Interactions with a Violent Past

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CHAPTER 8

Aesthetic Forms of Post-Conflict Memory:
Inspired Vessels of Memory in Northeast Cambodia

Krisna Uk

Introduction

In many highlander villages in northeast Cambodia, which have once been the theater of violent conflicts, villagers living in the northeast fringes of Cambodia have adjusted to the impacts of 30 years of conflicts that have destroyed their man-made and natural environment. Indeed older and younger generations alike continue to find new “meanings” in the traumatic events, which featured the Americans’ intense bombardment of the region from the mid-1960s to 1973 and the brutal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. The aftermath of war often calls for processes of healing and memory. The work of remembrance and healing is left to the survivors who seek to maintain the continuity of life despite the discontinuity brought by the violence of the past. Such traces of the past can be found in local aesthetic practices, which simultaneously crystallize, communicate and transmit individual and collective memory in tangible forms.

The objective of this chapter is less to add to the vast existing literature on memory established by Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Connerton, Maurice Bloch, and Paul Ricoeur, amongst others, than to look at alternative vessels of memory produced through the arts of sculpting, painting and weaving. Particular attention will be paid to the role of the craftsman
from the old and youngest generations as a conscious, dedicated and skilful individual who does not simply create, but creates in a beautiful manner. In reproducing work and seeking inspiration from earlier times, the technique of the craftsman becomes the means whereby memories of the past, perceptions of the present, and predictions of the future are given aesthetic and material form.

The following ethnographic examples concern two Jorai villages and a Tampuon village where local craftsmanship reproduces objects which remain deeply imbued with the history of warfare in the region. The purpose is to reflect on the ways the war-torn landscape — or its symbolic association with the destructive power of high technology warfare specifically — becomes a source of inspiration that culminates in object design. It thereby also seeks to examine how through this very process the craftsman and his recipients can treat the past as a project that is continually revisited.

Barbara Mills argued that the term “memory-work” refers to the “many social practices that create memories, including recalling, reshaping, forgetting, inventing, coordinating, and transmitting.” By using his skills, emotions and experience (or lack thereof), the craftsman can attribute new meanings and functions to the inherited past as will be shown by the woodcarver who encapsulates personal and collective war memories in a plane replica, by the funerary painter who writes the past and foretells the future of the dead on a funerary monument, and by the fabric-weaver who manipulates threads of personal and vicarious experiences.

All the sites to which I had traveled were formerly a part of what the Americans called the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” — a complex and organic transportation corridor of immense military and political significance. Therefore the cases profiled feature the production of what has been termed “trench art,” which can be defined as: “any item made by soldiers, prisoners of war and civilians, from war matériel directly, or any other material, as long as it and they are associated temporally and/or spatially with armed conflict or its consequences.” Although such memory-objects described in this chapter originate neither from parts nor from whole physical remnants of war, they can still be considered a meaningful manifestation of trench art. While all of them recall Aristotle’s wax tablets in the way that they bear the visual prints of warfare episodes that have marked the lives of the inhabitants of this area, their intrinsic resonance also unveils how villagers respond to whispers from the past, voices of the present and echoes of the future simultaneously.
Leu Village: Sculpting and Carving Funeral Effigies

The village of Leu is home to some 300 souls, comprising 27 families of the Jorai ethnic minority and three families of Khmers — the dominant ethnic group in Cambodia. An Austronesian ethnic minority linguistically akin to the Malays and the Chams, the Jorai of Leu speak a Chamic language which belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian language family. The Jorai villagers of Leu organize their social structures along matrilineal lines and attach strong importance to kin and affine-based relationships. The livelihood of the Jorai inhabitants of Leu is based throughout the year on a range of subsistence procurement activities. These include slash-and-burn clearance to allow the cultivation of vegetable plots and orchards (*hwa*), wet rice cultivation, hunting, fishing and the collection of non-timber forest products. A few people find seasonal employment in plantations or large farms and occasionally participate in house-building in return for a wage. James Scott and Jean Michaud argue that this kind of range of livelihood activities is a key characteristic of acephalous societies, whereby their relative autonomy enables them to remain beyond the state control.

The Mnemonic Functions of Sculpting

Funerary statuary in the Jorai village of Leu encompasses a wide range of old and relatively new forms of traditional sculptures, which include animal and human effigies as well as war-related items. Village effigies that belong to the pantheon of funerary sculptures such as the mourner (a crouching male with his chin resting on the palms of his hands), the peacock (the legendary surrogate mother of the Jorai and a symbol of beauty), the elephant (an animal associated with power and prestige), and the monkey (a popular dweller of the forest) now stand, however, alongside war-inspired carvings like the helicopter and bombing plane. In the case of grave decorations, planes appear in both sculpted and drawn forms and can be regarded as fulfilling aesthetic and symbolic functions. According to Siu, a talented woodcarver, the plane is a *damnang*, a substitute (in Khmer) for the traditional mourner who looks after the dead until their souls travel to the next world.

In the village of Leu, the association between the plane and the US bombardment that devastated the region more than 30 years ago remains strong, particularly amongst the adult segment of the population. In his study of man-made objects derived and inspired by conflicts, Nicholas Saunders noted that the Vietnam War generated a plethora of “Trench Art” such as models of warfare equipments manufactured from war debris by
soldiers for whom the American Huey helicopter gunship became “the definitive icon of technological war during the conflict.” Furthermore, the fact that commercial air travel remains outside the experience of most Jorai people living in the district of Andong Meas and beyond maintains the innate relationship between planes, bombing, and death for which the plane itself has ultimately become the sign (what announces death) and the symbol (the conception of death, not death itself).

