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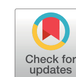
Research article

“His body is human, but he has a *tiracchāna* heart”: An ethnographic study of the epigenesis of child abuse in Cambodia



Maurice Eisenbruch

Department of Psychiatry, School of Clinical Sciences at Monash Health, Monash University, Australia

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ABSTRACT

In Cambodia, more than half of all children experience physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. This article examines how Cambodians view the causes and effects of child abuse and analyses its underlying cultural forces. Adopting a conceptual framework originally developed for the cultural context of violence against women, 110 cases of child abuse were ethnographically studied, comprising 61 cases of sexual abuse (50 girls and 11 boys), 26 cases of physical abuse (13 girls and 13 boys), and 23 cases of emotional abuse or neglect (13 girls and 10 boys). The perpetrators included fathers and other close relatives, lay Buddhist officiants and monks, and neighbors. Most informants viewed the sexual or physical abuse of children as stemming from “cultural attractors,” including blighted endowment caused by deeds in a previous life, a bad character starting early in life, astrological vulnerability to abuse, preordained entanglement between the child and the abuser (they are “fated” to meet), sexual craving, “entering the road to ruin,” and a moral blindness that portrays the abuser as blameless. Although these traits are similar to those identified in the explanations of violence against women, there were notable differences such as the role of the *tiracchāna* in explaining sexual abuse, including incest. Using these findings, this article identifies a cultural epigenesis of child sexual abuse, and provides a blueprint for developing a culturally responsive plan to prevent child abuse.

Tiracchāna: going horizontally, a designation for low beasts.
(Rhys Davids & Stede, 1900)

1. Background

Leon Eisenberg, in his address to the Third International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect in 1981, declared that the first task in preventing child abuse is to identify the sociocultural factors that contribute to the problem. That same year, in her book on cross-cultural perspectives on child abuse, Korbin (1991) urged researchers and caregivers to be mindful of how communities define child abuse within their own boundaries (Maitra, 1996). Today, child abuse remains a global problem and, despite extensive research on its cross-cultural aspects, a gap remains between the understanding of the cultural context of child abuse and the potential to channel this understanding into prevention. For example, a recent *Lancet* editorial calls for research on how to change cultural norms sanctioning violence against girls (Temmerman, 2015).

In their work seeking to mobilize international action on child abuse and neglect, Finkelhor and Lannen (2015) posed three dilemmas regarding cultural relevance. The first concerns which programs are likely to be most internationally transferable; these

E-mail address: maurice.eisenbruch@monash.edu.

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should be subjected to proper cross-cultural evaluation in the new setting. The second concerns the notion that the West is always best; it is essential not to recognize and preserve the existing protective institutions, such as cultural practices, in other countries. Finally, the third concerns transplantation versus local cultivation—that is, new models might work better than simply redeploying old programs. These three dilemmas provide the framework and rationale for an ethnographic study.

This study aims to chart the ways in which Cambodians, drawing on their cultural references, understand and make sense of child abuse in their country. Intervention and prevention might work better when informed by a more nuanced view of the cultural drivers behind violence.

Child abuse is a notable priority in high-income countries, where there is also a drive to develop culturally responsive approaches to intervention. In the United States, culturally sensitive interventions have been developed and tested for African Americans and Latinos (Misurell & Springer, 2013), as well as South and Southeast Asian immigrant families (Futa, Hsu, & Hansen, 2001; Kanukollu & Mahalingam, 2011). Qualitative studies of ethnic groups in the United States and Canada show the importance of family risk and cultural transitions among African American and Latino communities (Fontes, Cruz, & Tabachnick, 2001), and of attitudes towards corporal punishment among South Asian and Chinese communities (Maiter, Alaggia, & Trocmé, 2004; Rhee, Chang, Weaver, & Wong, 2008). Families of various cultural backgrounds show differences in the disclosure of child abuse (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Glabach, 2012; Reavey, Ahmed, & Majumdar, 2006). Zhai and Gao (2009) pointedly show that within a given group, such as Asian Americans in the United States, culture can both protect against and increase the risk of child maltreatment; for example, emphasis on family harmony may dissuade abuse, whereas parental beliefs in harsh discipline may promote it.

There have also been significant psychocultural and ethnographic studies of child abuse in everyday life (Scheper-Hughes, 1987, 1990; Scheper-Hughes, James, Richard, & Gilbert, 1990; Scheper-Hughes, 1992); the politics and history of family violence (Gordon, 1988); trauma theory (Herman & Hirschman, 1984; Herman & Schatzow, 1987; Herman, Russell, & Trocki, 1986); child victimization (Fang, Fry, Brown et al., 2015, 2015b; Finkelhor & Lannen, 2015; Finkelhor & Tucker, 2015), and developmental psychopathology (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). These studies have approached the problem of child abuse using different disciplinary frameworks.

Child abuse represents a greater health and economic burden in low and middle-income countries (LMICs), where outcome evaluations of preventative interventions are exceedingly rare (Mikton & Butchart, 2009). Girls in Southeast Asia, for example, have long faced discrimination and vulnerability to sexual abuse and trafficking (Rafferty, 2007). Although there are exceptions, such as programs targeting children in Samoa (Seiuli, 2016) and Kenya (Plummer & Njuguna, 2009), child abuse prevention in LMICs regularly overlooks relevant cultural factors, and disclosure varies according to culture (2015b, Fang, Fry, Brown et al., 2015). Other data from the Asia Pacific region reveal wide cross-cultural variation in determinants and protective factors (Dunne et al., 2015). Children in humanitarian settings face a particularly high risk (Stark & Landis, 2016).

This paper focuses on present-day Cambodia. According to the Cambodia Violence Against Children Survey conducted in 2013, one in two children has experienced physical violence (including corporal punishment), one in four emotional violence, and one in twenty sexual abuse (Ministry of Women's Affairs et al., 2013). The surprisingly low figure for child sexual abuse, which is lower than that cited for the United States, probably reflects the lack of both reporting and services for child sexual abuse, which precludes gathering valid statistics, Among Cambodian girls subjected to physical violence, 37% engaged in self-harm, 12% suffered mental distress, 10% became problem drinkers, and 34% endured intimate partner violence (Fang & UNICEF, 2015).

This article reports on the sexual abuse of children, which is a serious problem in Cambodia (LICADHO, 2015; Miles & Sun, 2005). Sexual abuse is defined to include unwanted sexual touching, attempted unwanted intercourse, physically forced intercourse, or pressured intercourse. By some accounts, child rape accounts for 80% of all rapes in Cambodia (Phorn & Wallace, 2011). Though outside the scope of this article, child trafficking and prostitution are also concerns (Ministry of Women's Affairs et al., 2013), with street children and young people especially at risk (Beazley & Miller, 2016). A study by Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC) reported that Cambodian youth see nothing wrong in gangs raping certain kinds of women (Bearup, 2003).

