SPECIAL FOCUS

LIFE AFTER COLLECTIVE DEATH IN SOUTH EAST ASIA: PART 2 – HELPING AND BEING HELPED

Introduction

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This Special Focus is the second part of 'Life after collective death in South East Asia', a collection of papers examining what happens after wide-scale destruction has occurred and how the social and individual lives of the survivors recover. Part 1, published in *South East Asia Research* in June 2012 (Vol 20, No 2), focused on the social and religious processes that help the '(re-)fabrication of social bonds'. Part 2 deals with another major aspect of resilience – the issue of help, especially in the case of international humanitarian aid. In many ways, in the contemporary situation, it is taken for granted that help will be provided. We question the evidence for this, asking what rationales are involved in post-catastrophe help. We shed light on why, for example, people decide to engage in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help distribute drugs in a Cambodian outpatients ward or, alternatively, to carry rice sacks in the Ayeyarwady Delta to help victims of the typhoon in Myanmar. We highlight why people in the West consider such activities 'normal'. We focus on how people, having been labelled as 'victims', receive and perceive such aid and how they respond to it. Further, we ask how (and to what extent) aid contributes to change, implicitly or explicitly, in the societies affected. Finally, we question what contemporary international aid brings when compared to the older local relief systems and systems of mutual help, particularly those examined in Part 1.

Humanitarian aid and the building of transnational moral boundaries

Humanitarian aid is intrinsically and historically grounded in a morality of aid, considered both universalistic and transnational. This aspect of modern-day aid is made even stronger by its repeated mediatic declinations. Although books and articles featuring both criticism and praise of international aid have been published

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since the early 1970s,[1] with the history of major organizations described and analysed in major works, it is important to outline the historical foundations of the ideology of international aid if we are to shed new light on contemporary humanitarian actions in South East Asia and on those who undertake them.

Modern humanitarian assistance is generally believed to have started with the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross by the Swiss Henri Dunant (1828–1910). Its ideology opposed the rights of warfare (attack, defence, patriotic ideas, territory and so forth), was intrinsically international or transnational and was founded on the belief that, during times of war, human beings have to be rescued regardless of their location and without consideration of their allegiance in the armed conflict to which they belong. In fact, a few years before Dunant began the Red Cross, at the end of the nineteenth century, the international Catholic movement, Caritas Internationalis, had developed on broadly similar ideological grounds. If, during the Second World War, a group of citizens moved by a moral and often religious intention appeared on the international aid scene (such as Oxfam and Care), the end of the colonial period brought about a redefinition and diversification of what and who were seen as needing help and intervention, and why. This was the beginning of the progressive ideology of 'development'. The end of the 1960s saw a new kind of universalism, subsequently reaffirmed by the 'French Doctors' during the Biafra war.[2] The old idea of neutrality was replaced by its opposite – the duty to testify when human rights violations were observed during rescue actions, coupled with the right to interfere and even the duty to intervene. At the same time, medicine was implementing the new concept of emergency in domestic medical practices as well. It was transposed to poorer foreign countries in easy parallel with notions of development. Emergency, in fact, is a powerful notion that justifies and motivates intervention at all levels.

In the 1970s in mainland South East Asia, ongoing armed conflict between the communist movement and the US-backed governments in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos played a major role in the development of the contemporary ideology and practices of humanitarian aid, especially when hundreds of thousands of refugees fled their countries on foot or by boat. The highly mediatized rescue of 'boat people' in the China Sea by the 'French Doctors', coupled with the flood of aid that attracted volunteers from all over the world at the Cambodian–Thai border, was guided by ideas of humankind, brotherhood and political neutrality. It was in mainland South East Asia that Médecins Sans Frontières reached the full potential of its strength and became exemplary of the ideology of emergency. 'Emergency', as an example, is the name of the most important Italian NGO currently in operation, working in much the same way as Médecins Sans Frontières.

The situation in insular South East Asia was rather different from that on the mainland. The 1960s witnessed major US-funded programmes in Indonesia in famine relief and agricultural modernization, such as the unsuccessful programmes for irrigation (Crawford, 1997). Despite this, the international community – as it is known today – remained largely silent and inactive during the Soeharto dictatorship. The first modern, and direct, international humanitarian interventions came much later than in mainland South East Asia, with the US-funded HIV-AIDS

[1] See the overview by Smith (1990).