Indeed, for the older generation, a carved plane is also invested with personal experiential significance. Some of my informants view the presence of a sculpted plane on top of a particular grave as a way to remember the deceased as a former soldier or “a person who was very quick and efficient in gathering food and weapons.” In the same way as the funerary sculpture of a man holding a machine gun identifies a former soldier, the plane effigy — beyond its aesthetic and symbolic role — acts as a semiotic device that often tells the past history of the dead.

Following the US bombardment from the end of the 1960s to the mid-1970s and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) intervention to support Cambodia’s reconstruction in 1992 (where military aircraft dominated Cambodia’s skylines this time in the form of UN planes and helicopters), Leu villagers were keen on creating replicas of the planes they had seen for display in both their cemetery and their village. In the latter case, on the occasion of the buffalo sacrifice to propitiate spirits, the plane effigies featuring at the top of the sacrifice pole convey a particular memory of past perceptions and behavior; according to a village elder: “The planes remind people about their foolishness … now we laugh at the thought that we were once so scared of them and that we were all running to hide … [the sculptures] tell our children about our experience of the past.” However, most people who have survived the conflicts believe that because of its intrinsic power (peutrang), the plane can preside at the death of the animal while warding off evil spirits at the same time. As another village elder comments, “This is a bombing plane, the same as the ones that came to wage war on us! It is powerful, beautiful and it inspires fear!” An epitome of beauty and power, the plane has, since the aftermath of the wars, supplanted traditional icons like the ibis bird or the Jorai drinking at the rice wine jar.

Most village elders and middle-aged persons I worked with do not feel any sense of recrimination toward the Americans. Some feel they had no or very little power over the course of the conflicts, and that as time passes, any resentment has become irrelevant. Despite seeing the US bombardment as being particular harrowing, some village elders nonetheless say
that they now view their past belief in the planes being “flying gods” as a rare comic element amidst otherwise traumatic memories of this long period of protracted conflicts.15

According to Paul Ricoeur, forgetting and forgiving are two crucial and interdependent components of the ethics of memory.16 For the villagers living in Leu though, the presence of a sculpted plane during rituals often acts as a mirror, which triggers collective remembering as well as the contemplation of the self in the past. For the village elders, remembering and laughing at one’s past mistake can also lead to forgiveness. In this particular context, the process of forgiving oneself and others relies more on the act of remembering than forgetting. For the same village elders, the fear that they felt when first seeing the bombing planes today makes way for an appreciation of the fascination that this same image inspires amongst the youngest inhabitants of the village. As one of them put it: “when the animal is killed at the foot of the sacrifice pole, the plane at its top shakes and moves to the great delight of the children.” Each time a plane features in a village ritual, the flying sculpture comes to life, engendering a range of wide-ranging emotions amongst its inhabitants.

Most of the village’s youngest inhabitants have never seen a real plane before while some I worked with told me that they have not seen a plane since the UNTAC period ended more than 15 years ago. This does not prevent them from carving, drawing or imagining planes, however. On the occasion of the funeral of a village elder, a cow and a buffalo were offered to the spirits at the sacrifice post which was decorated with a sculpted plane. For Wai who is 27 years old and a member of the post-conflict generation, the plane “[…] is something the sculptor has imagined. We imagine from what other people — old people — have told us. I don’t know why we do that, but as far as I can remember I have always seen this. The plane is there because it looks like it is where it needs to be … It has landed for the funeral!” In fact Wai’s comment underlines the fact that the capacity to reproduce an object does not need to be sanctioned by empirical experience (seeing the object) but can be inspired by stories of village elders, local wooden sculptures as well as television, newspapers, toys, printed T-shirts and other sources of visual stimulation. For his maker who is 14 years old and who got inspired through such visual channels, the plane he created is simply “beautiful.”

Carving a Better Plane

Siu, 35 years old, whose father taught him the secrets of wood carving, is regarded by his fellow villagers as one of the most skilful craftsmen in
the area. Whether he is producing wood sculptures, handles for knives, or house parts, Siu is perceived to have a special connection with his material, which seems naturally to flow through the deft movements of his sculpting knives. Having spent several months working with him, my hours of observation led me to conclude that his ability equally to tame wood, bamboo and water reeds so as to coincide exactly with the shape of his imagined object is not only stimulated by his apparent passion to make but the passion to make beautifully. In many instances, this craftsman re-fashions objects started by others, drawing on his aptitude for turning the object into the object they had in mind.

Siu occasionally sculpts objects for people living outside the village. In the past, he and his relatives have sculpted men, women and animal effigies (elephants and monkeys) for the decoration of a hotel in Banlung, the provincial capital of Ratanakiri. For a full day or two of work, Siu is paid in cash. In December 2007, Siu completed the wooden effigy of a helicopter that I commissioned for the Cambridge Museum of Archeology and Anthropology. Because it had three propellers, a Khmer visitor commented that this effigy could not be the true representation of a real aircraft. Unperturbed, Siu replied with undisguised pride: “This plane is awesome, powerful, more so than the ones that flew here before.” One of the most interesting issues raised by this comment is Siu’s inference that there is more to sculpting that the mere illustrative reproduction of an object. In the eyes of the external beholder, the plane was not and could not possibly be real, given the incongruity in its engineering. For Siu, conversely, the plane was even more real because it illustrated perfectly his idea of what a plane should be.

When considering the sculpting of a plane, one can infer that the material used (wood) is a tactile medium that can shape the very idea of the plane. From this perspective, which emphasizes the relationship between the maker and the object, the actual material that is shaped is less the tangible, palpable and possibly destructible log than the virtual material (or matière) in which the idea of the plane itself is made. Borrowing Dorine Kondo’s expression, the attentive sculpting of the effigy thus demonstrates how “crafting fine objects” can become synonymous with “crafting a better idea of the objects.”