Boys involved in prostitution and transgender children face a high risk of rape and sexual exploitation. Street-involved boys in Poipet and Sihanoukville are more likely than girls to cite sexual violence (Davis & Miles, 2014; Davis, Fiss, Miles, Sanrithy, & Nguyen, 2017). Throughout these studies, there are indications that masculine identity and gender socialization may reduce males' perception of their own vulnerability to sexual violence, despite significant and ongoing experiences thereof. In Poipet, sexual abuse is more than four times more prevalent among males than females, yet sexual violence is seemingly not perceived by females or males as a danger for the latter, even among males with direct experience of such violence (Davis et al., 2017). This increased vulnerability seems connected with gender assumptions applied to males (i.e., that they are less vulnerable or innately more capable of taking care of themselves). Thus, in families where finances are tight (e.g., with more children than they can afford to care for), it seems that boys are allowed to run free while girls are kept close to home, as they are seen as fragile and susceptible to having their virginity stolen.

Though Cambodia acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992, it still lacks a national child protection system and mandatory reporting. The Royal Government of Cambodia has a Positive Parent Working Group and a National Steering Committee on Violence Against Children, which is developing a National Action Plan on Violence Against Children. The government in developing a comprehensive care system to prevent abuse, respond to the needs of vulnerable children and families, and integrate positive parenting concepts into legislation and a national plan of action. In 2015, the Ministry of Health published the *National Guidelines for Management of Violence Against Women and Children in the Health Sector*. These provide guidance to healthcare centers and referral hospitals regarding prevention and responses to violence against women and children. Complementing the National Guidelines, the *Clinical Handbook: Health Care for Children Subjected to Violence or Sexual Abuse* offers guidance on medical management, first-line support, and referral to key social and legal protection services.

Despite the prevalence of child abuse and the above-mentioned recent advances, few studies in Cambodia have focused on the cultural issues that explain local views of childhood suffering and illness (Eisenbruch, 1998; Gourley & NGO Committee on the Rights

of the Child, 2009). Social constructions of childhood in Cambodia “contribute to norms that allow for children to be disciplined harshly, for child rape to be silenced to protect family honor, or for children to be sold to traffickers” (Jacob, 2014, p. 103). Publicly acknowledging that Cambodian parents might hurt their children is a politically charged matter. Cambodia’s prime minister recently threatened to close Agape International Missions, an American antitrafficking NGO, after it contributed to a controversial CNN report claiming Cambodian mothers sold their children into prostitution. The Interior Ministry complained that the story violated the dignity of Cambodian mothers and girls because culturally Cambodian mothers never sell their girls. The NGO apologized, noting that it had neglected to state that the abusive parents were Vietnamese, not native Cambodians (Wallace, 2017).

However, several studies have served to elucidate cultural construction of the causes and consequences of child abuse. Miles and Thomas (2007) highlight the characteristics of the new generation of children reared by survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime. They point to the contrast between the traditional view that girls are inferior in status—citing the Khmer proverb, “Girls are not as long-legged as boys, they can only go to the stove and back”—and the contemporary reality that girls no longer learn the classic “Women’s Code” in school. They also find that human rights ideals, despite gaining some acceptance in Cambodian culture, “have also been subsumed under traditional hierarchies of deference, so that parents are seen to have more rights than children” (p. 395), though it is unclear whether mothers are equal to fathers. Meanwhile, Fordham (2005) survey of children revealed that a surprisingly large number of young boys and girls have been exposed to hardcore pornography. These children did not recognize that raping young girls was wrong because they had seen such conduct in videos.

The next task is to take the cultural insights gleaned from these studies and determine how they are used, if at all, in preventing child abuse. The conventional wisdom is that violence is fueled and perpetuated by its cultural acceptance (Eisenbruch, 2018b). UNICEF (2016) declared that violence against children of all genders in Cambodia is rooted in the damage wrought to social traditions by the recent civil war, which fractured families and communities, thereby destroying many positive childcare practices. Perpetrators now find it difficult to change their ways as their behavior goes unchallenged.

One key solution is to educate citizens about child abuse and its causes and effects. Despite huge efforts to promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), there is very little evidence of its integration into Cambodian cultural views. In 2008, the NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child assessed the cultural factors in Cambodia that support or hinder the implementation of UNCRC at family level (Gourley & NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). They found that families were less likely to respect the rights of protection and participation when they believed these conflicted with traditional values, especially in rural areas. The authors urged the Cambodian government to adopt a Buddhist-inspired “middle way,” integrating contemporary concepts of social justice with more culturally appropriate methods of education and promotion. Unfortunately, these suggestions have not been actioned.

There is a temptation in this field to rush in and eradicate the “stubborn cultural stains” thought to cause child abuse. This is not my intention here. In the abuse literature, cultural factors are usually depicted as “schemas,” “memes,” “constructions,” “concepts,” “theories,” and “systems.” In my work on direct and public violence, I have been inspired by the notion of “cultural attractors.” Andrew Buskell’s (2017) masterful review of cultural attractor theory (CAT) shows how cultural attractors can explain ubiquity and diversity in cross-cultural beliefs, and that they are now used in domains far beyond their original anthropological context. If child abuse seems to endure in a particular cultural setting, we need to explain why it remains stable when many attractors are unique to individuals. Sperber (1996) interpretation of cultural attractors might provide an explanation: the stability of cultural practices is attributable to their “attraction” to “natural psychological channels.”. Tavory, Jablonka, and Ginsburg, 2012, p. 15) depict cultural epigenesis as underpinned by “cultural attractors,” which are “mutually reinforcing mechanisms that lead an individual to a shared outcome in a landscape underpinned by a series of interacting elements.”. In an earlier exploration of the “epigenesis” of violence against women in Cambodia, I identified eight “cultural attractors” that propel a person to violence (Eisenbruch, 2018a, 2018b). Applying the conceptual framework developed in those studies seems a useful way to determine the similarities and differences between intimate partner violence and child abuse. I aim to better grasp the phenomenon of child abuse in Cambodia through CAT, particularly the psychological and ecological processes in “cultural transmission” and the transformation of cultural representations (Acerbi & Mesoudi, 2015; Sperber, 1996). In this article, I propose that the “transmission” of child abuse is driven by a series of psychological, religious, and supernatural attractors; in Cambodia, this includes the karmic destiny of the perpetrator, the abused child, and his or her family.

