'Fire in the House': Gendered experiences of drunkenness and violence in Siem Reap, Cambodia

Katherine Brickell

Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

After decades of turmoil and international isolation, Cambodia has embarked on a threefold transition: from armed conflict to peace, from political authoritarianism to liberal democracy, and from a socialist economic system to one based on market-driven capitalist growth. Drawing upon the Cambodian Buddhist expression, 'Fire in the House', this paper examines how alcohol-related gender-based violence is manifest in the everyday lived experiences of men and women and explores the perceived linkages that exist between drinking, drunkenness and violence at this time of transition.

While the proverb traditionally relates only to women's responsibility to contain three fires of anger – related to parents, husbands and 'others' – within the spatial confines of the house, the paper that follows considers intra-community violence between men alongside its primary focus on inter-spousal violence against women. By focusing on gender-based violence and its intersection with post-conflict dynamics and alcohol use, I contribute to a fuller understanding of what are regarded as common 'myths' that are used to explain or justify such violence (Pickup et al., 2001, 18) and demonstrate the ascendance of alcohol use as a perceived external factor.

Given that it is critical to understand the cultural, political and economic environment within which this drinking and possible violence occurs, in the discussion that follows I briefly outline Cambodia's recent history from 1975 to the present day and explain the main objectives informing the paper. I then examine some of the interconnections that exist between drinking, drunkenness and violence in post-conflict and transition contexts before considering the conceptualisations of men, masculinities and violence, which underpin the framework of this paper.

2. From conflict to violent peace?

Holding particular salience in contemporary Cambodia is the notion that the absence of war does not mean peace (Galtung, 1969). Domestic violence is persistently identified as having increased in scope1 and intensity2 in the aftermath of Pol Pot's reign (Mackay, 1995; Kumar et al., 2000; Pickup et al., 2001; Surtees, 2003) and is now considered to represent the major challenge for Cambodia to reach its targets of promoting gender equality in the Millennium Development Goals (Ministry of Planning, 2005).3

1 In terms of scope, a nationally representative survey found that 22% of ever-married women reported physical, sexual, or emotional violence with 13% of surveyed women reporting physical violence (National Institute of Public Health et al., 2006, 290).

2 Compounding the widespread nature of violence is its severity with 10% of women reporting having been slapped or having their arm twisted and 8% reporting having been pushed, shaken or had things thrown at them by their husband in the 12 months preceding the survey (National Institute of Public Health et al., 2006, 291).

3 According to the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights (2006), the government response to domestic violence in Cambodia has been slow and inadequate. While Cambodia ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1992 it was not until September 2005 that the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims was passed – and in 2000, committed to enforcing the Cambodian Millennium Development Goals (CMDG). Both instruments contain provisions to reduce and eliminate violence against women, but there has been insufficient government action to implement or enforce them.
Furthermore, violence against women is viewed as one of the most serious human rights problems in the country (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights (2006)). In Cambodia, nationally representative data shows that women’s experience of violence also varies with the extent of alcohol consumption by the husband. Women whose husbands regularly get drunk are over six times more likely to have experienced physical or sexual violence than women whose husbands do not drink or do not get drunk (National Institute of Public Health et al., 2006, 295). Given such evidence, this paper examines more closely the circumstances that women – and men – use to ‘explain’ drinking and violence.

To date, studies on Cambodia’s history of violence have tended to prioritise the systematic state violence and politically-motivated killings directed towards urbanites, high-ranking government officials, businessmen, military officers and/or those that refused to transform to Democratic Kampucheasian life during 1975–1979 (Chandler, 1991; Vickery, 1984; Zwi and Ugalde, 1991). Some research has looked more specifically at the gendered dimensions of the period, albeit from a female perspective alone; including women’s experiences as victims of forced marriages organised by Pol Pot cadres (Heuveline and Poch, 2006; Surtees, 2003)4, in exposure to rape by Khmer Rouge, Vietnamese and Thai soldiers in camps (Fein, 1999). Meanwhile, the absence of alcohol from accounts of time (Lala and Straussner, 2001). One can imagine a Cambodia that is not one where the genocide itself (Fein, 1999). Meanwhile, the absence of alcohol from accounts of time (Lala and Straussner, 2001). One can imagine a Cambodia that is not one where the genocide itself (Fein, 1999). Meanwhile, the absence of alcohol from accounts of time (Lala and Straussner, 2001).