Indeed, crafting the plane allows the individual to reconstruct the idea of a plane (what a plane should be, not what it was in the past or what it is today), thus gaining control over the object and its inherent powers. By harnessing such powers through craftsmanship, the woodcarver can attribute new meanings to the object. Encoded with renewed ideas and values,
the plane can eventually be invested with a guardianship duty so as to care for the living and the dead or simply remain a symbol of power and beauty. All of this poses the interesting question of whether carving and adapting such images might be a means of taming the dangerous object so as to shift the status of the carver from one of victim (Siu’s father died during the protracted conflicts) to that of master and controller.

Whether war-associated sculptures function as guardians or vessels of power, their local use is often a matter of doing or redoing, which according to Alfred Gell fits into this system of actions intended to change the world rather than being a mere representation of its phenomenological perception. In furthering Gell’s “action-centred approach to art,” however, the appropriation, manipulation and display of the formidable objects are all forms of praxis that not only produce “meaning” but can also become meaningful actions as they are being performed by the artisan himself, who may find in sculpting a way to heal some of his war traumas (for instance, the anxiety caused by the bombing plane). In this sense, the crafting of warfare objects is also a creative psychological process that enables its maker to harness their intrinsic power for positive purposes, thus turning them into signs of life. The following vignette explores this idea further.

Peuho Village: Painting Individual and Collective Memories

Peuho is a Jorai village located southeast of Leu in the neighboring district of O You Dav. It is only a few miles from the Vietnamese border. Its inhabitants live a life of subsistence activities, notably farming and collecting bomb debris for sale across the border. A village elder told me that since the bombing event, people in Peuho and other Jorai villages along the border have been singing songs that narrate the history of the bombardment. Most of these songs are revived in the first few months of the year when the work in the hwa (fruit and vegetable orchard) is very limited and when various celebrations and rituals to the yang (spirits) take place. As an alternative to songs, the village funerary rituals offer, like in Leu, a rich system of inscription that gives another insight into the local hermeneutics of memories.

The Funerary Monument: A Distinctive “Lieu de Mémoire”

In the village cemetery, one cannot fail to notice a posat atão, a tall funerary monument, with a roof shaped like a saddle, which although
almost completely covered by the vegetation, still reveals colorful images illustrating everyday life underneath a large flying plane. In the immediate aftermath of the death, the inhabitants of Peuho keep watch over the deceased for a few days and make a series of sacrifices involving buffaloes, pigs and chicken.

Keulagn Beuragn is the 70-year-old painter who decorated the *posat atâo*, following the death of a young boy a few years ago. He explains that nobody has ever taught him how to paint, as “one needs to see and naturally know how to do it.” More than a skill that can be passed on through the generations, Beuragn regards his aptitude for painting as a gift from the *yang* (spirits). In his view, the craftsman who is dedicated to his work is an initiate who has been chosen by the spirits to fulfil specific duties. As a result, trying to teach someone how to paint would be *kanm* (taboo). In lieu of payment, the funerary painter receives a gift in exchange for his artistic work. Just as he sees his skill being a gift donated by the *yang*, his painting for other villagers is in turn considered a gift to them.

The making of the *posat atâo* marks the second burial of the dead. The *posat atâo* is a four-meter-high edifice with four sides; the largest sides being the ones on the front and on the back. It takes two to three days to fully decorate it. During this time, the act of painting is guided by a series of taboos which isolate the individual in a variety of ways. As Beuragn explains, in the course of this decorating period, the painter is not allowed to return to the village as he is considered polluted by his proximity with death. He is thus compelled to live temporarily outside the village boundaries in a small hut where he sleeps and eats until the end of his work. This physical exclusion seems to reflect the fact that the painter is socially considered “dead.” Only with the completion of what Beuragn describes as a “risky” work can he re-integrate with the social collectivity of the village.

A further taboo is associated with naming the person who did the painting: “If some villagers returned from a day’s work in the field, saw the decoration and asked who created it, it is *kanm* (taboo) to say the name of the person who painted it.” For Beuragn, naming before the completion of the work can place the painter in a hazardous situation whereby he can be directly affected by the death (by becoming ill). In other words, preserving the anonymity of the painter is a way to guarantee his safety so that the potential evil *yang* would find it difficult to identify him and harm him. An additional proscription relates to the maturity of the painter who needs to be at least 60 years of age. According to Beuragn, it is traditionally taboo for anyone under 60 to try to decorate a *posat atâo*; children
especially, since they are considered more vulnerable to the malevolent spirits. However, as will be shown later, taboos associated with painting the *posat atâo* have been frequently infringed.

Partly because of the costs and labor entailed, most people in Peuho believe that it is not necessary to build a *posat atâo* for a child. Indeed, villagers tend to ornament the grave of a child only at the point when the deceased would have reached the age of 15 and thus attained adulthood. As a villager commented: “in the past people used to build these funerary monuments all the time ... they were richly decorated with images of women winnowing, people using mortar and pestle ... but today fewer and fewer people can afford them.” Yet in the above case where the bereaved family was relatively affluent and very fond of their child, the head of the household decided to build a *posat atâo* on top of his ten-year-old son’s grave and asked Beuragn to decorate it. The latter explained that in this case, a child’s grave should look identical to an adult’s. In the words of the painter, the most important consideration is that “it needs to be as beautiful as a temple” so that the dead will like his new home.