This paper is organized as follows. I first document local understandings of child abuse among perpetrators, the families of victims, and the religious-healing network with whom these families engage, including monks, lay Buddhist officiants, and traditional healers. I explore the popular idioms people use to depict child abuse, and identify a series of cultural attractors, using detailed examples to describe each. I show how people understand abuse through formal Buddhist teachings from the *dhamma* and popular stories such as the Jātaka, which help to explain—but not justify—the factors leading to child abuse. I also explore the influence of local Cambodian social realities, such as the prevalence of alcohol and the gang rapes committed by juveniles. I compare the cultural attractors of child abuse with those of violence against women, and illustrate their different emphases. I then use an epigenetic formulation to identify the “cultural attractors” that form the landscape of child abuse. Finally, I discuss the implications of a “theory of change” that could provide a new and culturally responsive approach to reducing and preventing child abuse.

2. Methods

2.1. Approach and design

I am a Khmer-speaking medical anthropologist and transcultural psychiatrist. I have been studying the effects of direct violence in

families and the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of children since 2000. The present study is based on ethnographic and clinical research I have conducted in community mental health since 1990. This research has been supported by a male Cambodian assistant based in Phnom Penh, with whom I have worked for almost 25 years, focusing since 2005 on the cultural context of violence. The fieldwork reported in this article was carried out from 2011 to 2017. All fieldwork was conducted in Khmer, audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

2.2. Sampling and participant selection

We used a person-centered ethnography of "ordinary discourse" (Hollan, 1997) to explore the meaning of child abuse in Cambodia. This method, which has been used in previous research on violence (Eisenbruch, 2017), involves an in-depth study of a small sample of cases. Data were collected to identify and describe a cultural phenomenon, rather than individuals, and nonprobability sampling was employed.

The informants included 39 mothers, 20 fathers, 16 grandparents, two elder sisters, one aunt, and eight other relatives of abused children. We also interviewed six perpetrators and their families including six wives, five mothers, three fathers, two grandparents, one sister and one brother, and various other family members.

The key informants from the traditional sector included six abbots, six monks and five novices, 20 lay Buddhist ritual officiants, five female and four male devotees, 11 traditional healers, two mediums, one astrological practitioner, and two traditional birth attendants.

Other informants included neighbors, 21 other villagers, and six village heads, as well as health workers, doctors, and nurses who have treated abused children. We also interviewed representatives of local human rights NGOs and faith-based organizations that provide support to child survivors of abuse. For general background information, we also interviewed staff from child protection agencies such as the Child Protection Unit and the Cambodian Center for the Protection of Children's Rights.

The dataset differed to that employed in the author's earlier study of violence against women (Eisenbruch, 2018a and b). There were some differences in the locations for sampling: for example, cases of child abuse were gathered from new settlements such as Sen Sok, reputed to be areas where children are prone to sexual violence. There was no planned overlap between the 102 cases of violence against women and the 110 cases of child abuse reported here. It emerged that only two previously considered cases of violence against women, each involving father-daughter incest, were included in the present study. There were also three cases in which the husband attacked his wife because she tried to stop him from raping their daughter. Overall, there was negligible overlap between the key informants interviewed for the two studies.

2.3. Procedure

We obtained ethics approval from the National Ethics Committee for Health Research (NECHR) in Cambodia. Sadly, it was easy to learn about cases of abuse since Cambodia's mainstream media do not hesitate to report cases, sometimes in lurid detail. Since they freely publish the names and village locations of these children. Often, however, we used our existing networks of village leaders, Buddhist monks, and lay ritual officiants to learn of cases. We took steps to avoid revealing the identities of children and their families in the process of recruiting and interviewing. We routinely sought permission from village heads to visit families. Police were never involved in initiating the referral or our actual encounters with families, and there was no element of coercion.

We introduce ourselves to parents or relatives, explained the purpose of the research, and obtained their informed consent to participate. When interviewing informants, we preferred oral consent (Jewkes, Dartnall, & Sikweyiya, 2012). In these encounters, we were mindful of culturally encoded barriers to disclosing shameful family secrets. Although we did not directly interview children, we were nonetheless guided by the UNICEF Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) criteria (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013). We emphasized that we were not news reporters and that we would not share sensitive information or reveal families' identities. We explained the procedure for safely storing data according to standard ethics protocols. We avoided creating false expectations and, by explaining our aim to inform programs to end child abuse, ensured that our research would not be misconstrued as condoning or legitimizing child abuse as a cultural or religious aspect of Cambodian life. Informants' names and locations have been changed. All families that were asked to participate agreed to do so; indeed, many seemed relieved to be able to tell their story. Once consent was obtained, we arranged a convenient time and place for interviews. A natural tendency in Cambodian rural life is to meet and talk in an open setting, such as in front of the house, where bystanders tend to gather. We took strenuous steps to conduct interviews privately, lowering our voices so that others could not overhear conversations. In addition to ensuring confidentiality, we also devoted time to building trust with each family.

To explore child abuse perpetrated by monks or lay Buddhist officiants, We would pay a courtesy visit to the chief abbot at the temple. We generally found that the monks and lay officiants were willing to express their views about child abuse, including its causes, its consequences, and their suggested solutions. However, one freshly ordained monk refused to participate and became annoyed, wanting to avoid the scandal becoming known outside the temple. He exclaimed, "Have you come to rummage in that matter?" (*moak kakoo kakaay riəŋ niŋ tiət haəy?*). We immediately apologized, left the temple, and did not pursue that case.

Our research into child abuse formed part of an ethnography extending over many years, involving well-developed networks that I established and maintained, with the support of local research assistants, with monks and traditional healers. Cases were recruited between 1990 and 2017, with the majority between 2005 and 2016. The network was reinforced by my earlier involvement as a clinician-ethnographer working with IPSER/TPO, an international NGO specializing in community mental health in Cambodia. Every effort was made to minimize selection bias, with families included whether or not they had been highlighted by the local community

as "affected by child abuse."

Sometimes we followed families as they sought help from the village head, a local clinic, or monks and healers. Some encounters were brief, some lasted several hours, and others, such as those during a ritual healing ceremony, were extended over a period of days. Occasionally, we followed families over several weeks. We explored informants' experience of the abuse, their attributions of cause—including predispositions and triggers—and the ritual ceremonies performed to ameliorate the suffering of the child and their family and to reduce the likelihood of recurrence.

We documented informants' views of child abuse, recording their use of language, including proverbs and sayings. Informants were encouraged to elaborate their views on concepts such as karma. We asked monks and healers to expand on child abuse and the Buddhist, mystical, animistic, and magical frameworks that helped them respond to it. We explored the ways through which communities made sense of child abuse and how they reconciled traditional ideas with those acquired through more recent exposure to rights-based notions. We recorded the ritual interventions by monks when treating victims and their families and in their encounters with perpetrators. It was important to help informants overcome any tendency to espouse Western rights-based views in an effort to please us, and to help them feel comfortable to express local views of child abuse, without fear of shame or embarrassment. To this end, we endeavored to create an atmosphere of trust by demonstrating genuine interest in informants' views. We continued sampling until we reached data saturation, with no new themes emerging in the thematic analysis. This comes relatively early in ethnography due to the depth of data, lengthy timelines, and multiple qualitative data collected (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

2.4. Analysis

We analyzed the cultural idioms of child abuse and examined how perpetrators explained acts of violence, especially those committed against their own children. We performed content analysis, noting the cultural registers and use of popular Khmer cultural references, such as the *tiracchāna*.