[2] The Médecins Sans Frontières NGO and later the Médecins du Monde NGO were created by some of them.

programmes (in the mid- to late 1990s, and especially after 1998), post-catastrophe relief following El Niño in 1997 and in the final part of the struggle for independence in Timor Leste in 1999 (Brown *et al*, 1997; Fox, 2000). Humanitarian aid has grown in the light of independence struggles in Timor, Aceh and Irian Jaya. Among the international community, the interventions made in life-threatening emergencies are often closely linked to an idealistic effort to help democracy and democratic processes. Many of the actors who were relevant in late-conflict Aceh have now undertaken tasks in Timor, as Jacqueline Siapno reports of her own fieldwork experience in this Special Focus.

Emergencies continue to occur in what is perceived and described as a very unstable world. The distinction between the first two worlds and the Third World has become blurred as natural catastrophes have become so highly mediatic that they have created parallels between richer and poorer countries. This has removed much of the cultural specificity from catastrophes. Hurricane Katrina, which hit the USA, was a typhoon like the Burmese Nargis, and the Indian Ocean tsunami was a perfect match for the one that struck Japan. A sense has therefore developed of the existence of a global community, and the idea of emergency has become connected to a specific, quasi-technical phase of international aid (see the paper by Maxime Boutry in this issue).

The universal victim and meaningful work

The moral history relating to the background of international aid, at first openly defined within a general religious and ideological context (charity, development), is today encompassed by wider 'moral boundaries' specific to humanitarian reasoning. Thanks to the penetration of the media into the heart of catastrophes, both the suffering and the helpers are staged and dramatized worldwide. Emotions based on self-identification (this victim could be you or your child) and compassion (we are all human) have been introduced as the dominant narratives pertaining to the politics of aid in the mediatic treatment of wide-scale human destruction, be it war or natural disaster (Fassin, 2011). Fund-raising campaigns address such emotions directly; the 'universal victim' must be urgently helped. South East Asia offers two important and constitutive examples of this. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge genocide has drawn extensive humanitarian aid, with the sites of the genocide now operating as tourist attractions. Across many countries, the 2004 tsunami allowed the biggest fund-raising campaign in history.

It has been argued that the construction of a 'universal victim', produced through the idiom of trauma as individual suffering (Young, 1995; Fassin and Rechtman, 2009; Kwon, 2012), has downplayed or at least reoriented concerns regarding the moral duty to intervene, the necessity to control the results and, in general, the consequences of the intervention or the right to assess the use of money donated. The ethnographies we present in this Special Focus show how donors, helpers and victims have been clearly constructed as moral, anthropological categories, separate and abstracted from any geopolitical rationale.

More specifically, labelling the suffering people as 'victims' solves the problem of accountability, placing the universalistic morality of humanitarianism in a narrow, individualistic framework of understanding. In a catastrophe, the 'victim' is anybody who has been 'affected', regardless of the responsibility or cause of

his or her suffering. In Part 1 of 'Life after collective death in South East Asia', we dealt in part with notions of victimhood, stemming from both locally defined moralities and humanitarian ones (Vignato, 2012). Here, in Part 2, we underline how, in the eyes of international agencies and NGOs, the identification of perpetrators is blurred because only the victim is a necessary object of aid. The relationship between helped and helper is the core and the focus of all international aid[3] and is presented as pure and entirely virtuous. Although none of the papers that follow directly addresses this issue, it often happens that, in parallel with international aid, other moral and political actions take place (for example, in Cambodia or in Indonesia) that examine and condemn the perpetrators, with little influence, however, on the mechanism of aid.

The 'universal victim' needs a standard and an easily understandable background or landscape of suffering. The mediatization of the international aid that responded to the 2004 tsunami even redesigned a geo-morphological space, with the Indian Ocean becoming an imaginary common social space that existed as a scene of victimhood, bringing together images of ravaged coasts where de-culturalized fishermen pleaded for boats and homes, temporarily suspended from their national contexts. Subsequently, unity was created around the disaster, an act that was totally oblivious to the complicated historical exchanges that occur and have occurred across that very sea. It was primarily for this reason that we chose to consider Sri Lanka as an important part of a pan-South East Asia disaster.