Beuragn’s typical *posat atâo* decoration combines motifs of flowers, items of everyday life, warfare objects and celestial beings. One fine example is shown in Plate 8.1. Beuragn comments that he always imagines the motifs that he wants to create first (his favorite motif being the stars) and draws them using a succession of horizontal rows. There is no specific order in terms of which motif should come first and the *posat atâo* painter is quite free to decorate it following his own designs and choice of colors. The drawing takes a day to produce and shows the following:

On the top corners of the edifice are what the painter describes as “flowers with heavenly hands.”
Rows 1 and 2: flowers (or Row 2 can also feature elephant trunks)
Row 3: hand grenades
Row 4: orchids growing on trees
Row 5: lighter sheaths (for a lighter composed of two stones to rub against one another)
Row 6: Water gourds
Row 7: Two fighting snakes, with one about to eat the other
At the bottom: A bombing plane over a house

This example of a *posat atâo* decoration shows an interesting mixture of flowers and objects. For the painter, the act of painting and knowing which images should come first, and in which color they should be depicted, is a spontaneous process. An important factor, though, is the relative
symmetry with which the objects are placed. In this example, the shapes in the row of hand grenades are reminiscent of the row of water gourds; similarly, the two flowers “with heavenly hands” at the top visually echo the fighting snakes. Flowers are recurrent and particularly praised posat atão funerary motifs, while the man-made objects depicted include not only water gourds and lighter sheaths but also hand grenades. An intriguing feature is the last row depicting two snakes fighting each other, which in the words of the artist show the largest “about to eat the other.” For the painter, the snakes act as a beautiful allegory of the war in which “one has to become the winner.” In a sense, this bottom row announces the warfare theme, which as he commented, often fills in the entire bottom space.

The last image on the large panel at the base of the monument thus features a warfare scene, which depicts a bombing plane about to destroy a house. Beuragn does not clearly remember when he started to draw war-associated objects but he acknowledges that since the protracted conflicts in the region, grave decorators have progressively incorporated images of war that they remember. While drawing and coloring the plane at the

Plate 8.1 Reproduction of the artist’s drawing of a posat atão.
bottom part of the virtual *posat atão*, Beuragn recalls that bombings in the area started from 6–7.00 am and lasted until 4.00 pm. Each plane that flew over the village used to drop four bombs. Beuragn clarifies, however, that: “if the cause of death is natural then the *posat atão* will not be decorated with much warfare imagery.” Conversely if someone has died from the war or as a result of some other form of violence, the edifice will feature a lot of planes, knives, grenades and assault rifles because “it is for other people to know the cause of death.”

In the case of the boy’s grave described above, Beuragn recalls having painted both ordinary and warfare-related objects. As the boy died from a long illness following the UNTAC military presence in the northeast, the edifice was subsequently decorated with a few weapons mixed together with images of everyday life. The painter also claimed that the objects that are depicted are “not for the dead to take along into the after-life” (like proffered objects placed on an ordinary Jorai grave would be) but only visual enhancements to turn the *posat atão* into a beautiful edifice. For Beuragn, war-inspired themes like hand grenades or flying bombing planes have now become established aesthetic motifs.

If a pregnant villager who died during childbirth is often represented by a woman with a large womb, and a man carrying an assault rifle on his shoulder commonly identifies a soldier who died in combat, roof drawings can illustrate the former life of the dead in a similar manner. A lot of funerary sculptures and illustrations may also be used for their symbolic value, however, in the sense that images of weaponry will enable the dead to be well-protected, strong, brave and respected in his next life. Like bringing personal objects to the grave, sculpting, drawing and painting contribute in some way in the making or invention of someone’s future identity. These good wishes for the dead either translate into three-dimensional representations such as sculptures, or two-dimensional drawings and paintings on traditional funerary monuments such as the *posat atão* which enables the family to foretell a successful life in order to lead the dead toward a more fulfilling existence.

For the painter, narrating the past — whether it is someone’s existence or excerpts of the village history — is entangled with narrating the present. In fact, objects that were commonly used during previous times of peace and conflicts (the old lighter and sheath or the hand grenade) have found their own space amongst objects of the present. Beyond transcending times, these warfare objects also stand amidst objects of peace to the extent that for the external observer, they have somehow lost their hostile
properties. As the row of hand grenades resembles the row of water gourds in both shape and color, the painter seems to have captivated — or rendered more visible — an artistic dimension of the war-associated object.

**The Collective Functions of the Posat Atâo**

The large panel at the base is a distinctive space which enables the family to tell the past story of the dead or an imaginary story of his future existence, which may become true in the afterlife. In this sense, war-associated ornaments on a ten-year-old boy’s grave, for example, do not necessarily mean that the child was a soldier or had any connection with the war. It only means that his parents hope that in the next world, the child will live a longer and happier life by being strong, valiant and respected; qualities which are suggested by the manipulation of symbols of warfare.\(^{23}\)

When working in the village cemetery, therefore Beuragn often leaves this particular space provisionally empty so that the bereaved family can

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**Plate 8.2** Example of a *posat atâo*, O’Kop village, Andong Meas district.
decide which motifs they want, although he says that he is often free to illustrate the entire *posat atào* following his own inspiration. He comments, however, that these days not very many people want to have many planes and bombs since they prefer images that convey a sense of natural peace, especially if the deceased person has suffered for a long time before passing away. According to Beuragn, some people believe that commissioning an impression of beauty and peace is a way to conjure a future existence that may be free of violence. Indeed, even if telling an imaginary story for the dead is a well-established practice in most local Jorai and other ethnic minority cemeteries, the introduction of war-related effigies as characters, symbols or mere aesthetic illustrations can remain subject to taboos, since their fundamental association with death may be perceived as insuperable. Painting the impression of tranquility on the wooden structure of the *posat atào* is therefore comparable to writing the future of the dead soul. In this case, the painter acts as a scribe who not only records the memory of the past but also tells the memory of the future.

