. Then, the Malino Declaration in December 2001 was too elitist. It didn't truly reach down into the community...so violence didn't stop. The Accord did put a dampener on violence, but because so many properties and lives were lost, violence didn't completely stop; it didn't resolve the problems. But aside from that, many efforts were undertaken by CSOs in the field, in the form of inter-community discussions and inter-religious group discussions. These peace-building efforts truly involved the community. (Researcher and observer, 24 July 2006).

The relative success of this regional level case of historical dialogue in Indonesia is in contrast to national efforts focused on the anti-communist violence of 1965-66, which saw more than 500,000 people killed (McGregor 2009), with numerous others incarcerated or injured. For the past half century, Indonesia has experienced the ideological repression of victims of anti-communist violence enacted in law, and in vehement and sexualised propaganda (Wieringa 2011), both under Suharto and in the post-1998 reform era. The fragmented voices of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and many non-PKI victims struggle to be heard today, even at the local level, across most of Indonesia.

In 2012, the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) delivered a report calling for those responsible to be brought to justice and further recommending that the government issue a national apology to victims (Purdey 2013). It argued that the events of 1965-66 constituted a gross violation of human rights, urging that those responsible be brought to trial. In light of the political controversy that erupted after the calls for an apology, President Yudhoyono did not acquiesce as was hoped (McGregor 2013; Wahyuningroem 2013). The Komnas HAM report was further rejected by the Attorney General's Office and by major Islamic groups, yet none of this was enough to stifle public debate. Since the release of the report public

discourse has intensified, further stimulated by the 50th anniversary of the onset of violence in 2015. However, many attempts to foster such debate have been shut down by state and non-state actors. For example, the 2015 Ubud Readers and Writers Festival, which had organised special sessions including a book launch, a photographic exhibition and three panels discussing representations of the 1965 violence, eventually withdrew these sessions because of police pressure (McGregor and Purdey 2015).

Nevertheless, the investigations of Komnas HAM into the 1965 violence has triggered a resurgence of demands for public dialogue on the violence, and many small-scale, *locally grounded* grass-roots initiatives facilitated by civil society organisations in recent years indicate that the *timing is ripe* for historical engagement. A number of researchers (see for example Wahyuningroem 2013) have identified important bottom up dialogue initiatives on the 1965 violence in examples from across the archipelago that have allowed for multiple voices and experiences of the 1965 violence to emerge. These have been accessible for local peoples, supported by civil society, and *locally grounded* in lived experiences, local contexts, and cultural values. Demands for dialogue gained further momentum with the 50-year anniversary of 1965 in 2015. However, some of these processes have been ad hoc, or have not been *sustained* over a period of time, as organisers were faced with threats of violence from external actors, or state institutions such as the police shut down forums. There are indications, therefore, of partial institutional support for dialogue, at least on the part of civil society (both organisations and actors), but without the tacit support (but not control) of the state this seems insufficient to create space for meaningful, agonistic engagement.

This struggle for effective national-level historical dialogue can be contrasted with the regional focus in the case of Poso, which highlights the transformative effects of historical dialogue processes that are *sustained*; focus on the *relational* aspects of conflict; are *intensive*; and which create space for multiple narratives of violence that culminated in points of intersection, divergence, and convergence among enemies. These interactions were heavily facilitated and structured. They also had *institutional support* from a combination of civil society organisations (and indirectly from the

state through its initiation of other formal processes,) and were appropriately *timed*, as they were preceded by a formal peace agreement and military action that signalled a shift in the willingness of political actors to find non-violent forms of contestation: they did not occur in isolation.

The series of agonistic historical dialogue processes and other public discussions were *locally grounded* in the lived experiences of conflict actors who could easily access and participate in initiatives, rather than constituting distant, elite driven processes operating at some distance conceptually and geographically from the site of violence. Multiple actors could participate, from combatants to bystanders on both sides. The state indirectly supported *but did not control* grassroots processes. The state instead signalled its institutional support for conflict transformation (rather than favouring one or another group) through its more direct involvement in parallel formal initiatives conducted together with other traditional, religious, and other elites. It is through these parallel initiatives that new, more elite arrangements for powersharing in the peace agreements and other subsequent efforts (such as in efforts to find new approaches to elections, and to share resources in development initiatives in the ensuing years). Grassroots efforts focussed on the relational aspects of conflict, while other more elite initiatives focussed on power and interests. The suite of conflict transformation efforts was complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Cambodia