Whilst decades of international isolation and civil war have come to an official end however, scholarship and international consciousness of what Cambodia represents as a nation remains dominated by the attempt to come to terms with the Democratic Kampuchea period (Marston, 2005). Moving beyond Cockburn’s (2001, 16) four analytical ‘moments’ of conflict (pre-conflict, conflict, peacemaking and reconstruction), the paper considers the significance of drinking, drunkenness and violence in the context of the new economic challenges and rising social expectations associated with Cambodia’s ‘post-post conflict’ development (World Bank, 2006, 1). I therefore contribute to a growing body of scholarship founded on addressing the socio-cultural changes which have accompanied Cambodia’s rapid shift from international isolation to global interconnectedness (Brickell, 2007, 2008; Derks, 2005; Gottesman, 2003; Marston, 2005; Ollier and Winter, 2006).

Focusing on these changes in relation to alcohol use and gender-based violence, I aim to redress the paucity of research on men’s roles and identities in Cambodia (see Brickell, 2007, 2008; PADV, 2003 as notable exceptions), as well as responding to the broader call for research on men and masculinities to move further beyond its primary focus on the ‘first world’ (Jones, 2006; Morrell and Swart, 2005; Osella et al., 2004). In a Cambodian context, the importance of studying drinking and drunkenness is compounded by the fact that alcohol appears a largely overlooked development issue in the country. This is despite the widespread problems of substance abuse particularly related to alcohol consumption ‘in every town, including isolated villages’ (Lala and Straussner, 2001, 323). Such inattention is likely to become more systematically under-estimated (Room, 1984, 170). In contrast to other disciplines such as anthropology however, geographical scholarship has paid relatively little consideration to the ‘ethnocentrism of alcohol studies’ against non-European countries (Valverde, 1998, 18). Rather this has not been a sustained area of inquiry by geographers relative to the examination of drinking and the development of modern industrial urban life in the Global North (Bromley and Nelson, 2002; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hubbard, 2005; Jayne et al., 2006, 2008). By exploring alcohol use and gender-based violence in the context of post-conflict transition therefore, this paper demonstrates the potential for geographers to produce a body of exciting work into drinking practices and related development issues in the Global South.

3. Alcohol and violence: a drunken mix?

Although there is long standing debate in feminist theory about the causality of men’s violence, in which the conditions and characteristics associated with gender inequality are widely emphasised (Barnes, 2001; Cleaver, 2002; Gelles and Loseke, 1993; Pickup et al., 2001; Surtees, 2003)5, ‘violence against women is not caused in any simple way by unequal power relations between women and men’ (Pickup et al., 2001, 111). Equally, as Gelles (1993, 169) argues, ‘if alcohol is linked to violence – then it is through a complicated set of individual, situational and social factors’. Whilst this paper does not seek to answer whether there is a ‘real’ causal relationship between alcohol use and violence, it does explore the ‘vocabularies of motives’ (Hearn, 1998, 133) which different participants use to establish a relationship between the two.7

The complexity and controversy surrounding the association of alcohol with violence can be viewed in a number of regards. At the most basic level, it is clear that alcohol consumption in isolation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of to explain violent behaviour (Gough and Edwards, 1998; Gutmann, 1996). The notion that gender-based violence is caused by factors such as alcohol (and poverty), rather than the underlying inequality of power relations between men and women, is also cast as particularly problematic in the sense that this construction ensures male dominance over women (PADV, 2003). Furthermore, the need to place violence in the context of wider power relations is critical given that ‘while it is both men and women who get drunk, it is particularly wives, subordinated by gender and affinity, who are vulnerable to male violence’ (Harvey, 1994, 227).8

On the other hand, others argue that academics are ‘frightened’ by causation and that alcohol-related behaviour is perhaps just as culpable to criticism than any other causal factor of aggression (Flanzer, 1993; Valverde, 1998, 14). This point is echoed in research in Southern India, which identifies alcohol as the main perceived agent in provocations of violence, where it is not men’s

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4 During the Khmer Rouge, marriage and sexual liaisons were strictly controlled in order to dissolve and deter the formation of social bonds (Fein, 1999).
5 In terms of total recorded alcohol per capita consumption (15 + years old), in litres of pure alcohol, Cambodia has a value of 0.36 in comparison with Thailand (8.47) and Myanmar (0.36) (WHO, 2004, 11–12).
6 This includes debates around the re-emergence of biologically based explanations for gendered social behaviour, in particular of evolutionary perspectives which allow male aggression to be categorised, at least in part, as a ‘natural’ phenomenon (Jacobson, 2000).
7 The term ‘alcohol-related violence’ therefore, is used to refer to incidences in which violence is reported to have involved one or more participants who had been drinking. The term is not used to imply a direct causal relationship between alcohol and violence.
8 In my Cambodian research, it appeared however to be mainly men who drank excessively. Population studies have shown that in almost every culture in the world, men drink more than women (Heath, 2000).
natures that are seen to require change, but men's access to alcohol (Busby, 2000, 211). As Krug et al. (2002) argues, the link between alcohol and violence is culturally dependent, only existing in settings where the collective expectation is that drink causes or excuses certain behaviours.