As the sound of his voice seems to indicate that some images are uninspiring, Beuragn admits that he never paints people celebrating and drinking at a rice wine jar. In cases in which the bereaved family places an order for this particular illustration, they will then need to ask someone else to complement Beuragn’s work, and who is well able to paint a specific impression beautifully. In a sense, the collective agency fulfills the taboo mentioned earlier of not naming the painter as a result of the multiplicity of the participants. Death being a total social event, the painting of the *posat atào* can also constitute a social endeavor in itself as it may involve several villagers to complete. When characterized by collective participation, the *posat atào* thus illustrates Alfred Gell’s remark that “decorative patterns attached to artefacts attach people to things, and to the social projects those things entail.”

Whether inspired from the family’s wishes or sourced from the painter’s own imagination (or both), the result is often an impressively rich piece of work based on a colorful “bricolage” of images, patterns, scriptures and geometrical forms. Such a collective undertaking often highlights individual roles and duties and their good wishes for the dead. Acting as a space of creative painting and writings, the funerary monument becomes the site for other painters’ investments where individual and collective thoughts, memories, and wishes are intrinsically bound together. In a sense, the experience serves to strengthen the community as a whole, hence contrasting with the previous image of the painter who is physically isolated. Functioning as a large *lo ci memoriae* or *lieu de mémoire* to
borrow Pierre Nora’s expression, the *posat atâo* thus offers personal and collective visions of the past, the present, and the future simultaneously.\textsuperscript{28}

The diversity of the ethnic groups living in the province of Ratanakiri opens up a multitude of lines of enquiry, as the notion of ethnicity is intimately connected to the sense of belonging and identity. However, in a place where provincial and international borders are being constantly re-negotiated, spatial mobility and habits play a significant role in repositioning oneself vis-à-vis the “other.” Inter-ethnic influences, I have been told, are most frequent when Jorai villages are located near Tampuon ones, thus giving birth to sources of inspiration that may affect customary laws, death rituals and aesthetic forms of memories.\textsuperscript{29} Such rapprochement is made especially visible in the domain of the arts whereby geographical proximity, interrelations and reciprocal influences have to some extent united them. Siu, the woodcarver of Leu village, told me that the Tampuon also have a funerary tradition to erect a *posat atâo* on the grave of their dead. He commented that the Tampuon *posat atâo* are traditionally covered with a large piece of fabric that would be richly decorated with painted images, and are hence more beautiful than the Jorai ones. As he puts it: “[the Jorai and Tampuon] are the same, we live next to each other, we copy them and they copy us.”

Having examined the Jorai use of war-related iconography in the crafting and decoration of funerary objects, the following examines the role of the tourism market in influencing the memory-landscape of a Tampuon village in the outskirts of the provincial capital.\textsuperscript{30} This example will serve to show how the manufacture of local memory can become an exclusive income-generating activity as memory-makers provide for both memory-consumers in search of war memorabilia, as well as for themselves.

**Laom Village: Weaving and Manufacturing Memories**

Laom is a small Tampuon village located in the district of Yeak Laom, on the northern road leading to Andong Meas district. Large portions of the communal land have already been sold to Khmer land prospectors who often turn the fields into plantations; a trend which is increasingly widespread in Ratanakiri, often bringing with it disputes between ethnic minorities and Khmer investors. At times when unscrupulous village or district chiefs sell the land where the village cemetery has been preserved for generations, villagers often feel that the link to their ancestors and customary spirits — an important aspect of their social life — has been irremediably lost.
Owing to its proximity to the relatively large town of Banlung, Laom is substantially exposed to the nearby hustle and bustle of the provincial capital and there are signs that the attachment to customary practices still highly visible in other villages is weakening. One example is the abandonment of the practice of grave (posat atâo) -making and ornamentation, which Laom’s inhabitants say is too costly and time-consuming to maintain. Besides, a large part of the forest that shelters the village cemetery has already been sold to Khmer investors who have turned the land into a cash crop field. This has in turn reinforced the idea that it may only be a matter a time before the entire cemetery disappears along with its traditional arts and rituals. A few women in the village have kept up the tradition of fabric-weaving, however. While this was previously a crucial means of commodity transactions between households and villages (for example, a large woven piece of fabric was exchangeable for a bag of rice), it is now primarily oriented toward the external market that caters for Khmer and especially foreign tourists.31

Being one of the most skilful fabric-weavers in Laom, Sing, like other women living in the outskirts of Banlung, has seen the changing economic landscape bring with it new opportunities to further the production of village handcrafts. A mature craftswoman, Sing teaches her seven daughters how to weave old traditional patterns together with images of high-technology weapons. She told me that her mother and grandmother used to weave and now it was her turn to transmit these skills to her own daughters. If in the previous cases, carving and decorating funerary objects is reserved to men, fabric-weaving in Laom is an exclusive female domain as it is passed on from mothers to daughters.

**Integrating New Weaving Patterns**

Sing’s personal craftwork represents some of the richest and most colorful fabric designs produced in the village and the surrounding area. As she proudly points out, her next door neighbor, who is also a weaver, often ends up buying the fabric that she makes. In her view, “she doesn’t know how to make beautiful ones!” According to Sing, her designs are also being sought out and copied in other villages.

She explains that she generally uses blue, red, and white threads, as they constitute the village’s traditional fabric colors, but that she sometimes weaves with other tones such as pink, green, and black, so as to diversify her products or simply provide for a special order. The fabrics
are generally of two sizes and the larger ones, which are for use as skirts, vary in price between US$10 and US$25. The skirts are dominated by broad horizontal bands of colors interspersed with narrower ones in contrasting shades. Their most striking feature, however, is a third type of band that Sing incorporates. These are galleries of icon-like motifs which juxtapose everyday household objects with darker themes of war.

Sing describes that she makes her own fabric designs by using traditional motifs (taught by her mother) as well as new ones inspired by things she has seen (planes, for example). She adds that she also weaves images of war-related objects she has never seen but only heard of from her husband and fellow villagers. For instance, she explains that the hand grenade — one of her favorite motifs — is one of the many images that her husband once described to her and drew on paper so that she could reproduce them with her loom. Despite this being an object she has never set her eyes on, she says that she has heard a lot about it and even knows details of how the grenade functions.