The contemporary mythology of aid and emergency efficiently moves people and money as it justifies the individual's relationship to a faraway, often exoticized 'disaster context', where professional and disinterested work is required. Such a powerful feeling propels young people from all over the world to search for jobs in NGOs – roles they perceive as more meaningful and attractive than simple touristic travel (particularly in the extreme case of post-genocide Cambodia, as Anne Guillou reminds us in this issue). According to Ryfman (1999, p 8), a specific class of young workers in the humanitarian field appeared during the 1980s, representing the last heroes of a world that no longer produced many of them. Any number of newspapers can be found displaying a similar type of narrative to that published recently in the *Phnom Penh Post* newspaper: 'A young Frenchman named [X] who works as a communication officer for the association called [Y] in Cambodia' explained that 'before [he] came to Cambodia in October, 2010, [he] worked for a cultural event organiser and a video game company. "I came to Cambodia because I wanted to do something different and something that makes more sense for me. Cambodia was a choice because I came here before as a tourist and was really touched."'[4]

Such heroic feeling takes on different forms in different contexts. During the last months of the Multi Donor Trust Fund for Aceh and Nias and the Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi, both of which organized lavish funds for the post-tsunami reconstruction, many of the generally young workers of the NGO and international agencies were turning their attention towards either Timor Leste or, in some cases, the West Sumatra earthquake. While none denied his or her intention

[3] There is a difference, of course, between aid in places where danger is still ongoing (as in Somalia or Afghanistan) and in the aftermath of events. In the first case, the helpers are forcibly more involved in understanding the specific context.

[4] *Phnom Penh Post*, 12 July 2013, p 7 of the special topic on 'France's National Day'.

of finding a new job, many were also protesting their attachment to Indonesia and its peoples, which they declared to be 'special'. Furthermore, when evoking the first months of their intervention, when the roads were destroyed and there was no functioning Internet connection, the fact that despite this everybody was giving their all to the task constituted an act of epic storytelling. Such enthusiasm towards emergency relief and reconstruction was also felt by the mass of young Acehnese who played a role in both post-conflict and post-tsunami interventions at all levels (logistics, research, manpower handling, advisory work and so on). Today, many of those Acehnese still feel badly let down by the lack of working opportunities in general and, more particularly, within that community of heroes. The negative emotion these people experience, however, has no place in the epic myths of humanitarianism.

The social impact of aid: politics and dreamed-of communities

As noted in Part 1 of 'Life after collective death in South East Asia', times of widespread destruction are always difficult for local political powers and governments. Handling a disaster poses an enormous political challenge for any kind of government, rich or poor, as it is in charge of public welfare and must respond to disasters in one way or another. For example, when Typhoon Nargis struck Myanmar on 2 May 2008, the junta was covertly accused of doing nothing. While popular discontent rose, the referendum pertaining to the ratification of the new constitution was due to be organized a few days later (Brac de la Perrière, 2010). In Thailand, after the Tsunami struck in 2004, informants interviewed by Monica Lindberg Falk felt disappointed by the aid provided by the government, stating that the government had promised a great deal but had not fulfilled its promises.[5] Even Japan, a country that has succeeded in making prevention the basic operational tool in its response to recurrent natural disasters, was overtaken by the 'unexpected' danger of damage to the Fukushima nuclear plant, and consequently major political change took place after the disaster. Contrary to the Japanese example, some governments gain legitimacy by developing specific support for poor people affected by natural disaster. For example, in Venezuela in 1999, after the mudslide known as 'La Tragedia', the government developed a 'compassionate militarization' (Vasquez, 2010) that became instrumental in strengthening the power of Hugo Chavez.

The presence of a heavily funded foreign body performing important functions for the population (curing, teaching or even feeding) is also envisaged as an alternative power of control by many governments. In some cases, as in Myanmar during the early stage of Nargis, there has been a clear refusal to accept foreign emergency aid for fear that it might provoke political change, as Boutry shows in this issue. In another context, the Indian ban on foreign funding of local NGOs speaks of national pride, the struggle against corruption and a will to control.