In the decades since the 1970s, Cambodia has endured a series of violent disruptions: civil war from 1970 and 1975 between monarchists and communists; aerial bombing by the United States collaterally to its 'Vietnam war'; the perhaps unrivalled brutality and revolutionary zeal of the Khmer Rouge and their program to remake Cambodian society in a romanticised image of precolonial agrarian life; and occupation by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam from 1979 until 1989, which was resisted violently by an unlikely medley of former domestic foes. Further, since 1993, Cambodia has experienced an unstable post-authoritarian democracy led only ever by one man, Hun Sen, who negotiated to hold onto power in spite of an election loss in 1993 and then achieved the same feat only by military means in 1997.

In Cambodia, the surviving leadership of the Khmer Rouge, which collapsed in 1998, has been brought before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) backed by the international community, to face charges of crimes against humanity. It was only in 2003, after much negotiation, that the ECCC was formed, consisting of 'a mixed tribunal comprising local and international judges operating under Cambodian law' (St John 2006: 175). Arrested in 2007, with trials taking place through to 2014, only five surviving senior Khmer Rouge leaders were charged. Three were found guilty and sentenced, one was found unfit to stand trial and has since died, while the other died in custody during proceedings. Thus, while critics suggest that by pursuing charges against only the most senior Khmer Rouge figures the ECCC has effectively underwritten the ongoing impunity of middle and junior level cadres, what is interesting is that—in contrast to Indonesia, which has pursued a more consolidated democratic path but is yet to tackle the legacy of 1965 violence—in its limited democratic political space, Cambodia has, to a degree, found ways to support an engagement with the past through the trials. As Dosch (2012: 1076) observes,

...the trials have triggered in Cambodia a process of reflection and coming to terms with the Khmer Rouge past. They have also spawned initiatives to deal with traumas that had been impossible until recently because the government was reluctant to engage with them. The idea that a profound understanding of the past is necessary to prevent conflict in the future is gradually taking hold.

Indeed, the ECCC enjoys considerable support from the Cambodian people (Dosch 2012: 1084) and, though it is not framed explicitly around the need for dialogue, dissemination programs, both internal and external to the ECCC, have in fact fostered widespread, small-scale initiatives. These initiatives suggest the seeds of historical dialogue are beginning to take root in some cases and becoming more deeply embedded in others (discussed further below). The trials have also indicated a degree of institutional support for wider engagement.

Though Cambodia's political elites have been engaged in dialogue as teleological negotiation since the mid 1980s, much of this lacks historical depth and has not been

locally grounded. Instead the dialogues between the divided but evolving factions of Cambodian politics have functioned primarily as a form of negotiation between the groups. For example, following such negotiations in the 1980s, Hun Sen reinstated Buddhism as the national religion and once more began promoting a form of Khmer nationalism. He renamed the People's Republic of Kampuchea the State of Cambodia, and his own Khmer People's Revolutionary Party became the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), shifting Cambodia away from its decade long Vietnamese orbit. Dialogue was in this case shaped by the nation-building agenda. Other notable forms of elite-driven dialogical exchange between political factions include: the Jakarta Informal Meeting I (JIM I) and JIM II in 1988-9; the First Paris Peace Conference in 1989; and the Second Paris Peace Conference in 1991 at which a formal peace treaty was agreed, ostensibly ending hostilities. However, participation in these and subsequent power sharing dialogues remained exclusively at the level of political elites, all but ensuring the concerns of the Cambodia masses remained at arm's length – dialogue was not *locally grounded* or *agonistic* as the Khmer Rouge boycotted much of this process.