In this article, we present Khmer terms whenever local idioms cannot be precisely translated into English. Khmer terms are spelled using Huffman, Lambert, and Im (1970) adaptation of IPA phonetic transcription, rather than transliteration, to help non-speakers of Khmer more easily and consistently pronounce the terms.

3. Results

3.1. Demography

Table 1 shows the types of child abuse and, within each type, the perpetrators and informants. Of the 110 cases, 50 girls and 11 boys had been sexually abused, 13 girls and 13 boys physically abused, and 13 girls and 10 boys emotionally abused or neglected. The perpetrators of sexual abuse comprised 13 fathers, stepfathers, or close male relatives such as uncles; three neighbors; 15 lay Buddhist officiants; and 21 monks. The perpetrators of direct physical abuse comprised three fathers and two stepfathers; one mother; and three monks, abbots, and monk healers. The perpetrators of acid attacks comprised two fathers' lovers, three stepmothers, and two

Table 1
Demography of child abuse.

Type	Perpetrator	Child	Informants
Sexual abuse (50 girls, 11 boys)	Father, stepfather, other close relative (e.g., uncle) (13)	Girls (14)	Child's mother (7), father (1), grandmother (2), sister (1), other relative (3); villager (3), village head (2), traditional healer (1)
	Neighbor (3)	Girls (4)	Girl's mother (2), father (1), grandmother (1), aunt (1), other relative (1); monk (1), lay officiant (1), medium (1); perpetrator's mother (1); villager (3)
	Lay Buddhist officiant (15)	Girls (15)	Child's mother (8), father (5), grandparent (2), other relative (3); perpetrator (3), abbot (2), monk (4), lay officiant (11), male devotee (3); perpetrator's wife (6), other relative (1), village head (2), villager (5)
	Monk (21)	Girls (17), boys (11)	Child's mother (6), father (4), grandparent (5), distant relative (1); neighbor (6), village head (1), school deputy (1); abbot (5), lay officiant (8), female devotee (5), male devotee (1), other (1); perpetrator's father (1), mother (1), grandparent (2)
Physical abuse (13 girls, 13 boys)	Father (3), mother (1), stepfather (2), monk (1), abbot (1), monk healer (1), other (1)	*Beating, torture:* Girls (6), boys (10, including 6 novice monks)	Stepmother (1), grandparents (6), older sister (1), mother (3); perpetrator (3) and their sister (1), mother (3), father (2) and brother (1); village head (1), human rights official (1), male healer (1), villager (1)
	Father's lover (2), stepmother (3), attacker hired by mother's rival (2)	*Acid attack:* Girls (5), boys (2)	
Emotional, neglect (13 girls, 10 boys)	Parents	Girls (13), boys (10)	Child's mother (13), father (7), grandmother (8); traditional healer (9), monk healer (1), Traditional Birth Attendant (2), medium (1), astrologer (1); villager (9), neighbor (3 women, 2 men), nurse (1), doctor (1), other (1)

mothers' rivals. The perpetrators of emotional abuse and neglect were parents. In Table 1, the informants in each group belong to three subgroups: parents and relatives, neighbors, and key informants (e.g., monks and village heads).

Victims ranged in age from 2 to 18 years, and mostly lived in the provinces of Sen Sok, Sen Sbay, Banteay Meanchey, Kampong Speu, Siem Reap, Battambang, and Takeo. Most families were rice farmers, though, in some cases, one or more female members worked in the garment sector. Nearly all the parents of the abused children were married.

Most of the cases were victims of sexual abuse, and all were girls except for the boys abused by monks. The two other groups, physical abuse and emotional neglect, had similar numbers of boys and girls.

The perpetrators of sexual abuse were close family members, such as fathers or uncles, or monks and lay officiants. Physical abuse was perpetrated by family members, such a parents or step-parents, and emotional neglect was inflicted by parents.

3.2. Cultural attractors

3.2.1. Scripted violence and karma

Many of those we interviewed believe that the perpetrator had a bad foundation (s*amnaaŋ mɨn lʔaa*) scripted into his life due to a bad deed in this or a previous life. Some also believe that the child might have a bad foundation, possibly through the bad deed of a parent or ancestor. This was the most widely adopted cultural attractor to explain why a child had been abused.

Some mothers of daughters who had been raped by their fathers blamed it on their own "bad building." Achariya, a widow, remarried a man named Leap, who soon became addicted to alcohol and watching pornography on his mobile phone. Leap raped his stepdaughter and then intimidated her into silence by burning her. She told Achariya that her suffering was too great to bear. It became clear that Leap was a *tiracchāna* (a savage beast that inhabits hell or the underworld), and Achariya called the police. She attributed her misfortune, including the sexual abuse of her daughter, to her own "bad building," as mentioned above. Mothers like Achariya believe that their karma leads them into marriages with violent perpetrators born with the character of a *tiracchāna*.

3.2.1.1. Vertical transmission of violence. Especially common among older and rural people was the view that illness and misfortune can be transmitted vertically, sometimes across several generations, and that this could include the tendency to commit or be a victim of child abuse. One 10-year-old child was referred to as a "third gender person" (*p^{h}eet*)—one who has male genitals but behaves like a girl. His mother said that he remembered his previous life, telling her that he was previously a woman who lived near the village and was constantly abused by her husband. Furious with him, she had wished to be reborn as a male in the next (i.e., this) life. People considered the gender conversion incomplete, and, to compound the child's misery, it failed to arrest the victimization. If anything, it attracted humiliation and opprobrium from people in the community, who disliked ambiguously gendered people.

3.2.1.2. Inversion of moral order. Another popular explanation for child sexual abuse was the popularity of pornography, which boys can easily access on their mobile phones, just as they can use Facebook to round up their friends to meet in isolated places and gang rape girls. For older villagers, rape reflected the inversion of the nation's morals, as in the Khmer Rouge era. They recounted the millenarian "Buddha Predictions" (*Buddh Damnāy*), which forecast that children will murder their parents and parents rape their children. These people believe that nowadays leaving your daughters with young men is like "leaving eggs in the care of a crow"—everyone knows the crow will devour the eggs.