The need for humanitarian help can also provide a good interpretative tool for the governments of countries affected by catastrophe to conceal other, more political events that are less easily understandable in the eyes of the international community (defined as those who share the morality of human rights). When the

[5] See Lindberg Falk (2012).

tsunami struck in Aceh, most of the compulsive TV spectators of the destruction had no idea that a civil war had been going on in the region for over 30 years. They learned of the conflict when the negotiations came to a slightly accelerated conclusion, shortly after the tsunami had struck and a flow of international aid agencies had entered the region. The civil war went unnoticed by the eager worldwide donors to tsunami relief. The Acehnese case is, however, in direct contrast to that of the similar Sri Lankan east coast, where the tsunami also affected a population involved in a long and cruel civil war. Mara Benadusi's contribution to this Special Focus clearly exemplifies how the actors of a perfectly successful participatory aid script constantly keep the ethnographer out of local and national political matters. As one of Benadusi's informants put it, the Western guests must 'go home happy'. This is, of course, the reverse of the emotions needed for the fund-raising of humanitarian aid, an obscure game of interests that is seen as endangering the actual help.

The landscape of humanitarian assistance has become contrasted and complex. Research has shown how it has evolved over a number of years and in an arena in which multiple actors compete for resources injected by international donors, as Olivier de Sardan (2005) has brilliantly analysed. This situation has been instrumental in creating a new social group of local go-betweens and humanitarian entrepreneurs, actors who specialize in designing projects that would fit the international humanitarian ideology framework and use its idiom (see, in particular, Benadusi in this issue). In this Special Focus, we underline how the archetypical helped–helper couple, so strongly embodied by the doctor–patient or teacher–pupil hendiadys, becomes animated by a vast array of subjectivities when it is examined case by case. Helpers are manifold and so are the helped.

The unequal, hierarchically unbalanced relationship of the international humanitarian helper towards the Southern country victim often appears as a different kind of exchange when observed as part of a more complex and informed picture of the local society and from the local society's point of view. In contrast, inequalities concerning the less visible social roles of the 'victims' can be reinforced by the very aspiration of the helpers to erase inequalities. In this Special Focus, Guillou demonstrates an example of the first case in relation to Cambodian doctors. The international aid medical staff or volunteers tend to see the Cambodian doctors as helpers, inscribing them with their own categories of help (empathy, rejection of suffering, tendency towards social equity). The Cambodian doctors, though, feel that their major obligation is not so much to their unknown patients as to a broadly defined kinship circle which they relate to as part of a gift–countergift dynamic. If they are forced to serve their unknown patients in tune with the humanitarian moral imperative, their local network of cure and social value becomes disempowered and their kin-patients do not receive the cures and care required. So there the Cambodian doctors stand, struggling to relate to their patients, to their foreign colleagues, to their kin and to their employers as the right kind of 'helpers'. On top of that, there is also the frustrating feeling of getting nothing in return. Boutry provides a perfect example of the second case in this issue. When the international aid agencies struggled to break the 'unjust' scheme of patron–client relationships in the delta of the Ayeyarwady, and eventually succeeded in their endeavour, they were not aware that they were in fact breaking an economic system (organization of labour, market, money loans) that structures what is said

to be one of the major resources in the latest international aid idiom: the social community.

In this regard, Boutry's account describes a recent shift in the tendencies of international aid. The creation of perpetrator*less* victims has fostered an individualized, egalitarian view of the society to be helped. It has, however, proved such a failure in so many cases that the last keyword in the humanitarian trade has now become 'community', as Soizick Crochet (2000) explains with reference to Cambodia. Thus, in the humanitarian idiom, individual victims are best helped by empowering their 'community'. Who and what constitutes a community? Benadusi shows how such a community can be entirely created by the power of international aid money. She very aptly underlines what happens when a local society, with its complex and often very contrasting sets of social practices and values, shapes itself as an ideal 'community' in order to respond to international aid. Hambantota was 'what a post-disaster village should be: a village that had been working hard and actively participating in all the different stages of reconstruction; a village that was able to benefit from the efforts of both international and local actors; and lastly, a village that could testify to the intervention's success in the eyes of an external audience that might be interested in continuing to support Sri Lanka with humanitarian aid'. The villagers that Benadusi met were conscious of this desire to fulfil the image of an ideal community. In fact, the ethnographer was felt to be a menace, as the spy of two higher agencies – the government and the international organization – and as a figure who would betray the disguise.