4. Drinking through transition

Given that the experience of violent conflict is not built upon a single discourse (Moser and Clark, 2001) and in the study of alcohol, academics are not examining static systems, but rather the dynamic interplay of many forces (Chafetz and Demone, 1962), it is important to consider the impact of Cambodia's transition on the nature of men's drinking and interpersonal violence.

One of these dynamics is war during which 'cultures of conflict' are infused into the symbols, attitudes, values, and beliefs that constitute society (Campbell, 1992). Studies have shown the connections that exist between state-level dynamics and post-war micro-level behaviour. These connections include the quality of marital relations declining (El-Bushra, 2000), problems of readjustment and reintegration of men and women (Cockburn and Zarkov, 2002; Dolan, 2002) and increased alcohol consumption as a means of coping with residual traumas (Brickell, 2007; Lala and Straussner, 2001; Moser and Mcllwaine, 2000).

An interrelated factor in the post-conflict period is that in Cambodia, the household division of labour is changing, with an increased tendency for women to engage in a broader range of tasks, including those traditionally associated with men (Brickell, 2007; UNIFEM et al., 2004, 23). In connection, Heuveline and Poch (2006, 99) argue that divorce and separation trends over time and across age cohorts show that a recent increase in marital disruption is the result of higher levels of female education and employment.

Studies from the developing world have tended to emphasise the significance of this increase in women's involvement in wage labour (or emancipation) in creating tensions, which manifest themselves in alcohol-related violence and even marital rape by men (Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies, 2002; Greig, 2001; Silberschmidt, 1990, 2005; Townsend, 1995). Violence against women is thus cited as one element of the 'myth' that women's empowerment can be achieved solely through participation in the paid workforce (Pearson, 2004; Pickup et al., 2001; Safa, 1995 among others).

Alcohol consumption is seen in East Africa, for example, as a form of escape for men when they go to bars and meet those in the same frustrated employment situation and 'get some social contact' (Silberschmidt, 1990, 148). Suggs' (2001) work on alcohol in Botswana also links social change with the politics of masculinity by focusing on seniors who traditionally controlled young men's access to alcohol, but whose power was reduced after the introduction of market exchange and competitive distribution of beer. These various examples point to what the Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies (2002, 13) sees as the product alcohol and its social role 'being swept along in the tides of global change' having been present in the cultures of many developing societies for thousands of years.

5. Men, masculinities and conceptualisations of violence

As I have already intimiated, this paper looks predominantly at alcohol-related inter-spousal violence against women, but also community-level violence between men. In regard to the former, I follow international definitions of violence against women, which focus not just on physical harm, but encompass broader physical, emotional and psychological harm, including the threat of such harm (Pickup et al., 2001, 12). This approach is broadly consistent with the definition of violence in Cambodian (Hoengsa) as ‘aggression, harassment, bad treatment or abuse’ (Cambodian Dictionary, 1967; 157 cited in PADV, 2003). I also use the term, ‘gender-based violence’ in a conventional sense, as ‘violence which embodies the power imbalances inherent in patriarchal society’ (El-Bushra and Piza-Lopez, 1993, 1). In considering violence against men however, I also engage with ‘gender-based violence’ as a product of the imbalances of power relations between men.

Rather than looking upon the notion of ‘men’ as a single, oppositional category then (Cornwall and Lidisfarne, 1993, 1), the paper is also organised around the idea that ‘hegemonic’ masculinities define successful ways of ‘being a man’ whilst rendering other masculine styles (and women) as ‘subordinate’ or inferior on the bases of differences within and between men according to class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation etc. (Connell, 1995). Although these categorisations of masculinity have been criticised for failing to reflect the complex, contradictory, fragmented, shifting and ambivalent lived experiences of men (McDowell, 2002; Mac an Ghaill, 1996), according to Jones (2004), in the study of violence against men (in Rwanda), they nevertheless help us to understand how men are lured or coerced into becoming agents of violence.

To explore men’s experiences in an empirically nuanced way, I also consider some men’s professed non-drinking, sobriety and non-violence. While studies are predominantly based on the orthodox alignment between alcohol and male identity (Brandes, 2002; Gough and Edwards, 1998; Gutmann, 1996; Lemle and Mishkind, 1989, 213), it is interesting to consider men who choose to reject alcohol consumption as a definitive part of their lives, as Brandes (2002) has explored in the context of men’s attempts at ‘staying sober’ through Alcoholics Anonymous group participation in Mexico City.