One such example comes from a village in Kandal Province and involves Phan, a 14-year-old boy, and Reaksmey, a three-year-old girl. Reaksmey's impoverished parents had to work in a faraway garment factory, and she lived with her maternal grandmother, Lina. Phan would visit to "play" with Reaksmey, taking her into her room and showing her pornography on his phone. When Grandma Lina found out, she shooed him away. In revenge, Phan lured Reaksmey to a forest and raped her. Phan's mother handed him over to the police herself. Just before the rape, she experienced a nightmare on which she consulted an astrological practitioner, who divined imminent disaster due to her astrological misfortune, or *krʊəh.* Unfortunately, she was too busy to seek the ritual to release it before the rape was perpetrated. One woman commented that the world was upside down. She said that children like Phan had become prematurely sexed, and that children, normally virgins, are now forced to have sex. Reaksmey was like the little eggplant, whereas Phan was like the sugar palm tree; in raping her, Phan had "crawled up the sugar palm tree."

These cultural tropes have apparently shaped older people's view of child abuse as reflecting the moral corruption of contemporary society, wherein normal relations between men and women, or adults and children, are upended.

3.2.1.3. Reenactment of trauma in a previous life. Use of the "bad building" metaphor shows people's unresolved feelings about historical trauma. One male perpetrator said he was a reincarnated tortured person, and that the Khmer Rouge had bound his wrists before they killed him by striking his neck with a hoe. He showed me the scars on his wrists with which he was born. "What you remember at the moment of death stays with you when you are reborn," he said. Since the Khmer Rouge cut him down so brutally in the youth of his past life, he has abused children in this life. In this cosmology, being the victim of a violent death as a child can lead directly to child abuse.

3.2.2. Childhood markers of violence

Some people suggested that there are clues hinting at a child's bad character and portending that he/she will later become a child abuser. These traits, people said, made some abusers like *tiracchāna*. Some were even capable of having sex with animals or corpses.

The following illustrates the depravity of a *tiracchāna*. A drug addict tried repeatedly to molest his daughter and raped a series of widows. Finally, he decided to have sex with a teenager's corpse on the day of her burial. He disinterred her and overcame his disgust

by watching pornography on his mobile phone until he was sufficiently aroused to penetrate the corpse. He is said to have had sex with her for hours until the police found him the next morning.

An even worse manifestation of a *tiracchāna* is the man who rapes his own daughter; he becomes known as "the *tiracchāna* father."

Chivy, aged two, was left in the care of her unemployed father, Khemera, while her mother, Mau, had to live far home to work in a garment factory. Within two weeks, Khemera raped Chivy, leaving her bleeding profusely from her lacerated vulva. Enraged, Chivy's maternal grandmother condemned her son-in-law as a *tiracchāna*, whose beastly nature would continue in this life and who would be reborn in the beast world in his next life. Mau told us of her shame at Khemera's savagery, saying he "ate his own child" and that she would divorce him at once. For years, she had withstood his beatings, staying only to protect the future of her daughter, whom he had now raped.

Girls like Chivy are considered "damaged goods" (*kʰooc ʔaʔnaakʊət*, literally, "damaged future") whom no man would marry. They are sometimes bullied by classmates, who humiliate them for "losing their virginity" (*ʔah zhin*, literally, "having run out of purity"). Faced with this stigma, many parents cannot bring themselves to disclose to monks what has happened.

The monks explained that this kind of violence happens when a perpetrator in his previous life has been reborn with a *tiracchāna* character. Unless he accumulates good merit in this life, he is bound to repeat the violence, thereby accumulating further bad merit. In the present life, he must either face the consequences of his act in a criminal court or be reborn at an even lower level than a *tiracchāna* in his next life. This is, the monks believe, why child abuse and incest seem to perpetuate through the generations, unless there is some action to interrupt the karmic cycle. Given the notion of a perpetrator's bad character, some monks saw it as their duty to stop aggressive men from hurting children; one monk, drawing on the famous Angulimala legend, said that he had to take the Buddha's role of warning these contemporary perpetrators, "I have already stopped, but you have not."

3.2.3. Risky and vulnerable situations

Beliefs in astrology helped people to explain why a particular child was vulnerable to abuse at particular times. The mother of Rachada, a girl who had been raped, dreamed of seeing herself drowning. She suspected this meant that someone in her family would face disaster. She used the popular expression "*yii sed dacʔaareak coan*," which is borrowed from Chinese astrology. Here, the Chinese loan word for "fortune" is combined with *dac* ("lowered") and *ʔaareak coan*, meaning "the *ʔaareak* spirit that trod on someone." However, she was too busy to see a monk to interpret her dream and thus avert misfortune. Shortly afterward, Rachada was raped. Only then did her mother consult a monk for the ritual pouring of lustral water. She was so ashamed of her negligence that she could not bring herself to tell him the whole story of her *krtua* and the rape. Instead, she claimed to have a headache. Fortunately, the monk saw behind this pretense.

Some families consulted monks to help liberate their daughters from their *krʊəh*. These monks poured lustral water on them while chanting stanzas of the Buddhist *Mangala Sutta*, thereby evicting the misfortune (*bandəɲ krʊəh*) and elevating the girls' astrological fortune (*leek rasi*), providing some relief and helping them to face the future.

Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse. We encountered a father of five who singled out his two disabled daughters, repeatedly raping them at home over several years. His wife was forced to witness this, and her pleas were to no avail. Ashamed, she "spit onto her own chest" (kept silent), rather than expose her family's plight to the public. In doing so, she felt she was sparing her daughters further pain and shame; the stain would remain on her. When she eventually reported her husband, she then realized that her family would starve without him, and so tried to withdraw the charges. Vulnerable children who are abused are often doubly disadvantaged due to the stigma resulting from public knowledge of their abuse.

3.2.4. Child and perpetrator entangled in a preordained fate

Some people believed that child abuse was caused by a preordained entanglement of the child and his or her abuser. The perpetrator, as a child abuser, was condemned to suffering; likewise, the abused child was also condemned to suffering as a victim. These people shared the notion that victims and perpetrators are locked in a mutual debt cycle, or *cumpeak kam*, meaning literally "to be in debt to a person or entangled with their fate as a consequence of their demerit."

Sen Sok is an administrative district to the north of Phnom Penh that has been resettled through mass evictions and is riven with violence. Resident Kusal Sok, a 65-year-old traditional healer and Buddhist ritual officiant, raped Mala, a seven-year-old girl whose family lived next door. He was a trusted elder. Mala's parents believed the rape's occurrence reflected the prior accumulation of bad merit in their family. Mala's mother felt that her daughter now "owed" the perpetrator something, and had to pay her debt on behalf of the unknown wrongdoer in their family.

Mala's mother said that the debt had to be acknowledged and repaid. Her father said that, although he had done no wrong in this life, he took responsibility. He believed that he must have been the culprit in one of his previous lives —perhaps he had raped someone—and he was now racked with remorse. However, he at least knew that his daughter had not brought the rape on herself.