Sing recalled that she got used to seeing planes, guns, and assault rifles in the past. If in doubt about their exact shapes, she usually asks

Plate 8.3 Sing modeling some of her creations, Laom village, Banlung district.
her husband for advice. The latter claimed that these objects are deeply etched in his memory because explosive items were left lying on the ground during the US bombardment of the region. Today these warfare motifs form an intrinsic part of Sing’s weaving style, alongside long-established Tampuon iconography like landscapes (hills and mountains), insects and animals (spiders, lizards, dogs), everyday objects (ladders), and ritual objects (urns, Tampuon posat àtâo).

By means of remembrance, visual representation and association of ideas, Sing manages to weave large pieces of fabric into illustrated patterns, giving shape, color and texture to her and her husband’s memories. Another factor in her choice of imagery is external demand, however, not least as Sing now supplies Khmer retailers in Banlung who market war-related souvenirs to foreign tourists. Sing claims that one of these vendors asked her to teach weavers from four or five other villages how to weave warfare images so as to increase overall local production. “[War designs] are very popular with tourists!” she notes, before asking me if I want to place an order and whether I can draw the warfare images I would like her to weave.

Looking at a series of fabrics completed by Sing, one cannot fail to notice that some warfare motifs are quite sketchy. She brushes this off lightheartedly: “It’s quite new to me, so I am still learning!” Sing goes on to explain, however, that some of the less well-defined war icons are the product of her daughters’ tentative efforts to help her meet the increased demand and simultaneously add new images to their own weaving portfolios. Interestingly, even a single piece of Sing’s fabric reveals the various pairs of hands at work, with a spectrum in terms of levels of mastery of the warfare images.

Although Sing is quite keen on weaving motifs that resemble the shape of the original object, she also appears to enjoy working and re-working them as if they are malleable substances. On the one hand, objects such as planes and bombs are evoked using a minimum of lines, as though reduced to their elemental form. On the other hand, objects like the traditional Tampuon graves (posat àtâo) are depicted to a more sophisticated level of detail. Sing comments that her motifs are spontaneously woven one after another, independent of any desire to produce a particular storyline (with a beginning, middle, and an end). Extracting images sourced from different times and domains and placing them side by side enables her to tell any tale. Her main objective is to turn the fabric into a fine, visual and discursive object that can lend itself to an infinite number of interpretations. With reference to the Jorai tradition of fabric-weaving,
Jacques Dournes once wrote: “[…] the weaving patterns are to be read in relation to the formulas of mythological narratives. Repetitions, redundancies, rhythm and symbolism come together and are explained by one another. As representations of mental space, existing this time outside all language, the fabric is also a text to be deciphered” (Dournes 1987: 168).  

**Memory-Makers and Memory-Consumers**

In light of this, the work of reproduction involved in weaving underlines its textual and recording functions. Well aware of foreigners’ fascination with warfare imagery, Sing appears to have specialized in the production of conflict-associated motifs, although she claims that she started to weave weapons long before today’s influx of tourists. However, the current market for war memorabilia (and especially for things related to the regional conflict of the 1970s) seems to have further stimulated her exploration of the domain of warfare iconography, which she likes to mix with traditional motifs, patterns, and colors.

Representations are essential to the process of memory, whether it is the personal work of an individual or the product of collective remembering. In this sense, passing on the experience of the war appears less relevant than passing on a particular narration of the war. In Laom, as well as in Leu and other villages, members of the post-conflict generation use their own understanding, imagination and means of representation to tell their version of the conflicts. As Aletta Biersack argues persuasively: “In the interpretive mode, re-narration requires coming to terms with the events *as narrated*; and understanding and explanation become alike windows on historical consciousness.”  

Yet as the inheritance of the past is handed on from generation to generation, the understanding of the event itself evolves through time as a dynamic entity.

What is worth noting here is that, more than transmitting the memory of the past, as it might have been transmitted from mother to daughter, Sing is willing to tell stories that are outside her own experience. In other words, by complying with the external demand for a particular set of illustrations, the craftsman becomes a tool, albeit an essential one, in the fabrication of memory — or stories — which can be perceived as driven by the tourists’ quest for war memorabilia. Within this fabrication process, the memory-makers (the craftspeople) may indeed fulfill the needs of memory-consumers (the tourists). This idea can be summarized as follows:

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Local memory-object > foreign souvenir-object
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However, memory-makers can sometimes become their own consumers, whether it is the crafts-person (who weaves or carves) or the buyer (in search of a specific story). Illustrative of Paul Connerton’s distinction between types of memory, Sing gives the impression that the informed knowledge she has of the hand grenade (cognitive memory) is part of her personal experience (personal memory).

There is, first, a class of personal memory claims. These refer to those acts of remembering that take as their object one’s life history. We speak of them as personal memories because they are located in and refer to a personal past […] A second group of memory claims — cognitive memory claims — covers uses of ‘remember’ where we may be said to remember the meaning of words, or lines of verses […] What this time of remembering requires, is not that the object of memory be something that is past, but that the person who remembers that thing must have met, experienced or learned of it in the past.

Through the knowledge gained from the repetitive act of aesthetic representation (copying), cognitive memory and personal memory have eventually collapsed into each other, thus giving the crafts-woman a first-hand, albeit virtual, experience of the object.