6. Methodology

The excerpts and broader observations in this paper are drawn from 100 oral history interviews conducted as part of a larger project on the changing contours of gender relations in post-conflict Cambodia. The sample was based on an equal proportion of men and women of differing ages living in two communes in Cambodia, one located in the centre of Siem Reap town (Slorkram), and the other located in its rural vicinity where rice farming still predominates (Krobei Riel). Siem Reap is home to the Angkor archaeological site, and is the most well-known tourist attraction, having experienced rapid development in terms of tourist arrivals, city landscape, tourism facilities and services in recent years. Puok district (where Krobei Riel is located) has also received some benefits from the boom in tourism in the provincial town, but production constraints (poor soils, no money for inputs such as fertiliser, lack of water and infrastructure) have all prevented most local farmers from responding to increased demand for food crops from hotels and restaurants (Economic Institute of Cambodia cited in World

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9 Cambodia already has one of the highest female labour force participation rates in the region forming 75% of the primary labour force in wholesale and retail trade and 66% of the manufacturing labour force (ILO, 2001). This figure is continuing to increase with industrialisation, as women play an even more important and visible role as income providers for families and as driving forces for economic development (UNIFEM et al., 2004, 22).

10 Suggs (1996) has shown in Botswana however, that some women do have agency, given independence gained through the cash economy, to be able to literally wait to find a man who rejects drinking as a definitive attribute of their gender.

11 The town received 856,150 foreign visitors in 2006, or about 50% of total foreign visitors arriving in Cambodia, a rapid increase from 264,000 visitors in 2001 (MoT, 2006).
While many women in Slorkram play an active part in the service-oriented work associated with tourism, women in Krobei Riel continue to work mainly as farmers and basket-weavers (albeit with a greater market for their handicrafts).

After a one-month pilot study in March 2004, a period of substantive fieldwork between June and November 2004 was used to conduct the oral history interviews. My sample of participants was derived through visits on different days and times to randomly selected individual households in the two communes and through contacts with schools, local businesses and construction sites. The oral histories were completed in two sessions lasting between two and four hours each, and were used to understand how the shifting expectations, responsibilities and attitudes of men and women’s roles in and outside the household. A profile was also used to gather background socio-economic information about the respondents and their respective households. To obtain broader understanding, additional consultations with representatives from the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MOWA), Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV) and Cambodian Men’s Network (CMN) were also held in Phnom Penh.

Oral histories were chosen for their emphasis on free-ranging, open-ended interviews around a series of issues, drawing chronologically on direct personal memory of the past and experience of the present. Their capability and effectiveness in researching sensitive issues surrounding conflict and interpersonal violence (El-Bushra et al., 2002, 8), domestic life (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, 35) and male subjectivities (Beynon, 2002, 152) were also contributory factors in my decision. This paper draws on approximately one third of these interviews from the overall sample which mentioned experiences or opinions on violence and/or on alcohol consumption at the interpersonal or intra-community level. The recorded, translated and transcribed excerpts in this paper from 10 respondents’ interviews have been selected to reflect the range of participant backgrounds as well as the consistency and divergence of factors to which participants attribute the problem of drinking, drunkenness and inter-spousal/intra-community violence. These detailed accounts have been provided to document the potentially traumatic life events of each participant in a sensitive manner, given that researchers have a particular ethical obligation to help ensure that their findings are properly interpreted in violence situations (WHO, 1999).

This approach relates to the possible taboos surrounding violence against women that meant I had to be responsive to the difficulties and dangers for the respondent. I explained to the respondent that if at any point they felt distressed and wanted to change subject (or stop the interview), then this was fine. Although one in three of these interviews from the overall sample which mentioned experiences or opinions on violence and/or on alcohol consumption at the interpersonal or intra-community level. The recorded, translated and transcribed excerpts in this paper from 10 respondents’ interviews have been selected to reflect the range of participant backgrounds as well as the consistency and divergence of factors to which participants attribute the problem of drinking, drunkenness and inter-spousal/intra-community violence. These detailed accounts have been provided to document the potentially traumatic life events of each participant in a sensitive manner, given that researchers have a particular ethical obligation to help ensure that their findings are properly interpreted in violence situations (WHO, 1999).

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The sensitivity I tried to adopt also filtered through to my choice of research assistants. I worked mainly with a 25-year-old male graduate, who had prior research training on gender and development issues in Cambodia. I also managed to find a female research assistant, which gave women the option to be interviewed by her instead. In the majority of cases however, women appeared happy to discuss their lives with the male research assistant, and equally, as a young, British woman interviewing Cambodian men, I felt a personal sense of safety, even legitimacy, being accompanied by a male assistant. I believe my ‘otherness’, was at the same time a source of intrigue and even status for participants. I also think that women may have felt greater liberty to express their opinions given the frequency with which I was described as a ‘modern lady’ not confined to traditional custom or rhetoric.

7. Main findings

The empirical findings that follow are divided into three interrelated sections. The first documents the observed legacies of Khmer Rouge times as well as the contemporary political situation for the nature of drinking and violence. The second takes a closer look at the links made between drinking, drunkenness and violence associated with daily family and work-related difficulties. Finally, the third section responds to Jones’ (2006, xviii) call for a more balanced and empathetic portrait of Southern men and considers the reasons behind some men’s rejection of drinking.