I tried to encourage Kusal Sok to discuss his sense of responsibility for raping Mala. However, he made recourse to karmic explanation, saying, "Perhaps in my previous life I or my family got caught up in a particular bad action committed by Mala's ancestors, and now it was my predestiny to get entangled in this debt between our forebears." He mournfully depicted his downfall: he grieved the death of his wife while he was in prison; his children shunned him; he had lost his liberty while imprisoned for three years; he forfeited his property by attempting to bribe the police to grant him early release; he ruined his career as a healer; and he had become homeless as he sought places to live where his bad reputation did not precede him. Worse, by raping Mala, he had sown the seeds of vindictiveness, and would not be able to escape the "entanglement" of his demerit: just as Mala had suffered an attack at his hands, he was now predestined to become a victim of a violent crime in his next life. After his release from prison, he entered the monkhood for a couple of years to try to disentangle himself from this fate.

Sometimes, karmic payback comes in this life, rather than the next. Tola, a 70-year-old, lived in Kampong Speu with his third wife, who was only 27 and in the advanced stages of pregnancy. One morning, Tola raped 14-year-old Sonitha, whose mother had placed her in the care of her aunt. Later that day, he was arrested and the incident reported in the media. That night, a juvenile gang violently raped Tola's wife, who was admitted to hospital to save her unborn child. The story shows how a trail of abuse and rape could run in the family, and how it could be avenged by a spiral of violence that does not wait for the next life.

3.2.5. Violence fueled by lust and ignorance

The monks and lay Buddhist officiants elaborated on the Buddhist concept of "Triple Poison," or three unwholesome roots (Pāli, *akusala-mūla*) in the mind, and how it fuels sexual abuse. Of the three poisons—craving and greed (*lobha*), physical violence caused by anger and aversion (*dosa*), and violence caused by moral stupidity and delusion (*moha*)—they identified *lobha* and its synonym *tānha*, an insatiable thirst for sensual experience, as drivers for child sexual abuse.

Alcohol was thought to fuel the perpetrator's uncontrollable lust. Some monks used Jātaka legends to help victims' families (Rouse, 1895). For example, the Kotisimbalī Jātaka tells the following story:

A giant Garuda bird swooped down and seized a Nāga serpent to satisfy his lust. In vain, the Nāga grabbed hold of a banyan tree to try to wrest free, but the Garuda was too strong and the tree was uprooted. The Garuda continued his flight, the Nāga in his claws, flying all the way to the Simbalī, the cotton-tree forest where he lived. There, he ravished the Nāga, split open its belly to enjoy the visceral fat, and threw the carcass into the sea.

Some monks explained the themes of this story to the families, saying that the Garuda's behavior was akin to that of a man who wantonly seizes and rapes a girl who, like the Nāga, cannot defend herself.

Some monks explained that a perpetrator may have forgotten it is wrong to abuse a child. This deluded state is called *mohā*. The monks described such perpetrators, even more so than those who committed violence against women, as having "no heart, no liver." Both monks and female devotees echoed these views, elaborating that the perpetrator's fate depended on the relative weight of each of the three unwholesome roots or poisons. Abusers consumed by lust would end up in the hell of wandering famished ghosts, known as *preta*; those consumed by anger would be confined to roasting in the ovens of Naraka; and those submerged in ignorance would descend to the realm of the wild beasts, the *tiracchāna*, where they would be torn limb from limb.

3.2.6. The road to ruin

Men who perpetrated child abuse were said to have "entered the road to ruin" (*apāyamuk*). Many disaffected youths run away from home and join gangs, becoming juvenile delinquents and drug addicts (*saep kriəŋ ɲiən*), and gang-raping children. The parents of these youths described them as "man-eating carnivores," baring their fangs as if about to pounce. Their ferocity is considered to exceed even that of the *tiracchāna*, and they commit armed robbery just to acquire food or cash to buys drugs. Some have gang-raped family members or raped their mothers and killed their fathers to fund their addiction. For some laypeople and monks, this inversion of the traditional hierarchy of respect exemplifies the "Three Vast Plains of Illness, War, and Famine," according to the millenarian Buddha Predictions (de Bernon, 1994). Laypeople interpreted social ills such as pornography and gangs as causes of child abuse, and monks articulated these causes through Buddhist *dhamma*, such as the *Parabhava* and *Sigalovada Suttas*, which teach about the dangers of the road to ruin.

3.2.7. Moral blindness

Monks said that men who raped their daughters were *mo baŋ*, meaning they had become morally blind. *Mo baŋ* was depicted in the popular Khmer expressions, "The monk donned the saffron robe but failed to shave his scalp. The layman looked in the mirror with his eyes closed" (*sliek sbaŋ min kao sak cloh kaɲcak tmɨc netrar*).

3.3. Physical abuse

Corporal punishment could cross into physical abuse, even among the monks. A nine-year-old boy named Bunthar, who lived in Kratie province, yearned to become a monk, so his parents sent him to become a temple boy. Unable to sleep, the homesick Bunthar loudly sang a lullaby, which annoyed a monk named Khat Soty. The monk repeatedly disciplined (*priən pradav*) Bunthar, inflicting electric shocks, dripping hot candle wax onto his skin, spraying deodorant onto his buttocks and setting it alight, locking him in a room, and pouring boiling water on his back. These punishments caused Bunthar to suffer severe burns. The monks clearly stated that "moral blindness" did not absolve an abusive monk of personal responsibility. Though the perpetrator may try to conceal their wrongdoing under their monk's robes in an attempt to avoid public discovery, it was their fault, not a weakness of the *dhamma*. Wearing a monk's robes and shaving one's head does not make one a monk: it only provides the external appearance of such. People who are ordained bring their character with them, and some cannot be changed through *dhamma* training and Vinaya discipline. The Bhikkhu declared Khat Soty a merciless (no *mettā*) and immoral (no *sila* or *dhamma*) savage. He disrobed the monk, who was tried and imprisoned. The message is that, according to Buddhist *dhamma*, no one, regardless of status, can escape personal accountability for having committed abuse.

3.4. Sexual abuse

Moral blindness helped people to explain—but not justify—the actions of a rapist or of a man who had committed incest. For example, we met Samath, who entrusted his daughter, Chantha, to Samol, an elderly man whom he had known his entire life. One

day, Samol became *mo baŋ* and raped Chantha. After the incident came to light, Samath listened to prewar music recounting the legend of Moggallāna who, in a previous incarnation, beat his senile and blind parents to death and was beaten and killed by brigands. The legend helped him come to terms with *mo baŋ*; he was able to make sense of the loss of Chantha's honor, and see how her suffering might be eased.