In asking me to draw images of weapons, it is clear that Sing is anticipating including additional warfare icons to her portfolio. She may also feel, however, that she could incorporate someone else’s memories through the repetitive and learning process of weaving, which would in turn allow her to know — and to some extent experience — the object. In the same way as medieval scholars read and memorize texts and illuminations, Mary Carruthers draws attention to the fact that when engaged in the intellectual exercise that renders things “familiar” they should make it “a part of [their] own experience” — in other words, “making one’s own.” One could thus surmise that the act of weaving provides a continuum that enables makers to digest transmitted knowledge in order to become consumers and vice versa. As a result of the market dynamics of supply and demand, memory-makers and memory-consumers thus become interchangeable.

**Searching for Authenticity**

The tourist industry in Ratanakiri has steadily been increasing for the past decade and it is likely to develop further with the expansion of the infrastructure linking Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam. While commercial
flights between the capital city of Phnom Penh and the town of Banlung have been discontinued for more than ten years, road transportation systems are benefiting from aid-funded development projects, and more and more vehicles travel daily between the two towns, with the journey taking nine to 12 hours and sometimes more during the rainy season. Travel agencies advertise the two northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri as a destination for eco-tourism, marketing their national parks and ethnic minority villages as singular environmental and cultural attractions that remain relatively unscathed by mass tourism.\(^{37}\)

Numerous young, ambitious and self-employed Khmer tourist guides are now based in the northeast. The touristic itineraries they devise include the “discovery” of local handicrafts as well as ethnic minority cemeteries beautifully decorated with war-inspired ornaments. Those people I met who showed a particular interest in going with Khmer guides to visit these places and acquiring war memorabilia included retired US soldiers who had previously worked in the region during the Vietnam War (often training Jorai special forces), unexploded ordnance and landmine experts, former military personnel deployed in the area at the time of the UNTAC,\(^ {38}\) and young backpackers in search of unusual souvenirs to take back home.

For each of these categories of memory-consumers, the objects in question mediate a different relationship between the individual and the illustrated episodes of the war.\(^ {39}\) In all cases, however, it is the memories, images, and the storylines conveyed, rather than the object or receptacle itself (be it a water gourd or a piece of fabric), that are the main source of attraction and hence the real object of commodification. In keeping with Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai’s “social life of things,” the illustrated memories of past and present craftswomen show that intangible things can also generate their own biography as they become someone else’s possession.

The 1979 to 1989 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan prompted a similar incorporation of war-inspired motifs into the designs of the carpets woven by Afghan women. According to J. Lee: “the images of war often … evolved from traditional natural forms: helicopters from chickens, hand grenades from the floral bokeh or Paisley motif” and these conflict-themed rugs became known as qalin-e jangi (fight-carpets) and qalin-e jihad (war carpets)” (Lee cited in Saunders 2003: 202) As their popularity increased, the rugs circulated (back) to the USSR through trade and personal purchases from Russian officers, with some eventually finding their way to European markets.\(^ {40}\) From this perspective, conflict rugs manufactured by
Afghan women in Afghanistan are categorized as being more “authentic” than those made by Afghan refugees in Iran for instance. For Lee, “Afghan War rugs … provide a potent insight, both beautiful and terrifying, into one of the 20th century’s great cultural and historical catastrophes” (ibid.).

Amidst this growing market for memory (or souvenir) consumption, the external buyer creates a specific demand for local war narratives, which eventually turns objects into overloaded vessels of war iconography. In items that may once have carried a fine and understated mélange of traditional patterns and warfare adornments, they can become oversized illustrations of war-associated themes. This resonates with Alfred Gell’s concept of the art “spectator as agent” who is essentially a consumer: his “demand for art is the factor ultimately responsible for its existence, just as the existence of any commodity on the market is an index of consumer demand for it.”

Authenticity can be a puzzling concept, especially when some local crafts are being shaped by external demand. For foreign buyers, authenticity may reside in the fine balance between what they perceive as essentially traditional and the subtle hint of external influence and/or modernity. For others, authenticity means that which has been made by the persons living in the area where the depicted events have unfolded. For a local provider like Sing, the fabric-weaver from Laom village, authenticity may be an irrelevant concept, as it matters less to her than the need to satisfy demand and her ability to expand her knowledge and iconographic skills. Yet in providing objects for the wider war memorabilia market, the act of weaving enables her (and her daughters) to make or create authenticity for the foreigners (as well as for herself), as these images and their stories genuinely become her own. This point can be summarized as follows:

| Local memory-object | foreign souvenir-object | localized foreign memory |

The biographies of such memory-objects show that their prolonged journey through time, refashioning hands, buyers and consumers, indeed turns them into unusual objects that are continually in the making.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the ways in which a traumatic event that has destroyed the man-made and natural environment of three ethnic minority villages has had an impact on people’s artistic, social and economic practices. It has sought to demonstrate how 30 years of prolonged conflicts
— and the episode of intensive aerial bombardment in particular — have generated its own material culture that is the testimony of local resilience and creativity. Indeed objects derived from craftsmanship, as well as the act of crafting itself, can provide a new framework of analysis of the ways post-conflict villages in Ratanakiri in northeast Cambodia interact with the physical and spiritual landscapes affected by a violent past.

Since the end of the conflicts, people have reconstructed their livelihoods from the rubble, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. Interacting with a familiar landscape — now rendered hazardous — through the re-collection of material, bodily and intangible remnants of war, can lead to financial and spiritual rewards, although not without courting considerable danger.

Although risk-coping mechanisms can be developed through recuperation of material debris, the symbolic appropriation of war-related objects by means of manufacturing, ritual utilization or commercial transaction provides us with a deeper insight into the array of local survival strategies. Subsequent to the passage of the foreign “other,” the encounter with the dangerous object can be re-enacted through the reproduction of weaponry that enables people to reconcile themselves to their violent past. Through their incorporation into the local arts, war-associated objects have become an established feature of the post-conflict landscape.