7.1. The politics of alcohol-related violence

As I have explained, Cambodia is portrayed as having ventured on two political journeys, from armed conflict to peace and from authoritarianism to liberal democracy (Peou, 2001; World Bank, 2006). Implications stemming from the incomplete nature of these transitions were marked in participants’ accounts, and especially in relation to alcohol-related violence, which is believed to have been exacerbated by the Khmer Rouge regime, its legacies, and the current state of Cambodian politics.

In terms of the Pol Pot period, while it is arguably time to view it from a greater distance – perhaps distinguishing it more disparately as part of larger historical and political processes (Marston, 2005, 501) – the reign of the Khmer Rouge remains of continuing importance for understanding older female participants’ post-conflict experiences of marriage. Nakry, a fifty-year-old widow who is supported by her five soup-selling daughters is a typical example. Having been the target of verbal and physical violence for many years, Nakry questions how she could have coped living with her alcoholic husband any longer. With conviction, Nakry explained that,

‘When my husband was alive I had no freedom. I could not go anywhere. When I was young I worked as a guide... I worked at the Angkor temple and studied history. My husband made me lose that knowledge... and I became a dull person. He always scolded me. He was violent so often and broke everything in the house. I did not love him. Pol Pot’
arranged our wedding. My marriage was destroyed by my husband’s rudeness. He did not know about honour. He did not think about earning. He drank alcohol but he was worse than a drunkard [tear in her eye]. For other women, when their husbands die, they feel like they are in the middle of the sea. For me, I am happy. After he died I could do what I wanted… Although I have only salt water with rice I am happy. For other women, a husband is a golden mountain. For me, my husband was not- he drank us into poverty- and if I had lived with him much longer I would have died young.’ (Nakry, female, Slorkram, 50 years old, widowed, cake maker at home.)

Nakry’s interview shows the significance of Khmer Rouge practices and their legacies for understanding women’s experiences of violence. Matched by Pol Pot cadres, Nakry starkly declares that she never loved her husband. Nakry’s lack of sentiment towards her deceased husband reflects Khmer Rouge attempts to dissolve the idea of romantic love and compatibility so that personal happiness would not be indulged at the expense of the work needed to reconstruct the nation.

As a by-product of Khmer Rouge marriage practices and the turmoil that the conflict inflicted on peoples’ lives, some women who experience domestic abuse express a sense of relief on the death of their spouse. This has been noted elsewhere, including in East Africa, where recurrent observations from women were that ‘a woman is better off without a husband’, ‘if he were only dead’ (Silberschmidt, 2005, 192). With a greater feeling of well-being, Nakry says that her husband’s death has enabled her to live without fear of violence, fulfill latent ambitions and to spend more time devoted to Buddhist practice in preparation for the next incarnation. In fact, Nakry believes she would have ‘died young’ if her husband had not passed away and in many ways, considers his death, as an acceptable ‘trade off’. This idea of ‘trade offs’ is particularly relevant to many women’s lives as they make tactical choices between different dimensions of poverty and well being (Chant, 2007; Kabeer, 1997). Although being without a male partner is often associated with heightened levels of deprivation (only having ‘salt water with rice’ rather than having an ideal husband who is a ‘golden mountain’ providing for his family), this can simultaneously be met by spin off benefits as inter-spousal violence rarely occurs in isolation from other controlling behaviours (National Institute of Public Health et al., 2006, 289). As Nakry alludes, these advantages can include pursuing a more vivacious and prosperous life free from violence and a spouse literally drinking the household budget.

Lastly, the widow’s past unhappiness was intensified by her late husband’s abusive behaviour in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime. Many women believe that there has been a negative change in their husbands, much like in Zimmerman’s (1994, 17) study of domestic violence in Cambodia, where women described men as ‘broken’ and ‘damaged’. On a personal level, Nakry accredits her husband’s alcohol addition and resultant violence to the lasting psychological impacts of the conflict. As Pickup et al. (2001, 145) relate, while the official end of armed conflict signals a change from war to peace at a political level, the impact of conflict on society alters it profoundly, and no political settlement can solve the social problems that this causes.

Nakry’s pointing out of the dominant role of the state in generating anti-social expressions of masculinities, is also referred to by a number of middle-age male participants. As Meaker told me, ‘People went through hard times, in different environments and situations. I see something unresolved… people were

17 In Mexico, studies have also shown men’s drinking to be one of the most common forms of ‘misery’ (Townsend, 1995, 109) and ‘sickness’ (Finkler, 1994, 63) in marriages.