Our informants believed that men who sexually abused children were driven by lust, or *raga*. Abusers with money often bribed the police and intimidated their victims' families to remain silent. In one case, the family called the police to report the intimidation, but they handcuffed the abused girl for having said too much to villagers.

A female Buddhist devotee told us that fathers committing incest were incapable of recognizing their children due to *mo baŋ*. The incestuous the father becomes like the *tiracchāna*, a wild beast that does not understand incest. The devotee said that a *tiracchāna* reborn in human form will continue to commit incest, because he retains his *tiracchāna* character and cannot restrain himself. He is like a "freshwater pike that gobbles and cannibalizes its own offspring." This notion was expressed in a popular saying: 'His body is human, but he has a *tiracchāna* heart' (*kluən cie mɔnuh, cət cie tiracchāna*).

Mo baŋ can escalate violence to tragic proportions. One example is Khean, a father who, while *mo baŋ*, became mentally confused and, regarding his teenage daughter Sreymau as an extremely attractive woman, raped and impregnated her. His son, Sovandara, became consumed with rage (*dosa*) and, in a state of *mo baŋ*, murdered his father, for which he received a long prison sentence. With no male breadwinner, the family fell into poverty. Overwhelmed by grief—especially over the prospect of a deformed baby and the loss of family honor—the mother sought shelter in the Buddhist Triple Refuge, finding salvation from her suffering and the strength to become the breadwinner.

The importance of shame is shown in the case of a farmworker in Siem Reap, who was a father of five. His oldest child was mentally disabled (*min krup tɨk*) and the youngest one mute (*kɔɔ*). He raped them both on multiple occasions. Eventually, his wife called the police. She felt shame for allowing herself to have a husband who committed such violence against her daughters (*kmaah kluən ʔaəŋ*), and shame in the face of others' views of her and her family (*kmaah kee*, literally, "ashamed of them"). Her husband felt no shame about committing incest (*mɨn kmaah baap mɨn klaac baap*, literally, "no shame of evil deeds, no fear of the consequences"). Those with good knowledge of Buddhist teachings viewed these acts as a breakdown in *hiri ottappa*, or loss of conscience—another manifestation of *mo baŋ* that leads parents to abuse their own vulnerable children.

4. Discussion

The first mention of child abuse in South and Southeast Asia is found in the Indian Jātaka dating back two millennia. The *Seggu Jātaka* tells of a father who, wanting to confirm his young daughter's virginity, takes her to the forest and threatens to rape her to gauge her reaction and thereby verify her honor. According to Jayatunge (2013), he had planned to rape her if he found she was not a virgin. In the father's mind, this is not incest.

Today child abuse remains prevalent in South and Southeast Asia. The present study describes how customary Cambodian beliefs and practices, which might be regarded as abusive by outsiders, shape the local outlook on abuse. It depicts how an idiosyncratic departure from the cultural continuum of acceptable behavior can be seen as abuse. It also shows how child abuse can result from social conditions, including poverty, forced displacement of communities, and mothers migrating to the cities to work in garment factories, leaving their children in others' care.

This research also highlights groups of children who are more vulnerable to abuse, including those with diminished social support or whose care was disrupted by their mothers being forced to live away from home. Cases such as those in Sen Sok district, where the community had weakened, show a fracturing of what Korbin (1991) calls the "embeddedness of child rearing in social networks." This has reduced the traditional moderating roles of grandparents and other senior family members, who might otherwise be able to curb abusive parents' behavior. Redistribution to "foster families" exposes children to even greater abuse, as they are often viewed as servants in these new homes. Finally, as Korbin (1991) points out, rapid sociocultural and socioeconomic changes increase the risk of child abuse, a theory borne out by this study's findings.

Child abuse entails social stigma for survivors. The interviewed parents of abused children generally avoided using the words "sexual abuse" (*rumloup*) or "penetrative rape" (*rumloup samrəc*, literally "successful rape"); instead, they referred to "the embarrassing issue of a bodily private part" (*rɨəŋ kee kmaah*, literally "a thing they are ashamed of"). Some worried that using obscene genital language tempted bad luck (*moat caŋray*, literally "a misfortune mouth") for them or their child. The intensity of Cambodian families' shame is consistent with that in many cultural settings, which inhibits disclosure and affects post-abuse adjustment (Fontes & Plummer, 2010).

4.1. Epigenesis of child abuse

Significantly, the epigenesis of child abuse was founded on a similar set of "cultural attractors" as those identified in the author's previous work (Eisenbruch, 2018a and b) on violence against women: each starts with blighted endowment, which continues as seeds of character, and emerges as astrological forces. These attractors erupt like poison and develop once the perpetrator enters the road to ruin. They set the stage for violence, as the perpetrator succumbs to moral blindness and an absence of shame or blame. However, the findings reveal some important difference in emphasis between the respective cultural attractors for violence against women and child abuse.

4.1.1. Scripted violence

Karma is a popular explanation for child abuse in Southeast Asian Buddhist societies: it is among the gender-related vulnerability factors that influence child prostitution in Thailand (Lau, 2008) and the trafficking of girls from Cambodia into Thai karaoke bars (Rafferty, 2007). Some of the mothers we interviewed view karmic destiny as unshakable, especially when considered in the context of social and economic realities. For example, for mothers such as Daravy, there is law but no justice, since the rich always win cases brought against them by the poor. An old proverb advises, "Do not quarrel with a woman, do not sue a Chinese person" (*kom clʋəh nɨŋ srəy kom kdəy nɨŋ cən*), meaning that a man should not lower himself to a woman's level by arguing with her, and that it is futile to challenge rich Chinese merchants who can bribe the court. Mothers such as Daravy see their karma as their shadow, while others say that they clearly recall what happened in their previous lives.

The suggestion that child abuse could be rooted in previous incarnations might seem outrageous. Fontes and Plummer (2010) suggest that blaming karma for child abuse stigmatizes victims and their families. They cite Luo (2000) work with Chinese college-educated rape survivors, arguing that the desire to end a vicious karmic cycle, rather than extend it into the next lifetime, deters families from prosecuting. However, this study shows that this is not how informants interpret the role of karma: no informant blamed the child. Regarding the failure to prosecute, it is true that most perpetrators of child sexual abuse go unpunished in Cambodia, but this is the result of corruption and impunity, rather than karma. Even in different cultural and spiritual frameworks, the notion of karma is important in child abuse, as Maitra (1996) demonstrated in his work with South Asian Hindu families in the United Kingdom; the idea of karma can salve parents' pain after their children are abused, keeping them from seeking revenge. Among South Asians living in the United States, karmic beliefs about child abuse invite families to seek solutions through spiritual means, rather than medical interventions (Kanukollu & Mahalingam, 2011).