There is a double narrative at work here whereby the material and psychological war debris can be given new shapes and meanings and new value. For Tim Ingold, “Art” disengages consciousness from current lived experience so as to treat that experience as an object of reflection.”

Similarly, both individual and collective memories can be treated as malleable material, which skilful hands can refashion in the same way in order to give past experiences and narrative accounts new shapes and better meaning. In this regard, the role of the craftsman provides an interesting window into material culture in this physically and spiritually traumatized landscape. Indeed, the wide range of local artistic practices is illuminating in the way it shows a mosaic of memories from different times and places that are encapsulated in manufactured objects.

Some of these objects offer layers of narrative accounts, thus acting as vistas on the ways conflict survivors reflect on their past and the ways that the younger generation of villagers inherit this past and in turn reflect on it. In this sense, the inspired craftsman may claim that “the past is never dead. It’s not even past” since memories of the present and future may be shaped out of their own material substance. As they gaze into their future, members of the post-conflict generation also try to make sense of
a violent past that they have inherited and carve their own historical space in a fast changing world. Today, new manifestations of power, this time in the guise of religious and material forms of consumption, give both the physical and memory landscape renewed contours.

Notes

1. Whilst the population of Cambodia is officially composed of 90% of Khmer and 10% of Chinese, Vietnamese, Lao, Cham and highland peoples (NGO Forum 2006), Ratanakiri province, which is bordered by Laos to the north and Vietnam to the east, is home to several ethnic groups such as the Jorai, Tampoung, Kreung, Brao, Lum, Kravet, and Kachok (Bourdier 2005).

2. The bombing campaign affected Vietnam, Lao PDR, and Cambodia with official data showing that the bombardment of Cambodia started in 1969 whilst unofficial records indicate that it started much earlier (Kiernan 1996; Shawcross 1979).


5. Drawing on Aristotle’s definition of memory as the ability of the mind to store and retrieve sensations, thoughts and knowledge of the past (Ricoeur 1984).

6. To preserve the anonymity of my informants, names of persons and places have been changed.

7. In Leu village, my informants found it difficult to conceptualize the Euro-American notion of “Art” (see Gell 1998). In a sense, each and every object that is produced by what we would consider artistic means (sculpting, carving, painting, drawing, weaving, etc.) has first and foremost a functional and practical purpose. This chapter uses the term “artistic” to refer to this set of practices but will try, whenever possible, to avoid using the word “art” on its own as its Euro-American definition has little relevance for my informants.


14. The buffalo sacrifice is a significant ritual that broadly marks important social events amongst the Jorai as well as other highlanders in the Southeast Asian region (see Condominas 1957; Lafont 1963; Goy and Coué 2006).

15. This chapter uses the word “trauma” in light of the following definition: “Trauma means wound, rupture, discontinuity in a tissue, in a fabric of relationships or in a life pattern. It is a break, an incision. Originally a surgical concept it has become a useful metaphor for characterizing the breaking point
in the lives of people who continue to suffer from repetitive death fears and of severe constriction of the personality. Trauma can be described either as an *event, a response* or an *inner experience*” (Dasberg et al. 1987: 1).


17. As Kondo wrote: “For a mature artisan is a man who, in crafting fine objects, crafts a finer self” (1990: 241).


19. The construction of a *posat atào* marks the second burial of the dead when the deceased is expected to finally embark upon his/her journey into the afterworld. For further information on the subject, see Hertz (1960).

20. For a historical impression of a *posat atào*, see Henri Maitre (1912): 226.


22. Beuragn uses a mixture of black, blue, and red dyes extracted from crushed stones and flowers.

23. In *posat atào* villages, people think that only male graves will benefit from these types of illustrations as girls or women are believed not to need any of these particular human qualities.

24. Such depicted weaponry include: knives, spears, crossbows and, more recently, hand grenades, assault rifles, rocket launchers, bombs, and planes. Amongst 30 villages spread in four districts that were visited — with the majority of them Jorai — 90% have used plane and other war-associated representations for sacred and more profane purposes. Indeed, such beliefs are not shared by every village in the two communes, though, as some people insist that the graves should not bear any war-related effigies since this may tragically affect the dead in his/her next life, hence being a bad omen of a violent death.


26. Some edifices feature sentences, names and birth and death dates.

27. Individual endeavor, such as keeping oneself safe in times of death, may also be an important source of motivation. In fact, other painters may only feel that they can further protect themselves from potential evil spirits by participating in the illustration of the funeral edifice.

28. For Nora, an object ranging from the most intellectually abstract to the most concrete is susceptible to qualify as a *lieu de mémoire* (see Ageron and Nora 1997).


30. The most numerous of ethnic minorities in Ratanakiri, the Tampuon, belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic group (Bourdier 2006; Michaud 2006).

31. Like the *arpilleras* from Peru and Chile or the “story cloth” manufactured by the Hmong in Southeast Asia, textile-weaving featuring war themes is a key source of income generation, especially for refugees (Saunders 2003: 218–9).
32. Author’s translation from French.
34. For Wolf Kansteiner: “[…] we should conceptualize collective memory as the result of the interaction among three types of historical factors: the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past, the memory-makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions, and the memory-consumers who use, ignore, or transform such artifacts according to their own interests” (Kansteiner 2002: 2).
37. Mass tourism which, for instance, targets world heritage sites like Angkor Wat in the northwest.
40. Indeed, the object eventually returns to its place of origin albeit in another form and texture: “the Soviet war matériel such as AK-47 assault rifles, Hind M-24 helicopters, HIP-8 troop carrying helicopters, BMD-2 armoured personnel carriers and a miscellany of rockets, grenades, handguns and aeroplanes” (Saunders 2003: 202) find their way back as illustrated motifs on a locally-woven carpet.
42. Ingold (2000): 111.
43. Quote from William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun (1951): Act I Scene 3.