18 AsMcCargo (2005, 104) comments, ‘the more people in Cambodia and abroad focus on the murders and other acts of brutality that the Khmer Rouge committed a quarter-century ago, the noton the runs, the less these citizens and observers will focus on the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Hun Sen regime itself’. Furthermore, it is argued that Hun Sen and his cohorts continue to ‘get away with’ authoritarianism because strongman rule is a lesser evil than mass murder (ibid. 107).

19 The Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) is a more or less liberal party in Cambodia. It is an opposition party to the ruling Cambodian Peoples Party (CPP).
As the murder of the 28 year old man in Krobei Riel demonstrates, drinking-related violence can be a powerful expression of the gender politics within masculinity for younger as well as older men. Alcohol and drinking can thus simultaneously solidify group identities while at the same time isolating ‘others’ who men are suspicious of. Just like the household therefore, communities are not homogenous, but contain individuals and interest groups that have the potential to clash with each other as well as to cooperate (Pick-up et al., 2001, 119).

The murdered man’s refusal to return home (despite his wife’s request), reflects the fact that men must have very strong, concrete reasons not to attend and will rarely refuse or leave early. In Cambodian culture, for example, men often coerce each other in peer pressure situations by threatening to end the friendship if the other does not conform, and likewise in turning down an invitation (PADV, 2003). This evidence again complicates the idea that alcohol is necessarily a strong and supportive cultural framework (Douglas, 1987) for all men at all times.

7.2. ‘Plates in a basket will rattle’: everyday encounters with drinking and drunkenness

The seriousness of issues associated with drinking, drunkenness and violence within marital and community-level relations, is not just the perceived outcome of historical and current elements of Cambodian politics, but also of daily family and work-related difficulties. The widespread belief that these external factors are to ‘blame’ for men’s drinking and violent behaviour can be introduced through the equation of drunkenness and conflict, sobriety and peace which Vichet uses to explain the verbal abuse he directs towards his wife,

‘We never have arguments except when we are drunk. I don’t know why I liked to drink. I just drank and was addicted so when I saw someone drinking rice wine I wanted to drink too. When I was drunk I would cause arguments in the house and no one would speak to me, but after I was sober I realised I had made a mistake to drink. If I don’t drink then everything is OK in the house.’ (Vichet, male, 35 years old, Krobei Riel, married, farmer).

While Vichet initially uses the term ‘we’ to refer to men generally, Vichet recognises his own personal role in the creation of household disputes. Vichet admits that it is generally a mistake to drink – attributing his frequent consumption to a discourse of addiction – but fails to apologise for the verbal aggression he directs towards his wife when drunk. Vichet states that if he does not drink, ‘then everything is OK in the house’, arguing that alcohol is the root cause of his violent behaviour. As Hearn (1998: 133 author’s emphasis) highlights, this produces a paradox here in the sense that ‘blame’ is accepted but on the condition that there is something else to explain the source that accounts for the blame.

In some women’s accounts, it even appears that drunkenness attracts more criticism than violence. With no education, Socheatha’s husband, a construction labourer and has a terrible temper, you must never dare to reply’ (Quoted Zimmerman, 1994, 26).

As Socheatha’s interview demonstrates, drinking is framed as a longstanding problem manifest in everyday life. While Socheatha makes reference to her lack of fear living with her husband, a number of Western academics have suggested that the characterisation of ‘home as haven’ is a representation of an idealised and nostalgic notion of home (Jones, 2000; Wardhaugh, 1999). In a Cambodian context however, home is generally thought of as a space of potential conflict instilled within traditional proverbs such as ‘Fire in the House’ and ‘Plates in a Basket Will Rattle’. The latter refers to the way that family members like plates, often collide with each other in the home. This conception of the household, relates to one of the most serious and perhaps alarming aspects of domestic violence in Cambodia – the culture of impunity and tacit acceptance surrounding it (UNIFEM et al., 2004, 13). It is important to note that the word ‘normal’ (tomodah) in some participants’ interviews (such as Meaker’s) does not necessarily imply tolerance and acceptance. Rather, in the majority of cases, it reflects a realisation that what is ‘normal’ behaviour often lies in contradiction to the Cbpah Proh (Rules for Men) which advises to avoid the ‘three madnesses’ of men – gambling, women and drinking.

Of further interest is Socheatha’s reference to her husband’s notion that he is ‘strong’ at work if he has consumed alcohol, but weak if not. Socheatha’s husband is a construction labourer and by relating physical strength with the consumption of rice wine, reflects the idea that ‘drinkers are viewed as manly not only because they drink, but also because their drinking is linked with other behaviours which are also connected with the image of being masculine’ (Lemle and Mishkind, 1989, 213). More frequently however, young men relate habitual drinking to daily employment difficulties, as Kamol and Darany confirm,

‘It is popular to drink for all generations. My father does, and so do I- to forget about all the bad things in my life. Near the airport the men drink and then beat their wives. I wonder why so many drink? We drink either because we are happy or because there are problems with finding work and alcohol is one way of dealing with it.’ (Kamol, male, Slorkram, 24 years old, single, tour guide.)