Resistance to democratisation and the institutionalised dialogue norms that accompanied 'peace' in the years following the 1993 elections, can be at least partially traced to the very international character of the Cambodian conflict resolution process (Osborne 1994; Kevin 2000; Richmond and Franks 2007; Gellman 2007). In the trials of Khmer Rouge leadership, Hun Sen was determined that the defendants would be held to account on Cambodian terms. 'The Cambodian government', Maguire reports, 'insisted that the trials take place in Cambodia with a Cambodian majority on every level of the court' (2005: 5). In many ways this dynamic can be viewed as a reiteration of Cambodian resistance to what is seen as the imperialist intrusion at the hands of France during its colonial period, the United States during the 'Vietnam War,' Vietnam itself in the 1980s, and most recently the international community during the negotiated settlement and post-conflict democratisation phases. Commentators have critiqued the disjunction between institutionalised dialogue norms imported chiefly from Western liberal democracies as part of the UN brokered peace settlement of the early 1990, and a hierarchical

Cambodian culture that has no historical experience of them or the social forms from which they were originally derived. Indeed, even the ECCC struggles with this problem, balancing the participation of expert international jurists with the asserted need for Cambodian sovereignty over the proceedings.

Today Cambodia continues to struggle with the domestication of violent political contest within non-violent institutionalised democratic forms foisted upon it by the dominant voices of the international community, to whose societies the ‘patrimonial’ (Cock 2010), ‘top-down’ (Ojendal and Sedara 2006) character of Cambodia bears so little resemblance. The contemporary political contest between Prime Minister Hun Sen and the main opposition party led by Sam Rainsy continues to break out of the fragile institutional frameworks imposed upon Cambodia by the international community and into sporadic violence on the streets. Most recently, in 2014, a series of protests culminated in the arrest of seven opposition lawmakers-elect for ‘insurrection’ (Un 2015). Promisingly, however, negotiations would secure their release, and the seven now occupy their seats in the National Assembly won during the 2013 elections.

On this basis, Sam Rainsy has begun promoting a ‘culture of dialogue’ to replace the culture of violence that has plagued Cambodia for so long. Provisionally, the ‘culture of dialogue’ calls for a restriction on particular language, such as ‘Vietnamese head with a Cambodian body’, ‘communist dictator’, ‘Vietnamese puppet’, ‘person who sells their nation’ and ‘leader of the thieves’ (Kuch 2015). By the same measure, threats of violence and intimidation such as ‘arrest and jail’ and ‘war will occur’ are prohibited (Kuch 2015). Though its formulation is very much in progress—whether as a private agreement between Sam Rainsy and Hun Sen, between their respective parties (Harfenist 2015), or as an ideal for the entire country—the ‘culture of dialogue’ is already viewed as a questionable political strategy by some commentators, and not simply because its details are yet to be worked out in full (Giry 2015: 144). For some it is a strategy to build up grassroots support for the opposition ahead of the 2018 elections (Giry 2015: 144). For the outspoken opposition deputy Kem Sokha, for example, the requirement to remain in dialogue forestalls the possibility of a strong critique of government behaviour that undergirds

a healthy democracy. For him, ‘The culture of dialogue is just words — it is not sustainable... [Hun Sen] seems to hate criticism. In democratic countries, they love criticism’ (quoted in Harfenist 2015).

In the longer term, however, the proponents of the ‘culture of dialogue’ view it as far more than simply a mechanism for present elite level power sharing but instead as a means of facilitating public discourse on the trauma of the past. There are numerous examples of efforts at dialogue that both precede and follow Sam Rainsy’s efforts to create such a ‘culture’, only one or two of which are mentioned here. Examples of early efforts include the ‘National Issues Forum’ held at venues across the country by the Centre for Social Development (CSD), which are intended to provide ‘an outlet for public sentiments’ during a period of social and political reconstruction in Cambodia. The CSD fora are ‘designed to facilitate cooperation dialogue among government, private sector, civil society, and the general public’ (CSD n.d.). As former CSD president Chea Vannath (CSD 2001) has argued:

In order for our society to stabilize and move forward, and for all people to develop to their full potential, we must work together. Our society is faced with the difficult issue of how to deal with our past. We should discuss it in public: civil society and government should have a dialogue. Some think that by talking to the Khmer Rouge, I want to forget what happened. This is not true. I want to help our people deal with this tragedy, find the truth and voice their opinions on the trial, on justice and on healing. This is the most important process to deal with justice, national reconciliation, healing, and genuine and lasting peace.

Academic Chheang Vannarith goes even further, underscoring the need for local ownership and control of these processes. For him, a failure to extend the ‘culture of dialogue’ to the community level would be tantamount to its failure, arguing that ‘Without local engagement, the practice of dialogue may not lead to many positive outcomes’ (quoted in Soksreinith 2015).

