

Book Reviews

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Interactions with a Violent Past: Reading Post-Conflict Landscapes in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Edited by Vatthana Pholsena and Oliver Tappe. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013. xii+300 pp.

Wars do not end with peace treaties and the demobilization of armies. Nor do they reverberate only in historical debate. The traumas of body and mind and the scars of landscape last long after the events that caused them. But memories endure only for so long, unless passed on — at first by witnesses, and then through narratives anchored in material remains, in letters and souvenirs, in medals and memorials, and in the decaying detritus of war. This book is about how memories of war both linger and continue to be created through interactions with the landscapes of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

In their introduction, the editors provide a brief background to the Second Indochina War before outlining the themes interwoven to a greater or lesser extent into each of the subsequent chapters — the lingering violence associated with the landscapes of war, the contested interpretations generated by memories and memorials to the conflict, and the transformations of communities and landscapes that have occurred since. These unifying themes bring the contributions of anthropologists, sociologists and historians together within an interpretive framework drawn from theorists of the interactions that occur among landscape as an active influence, personal memory and historiography.

Of the nine chapters that comprise this volume, four deal with Laos, three with Cambodia and two with Vietnam. The order presented by the editors groups three chapters on the interpretation of memorial sites, one from each country, followed by four on the continuing destructive effect of the war, again covering all three countries.

The last two chapters focus on the way that ethnic communities in northeast Cambodia and southern Laos deal with the impact and aftermath of war.

It is impossible to separate war from revolution in any of the three countries. Not only is revolution a thread that runs through all three of the Indochina wars (1946–54, 1960–75, 1978–89), but it has also continued, since their conclusion, to influence the ways in which these wars have been memorialized and interpreted. Somewhat surprisingly, however, revolution hardly figures as an analytical concept in this volume: there is not even an entry for it in the index. Yet the first chapter, entirely fittingly, deals with the most confronting of all memorials of the revolutionary aftermath of war: the torture prison of Tuol Sleng and the killing grounds of Choeung Ek. Sina Emde shows how these two sites provide powerful stimuli for the personal memories recalled before the tribunal established to try senior Khmer Rouge leaders, and how these accounts and associated ritual commemoration of the dead feed into the construction of collective memories with the potential to challenge the hegemony of state historiography.

In all three countries, ruling “revolutionary” regimes have sought to impose official historiographies of the war years — beginning with the naming of the war itself. While for Americans the “Vietnam War” conjures up a faraway country, in Indochina the “American War” recalls defeat of a powerful adversary. For the Lao, the caves of Vieng Xai, the wartime headquarters of the Pathet Lao in northern Laos, act as a “site of memory” contributing to a heroic image that serves to reinforce the legitimacy of the regime. Yet, as Oliver Tappe demonstrates, this portrayal masks both the lingering violence embedded in the landscape in the form of unexploded ordnance (UXO), and the poverty of rural life that war and revolution have failed to alleviate.

In the third chapter in this group on memorial sites, Markus Schlecker reveals how stelae (*bia*) erected by local communities in Vietnam to commemorate “martyrs of war” also reinforce the patrilineal descent groups comprising each community — thus incorporating

the experience of war into the continuity of ancestral lineages. The sacrifices of war are in this way culturally appropriated to create localized forms of collective memory.

In the first of four following chapters on the continuing legacy of war, Elaine Russell exposes the tragic toll of death and injury caused by UXO in Laos, and the programmes working to remove it. Continuing on the same theme, Christina Schwenkel shows how the economics of the scrap metal trade in the former demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Vietnam have exacerbated the risks associated with the disposal of UXO. In both countries, landscapes scarred by war continue to threaten violence that both revives memory and reconstructs it.

In her insightful chapter, Vatthana Pholsena “reads” the reconstruction of Route 9 from Savannakhet to the Vietnam border in central Laos in the context of both the war (the road was heavily bombed) and its aftermath (not only of the continuing presence of UXO, but also the unmentioned sites of former re-education camps). While the regime portrays the road as promoting economic development, local responses are more complicated, combining memories suppressed by the hegemony of official discourse with interpretation of the road as symbol of a return to normal civilized life.

Susan Hammond addresses a still more enduring legacy of war in Vietnam: the effect of Agent Orange, which not only blights the lives of thousands of families, but also threatens subsequent generations. Hammond recounts the struggle of victims for recognition in the face of denial, leading eventually to the provision of humanitarian assistance.

Finally, in the last two chapters, Krisna Uk shows how Jorai sculpture and painting and Tampuon weaving incorporate images of war (bombs, aircraft) as symbols of power on funerary monuments and design features for foreign purchase, respectively; while Ian Baird recounts the yearning to return to their homelands of Heuny villagers forcibly displaced by hydroelectric dams. Though this final chapter focuses on the impact of development rather than war, Baird’s

fine introduction on the interaction of landscape and memory ties it into the dominant theme of the collection.

The editors of *Interactions with a Violent Past* are to be congratulated for bringing together this imaginative and wide-ranging collection.

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Violence and Vengeance: Religious Conflict and its Aftermath in Eastern Indonesia. By Christopher R. Duncan. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. 240 pp.

Grounded in North Maluku, *Violence and Vengeance* makes an immense contribution to our understanding of the ways in which religion shapes local understandings of violence. Christopher Duncan builds from a disjuncture that he encountered throughout his considerable fieldwork. While most accounts of conflicts in Eastern Indonesia emphasize politics and critical junctures, these were absent from accounts offered by those who experienced violence, whose perceptions are coloured by faith. While we should balk at primordial and sensationalist accounts of religion as a cause of war, rationalist responses may have also gone too far, dismissing a role for religion in war. By locating religion as a factor that comes to delineate violence, shape discourse and reframe memories, this book provides a sensible study of the relevance of religion in violent conflicts.

Duncan provides a concise account of how religion seeped into a conflict in North Maluku that initially concerned specific migrant groups and ethnic identities. Christian and Muslim beliefs and fears came to displace more nuanced understandings of what was going on, as the social life of the conflict narrative shifted towards holy war. Rumours of sadistic violence, forced conversions and grand plots became commonplace as religious narratives came to make sense of violence for those experiencing it. This was furthered by