‘It is normal for men to drink and there are those for whom it happens everyday. They get drunk when they drink so much. They drink because they are unhappy and have stressful work earning money for the family. We do not deliberately drink because we know it will destroy our health but I will give you a crazy phrase that ‘we drink to be drunk, and if we are not drunk, we do not drink!’ (Darany, male, Slorkram, 28 years old, married, hotel bellboy.)

As Kamol highlights, alcohol is one means of dealing with the problem of searching for employment and can result in inter-spousal violence. Meanwhile, Darany points out in a general (rather than personal) sense, that drinking is a ‘normal’ and daily way for men to cope with the stress of fulfilling a recognised ‘provider’ role in

...
the family. Darany reflects on the supposedly ‘crazy’ situation, which men find themselves in – of knowing that drinking is potentially damaging to their health – but being unable to control the urge to get drunk and be released from the confines of routine and work. In this way, Darany draws on the idea that men are socially dispositioned to drink alcohol excessively, which may then be assumed to ‘explain’ any violence (Hearn, 1998, 23).

The aforementioned problems associated with employment are often related to a strong perception that ‘men’s work’ is under threat (deemed to be that related to ‘outdoor work’ and largely connected with farming) in comparison to the relative increases of women’s opportunities in the service-oriented industries associated with tourism in Siem Reap (Brickell, 2007, 2008). Many urban residents like Kamol and Darany are former farmers, who migrated to Siem Reap in search of work.22 As Pernanen (1991, 194) argues, academics are not only studying alcohol but also several types of empirical contingencies, in which rising frustrations related to the market economy for men in Cambodia is one.23 These structural factors, including poverty and unemployment, are also cited as underlying problems in other studies on intra-household conflicts, gender-based violence and alcoholism in Guatemala (McLlwaine and Moser, 2004, 60) and Colombia (Alcarez and Suárez, 2006).24

7.3. Sprouting bamboo shoots? embracing non-drinking and sobriety

‘Children should help their families even though parents act oppositely in society. We use the term ‘bamboo shoot’ to mean how the new generation can be something new e.g. if the father is a heavy drinker the children can still be better off.’ (Buntha, male, Slorkram, 82 years old, single, Buddhist monk.)

In the final section of this paper, I consider the perspectives of men who reject excessive alcohol consumption. As Buntha’s reference to the bamboo shoot illustrates, heavy drinking by one generation will not necessarily repeat itself in the behaviours of the next and while relations between some groups of men are characterised by peer pressure, this does not mean that all men succumb to heavy drinking.

In contrast to the communal drinking of Krobei Riel, I met a number of Slorkram men who purposely opt out of group drinking by strategically remaining inside the home to avoid being coerced into participating. Having migrated from Kampong Cham province in 2002, motorbike driver Vannak lives in a house borrowed from his brother and adopts this tactic,

‘I not only miss my old home but my friends. In the countryside we drink and dance at home which is different from in the town. If we want to do this we have to go to a bar or restaurant. During the Khmer New Year we have meetings and drink together in the village. Family life here is very separate: we live in our home and the others live in theirs. I like sitting here as opposed to outside also because I don’t want to meet any of the neighbours- they drink every day. They always drink and if they see me they ask for drink because they don’t have any money. At my homeland I did drink though because my wife made rice wine but now no because we haven’t the money for my children to study. I must save my money as we are poor.’ (Vannak, male, Slorkram, 41 years old, married, motorbike driver.)

As Vannak illustrates, the pressure to conform to a hegemonic model of masculinity (aided and validated by alcohol consumption) often disenfranchises men who do not wish to behave in this way. Instead, some men use home as a refuge from norms of ‘masculine’ performance and shows how alcohol consumption links to spatial relations and practices – in this case to avoidance. For Vannak, home represents privacy from societal expectations and community-level definitions of masculinity identified with regular drinking. Home thereby represents a subordinate style of masculinity away from the persuasion of those in the public sphere who have the power to define what is ‘normal’, or ‘ordinary’, male behaviour.

Vannak’s interview also alludes to differing patterns of drinking in rural and urban settings. Vannak highlights the lack of community cohesion in urban areas where life is more individualised and men drink in the bars and clubs that have proliferated with the town’s rapid tourist-centred growth (some lower-income men also drink in the vicinity of their homes where they consume industrially brewed beers). This is contrasted with the home-based drinking of Vannak’s rural homeland where the production of rice wine is a regular part of the household economy.25 These changes in migrant drinking patterns mirror experiences of Mixtec Indian settlers in Mexico City where the peasant drinks beer and tequila rather than traditional fermented juice and is ‘emancipated from the control of ancestral custom’ – but at the same time suffers by the ‘release from intimate group participation’ (Butterworth, 1970, 102).