The challenge of expanding this ‘culture of dialogue’ within Cambodia has been taken up with energy by a growing range of civil society actors, however, and indeed well in

advance of its articulation by Sam Rainsy. In addition to their work on policy advocacy, a significant effort has gone into supporting the work of the ECCC through dissemination programmes (Dosch 2012: 1077) and organising dialogue forums both formal and informal. One striking example of locally grounded practices of dialogue is provided in the work of Thet Sambath. A survivor of the Khmer Rouge violence which claimed the lives of his parents, following the demise of its leadership, Sambath began travelling into the rural provinces to trace the perpetrators from the village level up to an including Brother Number Two Nuon Chea and engage them in video recorded dialogue. Through his patience and humility he has been able to move beyond mistrustful denials of involvement to open admissions about the violences many Cambodians, it seems, would rather forget. Strikingly, Sambath refuses to cooperate with the ECCC by submitting his extensive video recorded interviews as evidence. Instead of legal proceedings against the former Khmer Rouge, he insists upon the need for a national dialogue.

The Cambodian case underscores the challenges involved when the imposition of institutionalised Western discourse norms does not make sufficient reference to local values and more. What makes this point about international intervention so important in Cambodia is that it brings into plain comparison the dominant peace building processes of the last 25 years with the historical dynamics that had contributed so much to Cambodia's descent into 'civil war.' The implication is that the possibility of dialogue is highly conditioned by the specific history of Cambodia fighting to defend itself against external interventions (Lee 2011: 351). Whatever has divided Cambodians in the past and continues to do so in the present, indeed whatever *internally* divides each of the groups and factions, the entire nation remains bound by this history. Thus, Cambodian nationalism plays an absolutely essential role in peace building and historical dialogue in that country.

Further, the case also illustrates the demands for continued and intensified dialogue that has a space in wider national political discourse, but one that is *locally grounded* in the diverse experiences of Cambodians. Time will tell if the negotiations between Sam Rainsy and Hun Sen constitute a 'ripeness' for a shift in political discourse to support a deeper, agonistic engagement with the past, or if the 'culture of dialogue'

is moulded as an elite-driven narrative associated with the nation-building agenda, or at worst is hijacked for political gain.

Conclusion

In this paper we sought to explore an ideal type of agonistic historical dialogue on violence, drawing on examples from Indonesia and Cambodia. Both the research on conflict dynamics and the Indonesian case study suggest that there are varied experiences of individual and group participation in conflict, which change over time and are embedded in local and national socio-political and historical frames. We argue that agonistic historical dialogue allows for a rich engagement with such conflict dynamics, allowing the heterogeneous experiences of groups and individuals in conflict to emerge, rather than commencing with the assumption that dialogue could or should initially focus on consensus on conflict causes. Both cases, and most especially the Cambodian case, underscore the importance of such processes being driven by local ownership and control, fuelled by the cultural norms and values specific to that place. In these circumstances such processes create the possibility for the continued, non-violent, contestation of the past through dialogue on agonistic collective identity.

Historical dialogue processes in divided or post-authoritarian societies that create spaces for agonistic engagement and a focus on the relational dimensions of conflict are an important means of facilitating conflict actors to understand how and why individuals and groups engaged in conflict at particular times in particular ways. These efforts provide a means for deescalating the underlying relational tensions in conflict, which are susceptible to being remobilised in violence when triggering actions that activate sensitive aspects of identity symbols invite reprisals. Key to this form of dialogue is proactively foregrounding the historical memory of violence. Through such processes, history is democratised, and narratives that reflect the experience of multiple actors can emerge.

Historical dialogue processes seem to be most likely to be effective when they are locally owned but operate in a space where there are indications of wider institutional support for conflict transformation. Civil society groups can provide this

space, and ideally it is supported, but not controlled by the state. Perceptions that such efforts are either 'top down', externally imposed or controlled by the state, and efforts that ignore history, are less effective at dealing with past trauma and the relational aspects of conflict. This conclusion drives us toward further, empirical research to further explore and test this model in practice, suggesting as it does a fruitful strategy for mobilising narratives of violence in the pursuit of peace.

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