That the 'community' has no given social structure appears clearly in Jacqueline Aquino Siapno's paper about 'resilient' victims. Siapno reveals the vital sense of community that the practice of music and dance has instilled among the Timorese before and since Independence. Despite the choices made by international experts, whose knowledge of their dreamed communities Siapno sharply questions, the ravaged villagers find an autonomous way of reconnecting to what she calls an 'affective community' and to 'speak beyond trauma' by learning, playing, composing and transforming their own music. Siapno, herself an activist, ends up joining in the music as best practice.

Reconstructing the circulation of gifts

In his brilliant essay concerning the contradictions of generosity within the morality of humanitarian intervention, Benedikt Korf (2007) argues that, so far, humanitarian interventions have staged a disembodied relationship between the donors of help (a small number of Western people) and the recipients of help (large numbers of 'Southern' people) – a relationship in which the former make a gift that the latter cannot reciprocate. Taking his fieldwork examples from the first stages of the tsunami relief in Aceh, Korf shows that the Acehnese felt humiliated by their inability to give anything in exchange for what they had received – food, houses, tools, schools, medical care and money. All the donors expected to receive from them was gratitude, proof of which was duly registered by the aid givers. This, however, argues Korf, is what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic domination' and is no less effective because it stems from a 'virtuous' feeling (the donors' will to help fellow human beings). On the contrary, it is particularly

mischievous because the donor transforms his or her status from dominant to generous and therefore cannot be seen as morally reproachable. Help then becomes an instrument of oppression that can be, and very often is, sabotaged in refined forms of resistance and reappropriation of resources, most likely by subjects and groups unimaginable and unimagined in the project of aid. This raises the issue of contrasting philosophies of aid, addressed by Guillou in this issue. Such contradiction can be solved only if 'we ground our duty to help in [the sufferers'] entitlement to be aided' (Korf, 2007): that is, in the sufferers becoming the subjects of their own rescue using funds that are morally owed to them as they would be – and in future may be – owed to any of the donors themselves.

Following Korf's intuition, we can read the papers of this Special Focus as cases in which, in the helpers–helped relationship, the gift goes only from the former to the latter, without leaving space for a reciprocal exchange. This creates invisible oppression, well maintained in moral discourses. The young Acehnese who lost their jobs with the NGOs and subsequently felt let down are understood as spoiled youngsters, too lazy to start a business of their own. The Cambodian doctors who make no effort to cure the ailing people outside their dispensary are seen as heartless, privileged members of the bourgeoisie, while the jobless moneylender in Myanmar is considered as a plague successfully eradicated. In fact, these people all express a feeling of being disempowered by the mechanism of international aid, while their disempowerment connotes a general failure of their society's resilience. Their voices are as important as the experts' analyses of the failures and successes of each international aid programme, as Siapno's contribution in this issue testifies for Timor Leste. By contrast, what the helpers, both donors and aid professionals, receive in exchange ought to enter the general compassionate discourse, especially when it expands in the media. The heroes of the Cambodian emergency or of the tsunami relief, the researchers who obtained jobs because of their essays on Aceh and Timor, should be depicted for what they are – people deeply indebted to those they somehow helped. Finally, the discourses held on the reconstruction of the circulation of gifts should also include the local subjects, actors who should not be flattened into the mass of 'victims' but who should also be seen in their moving hierarchies, both of power and entitlement.

In reaching a conclusion, this two-part collection of papers concerning life after wide-scale death in South East Asia cannot but underline and detail the difficulties of establishing a relationship of help, placing this alongside the opening up of a peer-to-peer dialogue with the subjects and groups who are in need of help. In Part 1, we underlined what traditional resources could be used by societies to face disasters, and we examined the various moralities at play. In Part 2, we point to the non-communication between those very structures and the international aid agencies, even in exemplary cases such as the 'perfect' Sri Lankan participatory village of Hambantota. In this way, re-establishing the circulation of gifts, both in practice and in discourse, looks like another form of re-fabricating the social bonds. This, of course, also calls for responsibility from the local social structures (political subjects, kin groups, village-based units, patron–client groups, gendered groups, religious groups, etc), as well as from all those who can circulate or block the gift in the long-term, post-catastrophe landscape.

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