Similarly, in the developing world, ‘it should not be automatically assumed that drinking is more common or heavy in the urban environment than in the countryside’ since moving to the city may be associated with reduced drinking (Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies, 2002, 113). In fact, new priorities emerge in urban areas, which means that some men are conscious of the need to curtail their drinking into order to pay for their children’s education or cope with the general burden of poverty.26 As Chann and Kesor explain,

‘Some men when they get drunk say that they do not want their children to go to school- that education is not important. Maybe they want their children to have a job as a drunkard! ... One can lose respect when one does not respect others in the village, especially if one is a drunkard. Arguments happen when people are drunk. They don’t think when they drink ... for me I like staying in at the home looking after my children. For the rich men, they like girls outside the home. I do not have enough money to spend on alcohol. Anyway, my health is not good enough for me to do that. Other men, they spend most of the evening drinking because they have the money and are happier with more than one women.’ (Chann, male, Slorkram, 24 years old, married, motorbike driver.)

‘My husband and I often argue and if he drank alcohol or if he was immature we would be divorced. We have no time to drink alcohol because we are poor. He tries to work hard to earn money as a mechanic for us.’ (Kesor, female, Slorkram, 47 years old, married, soup seller.)

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22 Food security remains a serious problem in Cambodia with agricultural productivity extremely low (at US $40 per ha) and is compounded by increasing pressures on land, making it extremely difficult for small farmers to survive (UNIFEM et al., 2004, 6).

23 In Krobei Riel, unemployment was seen to result in gambling and alcohol addictions, with two suicides in recent years. Apparently these were the consequence of being forced to sell land in order to pay off debts, with the men feeling so distraught that they could not support their families, that they took their own lives.

24 This does not mean however that all men at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy are necessarily more violent towards women than wealthier men (Pickup et al., 2001).

25 Rice wine has an alcohol percentage of approximately 30–40%. One litre costs around 1200 riel (about $0.30 cents) and can make one person very heavily drunk (Rammage, 2002, 23).

26 In Mexico City, migrants also become much more “ regimented drinkers” with the frequency and quantity of consumption of alcohol beverages diminishing in light of the higher value placed on the stability and dependability of their jobs (Butterworth, 1970, 104).
As the interviews show, alcohol is an expressed concern because of its negative associations with poverty, the reduction of health, capacity to work, loss of respect, and association with licentious behaviour. Just as McDowell (2002, 97) argues in relation to ‘lads’ in the UK, that masculinity is itself complex and variable and combines not only protest and resistance but also respectability and domestic aspirations; Chann and Vannak clearly imply the importance of the economic and social well-being of their families. Similarly, Kesor is one of a number of women who speak of their husbands’ efforts to contribute to family provision through employment, rather than spending time drinking. Related to this, the rationale for abstaining from getting drunk is also combined with the worry articulated by Chann to maintain respect and status in the community, rather than lose it as a ‘drunkard’. The interviews therefore point to the varied individual and community level responses to alcohol use, as well as to men’s differential motivations for upholding sobriety.

8. Concluding thoughts: extinguishing ‘Fire’ in post-conflict Cambodia

In this paper I have discussed the complex scenario of transition in Cambodia and from a gendered perspective, explored the discursive social, political and economic links made by participants between drinking and drunkenness and the exertion of multiple forms of violence – both private and public. I have shown how the perceived relationship between alcohol use and gender-based violence is conceived of in the context of a myriad of post-conflict dynamics. These include the cited decline in the state of marital relationships, the prevalence of family and employment related difficulties and the broader political environment of Cambodia both past and present. In doing so, the paper has shown the emphasis placed by men and women on external factors as largely responsible for gender-based violence. I thereby suggest that challenging these perceptions is a key part of extinguishing the ‘fire’ of violence in Cambodia, as elsewhere in the world. This has been revealed in two main regards.

First, the paper has pointed to the importance for development interventions not only to encourage individual responsibility for behaviours but at the same time to account for the specific socio-cultural environment in which men's gender roles and identities are being challenged (and in which drinking and violence occurs). This means that rather than confining the prevention or reduction of substance abuse to the health sector and to the addicts themselves, it is important to broaden the understanding of alcohol beyond its effects on individuals to include wider socio-economic issues (McEwan and Moser, 2004). These wider socio-economic issues could include future research on generational changes occur so that women's gains in the sphere of work are not sent the formation of more equitable relationships with women.

Overall therefore, further analysis of explanations for violence could elucidate a greater understanding of the barriers which need to be tackled in order for gender-based violence to be understood as a struggle for equality in men and women’s everyday lives.

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