4.1.2. Inversion of moral order

Scripted violence is also embedded in what one might call the "cosmic past." In the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta ("the Discourse on the Lion's Roar on the Turning of the Wheel"), the Buddha told the monks how morality declined in an ancient kingdom, and sexual violence and incest became common As discussed in my paper on violence against women, the millenarian *Buddh Damnāy* (de Bernon, 1994) explains Cambodia's endemic violence as a symptom of the upending of conventional morality during an "out of the ordinary" epoch (Eisenbruch, 2018a).

The *Buddh Damnāy* seems to have borrowed from classic Buddhist texts, such as the Mahāsupinajātaka (Cowell, 1895), which portray the mythical foundations of violence (Eisenbruch, 2010). King Pasenadi had a series of 16 dreams that he discussed with the Buddha. In his second dream, the king saw tiny shrubs bursting through the soil and abnormally flowering when they had barely sprouted. The Buddha interpreted the dream as predicting a future in which the world had fallen into decay, with men lustful, life short, and young girls having sex with men and bearing children. Our informants saw the Khmer Rouge era and the current era of rampant violence as the realization of this prediction, with child abuse, rape, and incest akin to the perpetrator harvesting the eggplant (having sex with children), rather than the more appropriate [adult] sugar palm. This notion was popularly expressed as, "Use a tall ladder to climb an eggplant shrub" (*dak baŋʔaoŋ laəŋ daəm trap*). Someone wanting to scale a sugar palm tree, which can grow to a height of 30 m, would normally climb a tall ladder, whereas to harvest a low-growing eggplant, which grows to barely half a meter in Southeast Asia, no ladder is needed, and even a child could harvest it.

There are similar examples of Christian millenarian cults—such as the Oneida Community in the late nineteenth century and, more recently, the Branch Davidians—that suspended conventional morality and encouraged child sexual abuse (Kent, 2012). The cases in this article, such as the rape of Reaksmey, show how old ideas (e.g., millenarian theories of disaster) and newer ones (e.g., the problem of pornography) are adapted when people face contemporary social problems, including youth violence and children committing sexual violence against other children. The references to pornography might be construed as "modern," and thus contrasting with "historical" explanations involving ghosts, astrology, or inherited character; in truth, however, pornography is simply a contemporary expression of the old Buddhist idea of *apāyamuk*, the road to ruin, or in Western imagery, the decline into debauchery, as depicted in Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*.

4.1.3. Character

One potent marker of child abuse is the character of the perpetrator. The most heinous is that of the "*tiracchāna* father," an archaic depiction of the bestial child abuser. The Khmer word comes from the Sanskrit *tiraścīna*, which means "moving forward horizontally." In the Buddhist canon, it also refers to a horizontal walking beast inhabiting the netherworld, whose speech can only be directed earthward and not upward (Tan, 2009). Such a father, like the quadrupedal beast, knows no incest taboo. Such a savage abuser of his own child is destined to be reborn, eventually, in the depths of hell inhabited by *tiracchāna* beasts sharing his character, who will presumably tear him apart. This notion of *tiracchāna*, far from being held only by old-fashioned monks, seem to be common among many rural people. It is unclear whether an abuser, being akin to a *tiracchāna*, would be considered accountable. According to the "wild beast" test of criminal responsibility, which Platt (1965) traced back to a pronouncement by English judge Henry de Bracton in 1256, "brutis animalibus" do not possess the intent to do harm and are not, therefore, legally accountable. Though any bad person who acts savagely might be given the epithet *tiracchāna*, the worst of all is the *tiracchāna* who has sex with his own child.

4.1.4. Risk and vulnerability

The belief that vulnerability to a various types of abuse is shaped by astrology is unsurprising. In India, there are even Vedic Astrology discussion forums, on which astrology pseudoscientists blame females and the planets for rape. The finding that astrology contributes to "explaining" child sexual abuse in Cambodia is significant. *Krʋəh*, from the Sanskrit *graha* (meaning "to seize") is a

concept rooted in Hindu astrology and embedded in the Khmer psyche (Eisenbruch, 2018a, b). These notions reflect ancient links—dating from Parthian and Hellenistic influences on North India—between child abuse and the attack by nine *grahas* on children (Mann, 2001). Cambodian monks and healers employ the principle of the nine *graha*s, referring to the planetary bodies that bring good fortune or violence to people's lives. This study reveals the importance of *krʊəh* for parents seeking to explain why a child had been abused and why at a particular time. Our informants discussed *krʊəh* as a negative force that unleashes the abuser's violence or victimizes the child. In their ritual interventions, the monks helped families of abused children to feel that their child's vulnerability to further misfortune had been reduced: a sort of positive psychology. These ideas are not as exotic as they appear. A recent psychiatric study among a Western population of childhood physical abuse survivors found that belief in astrology and other paranormal phenomena provided meaning and relief (Perkins & Allen, 2006).

4.1.5. Entangled destiny of perpetrator and child

It is accepted that child abuse will affect the emotional life of the survivor in adult life (Dinwiddie et al., 2000; McLean, Toner, Jackson, Desrocher, & Stuckless, 2006; Najman, Dunne, Purdie, Boyle, & Coxeter, 2005). Clinicians dealing with child abuse report forming the impression that abuse is repeated in the next generation. An abused child is said to become an abusive parent, and "child sexual abuse victimization sometimes re-surfaces across generations" (McCloskey, 2017, p. 61), although, as Jaffee's (2017) authoritative review asserts, the cycle of violence is not inevitable. Kim (2012) argues persuasively that culture has an important role in the intergenerational theory of transmission of violence, and that its explanation requires both personal and cultural causes. The research reported here demonstrates how Cambodians draw on an indigenous theory of transmission and why it is important to them. In a setting such as Cambodia, with the prevailing Buddhist doctrine of karma and the Khmer Rouge's legacy of violence, the popular view that child abuse is transmitted intergenerationally is unsurprising. Our research supports the notion that the abused child and perpetrator are locked in a mutual debt cycle, or *cumpeak kam*, meaning literally "to owe, in the sense of being entangled with the consequences of a person's demerit." The story of Kusal Sok and Mala shows how karmic theory flows between the family lines of the perpetrator and victim, and how people make sense of this by seeing blame bouncing back and forth across generations. This line of reasoning is quite alien to a Western rights-based worker.

4.1.6. Drowning in lust and other vices

The spectrum of the Buddhist Triple Poison, or the "unwholesome roots" of craving, lust and ignorance, differed from that found for violence against women. Men who attack women were said to do so in an alcohol-fueled rage, whereas sexual violence, including incest, directed against children potentiates the perpetrator's *taṇhā*, literally "drought" or "thirst" and figuratively the fever of carnal lust (Morrison, 2001).

As in the case of violence against women, the third poison—*mohā*, or ignorance and delusion—causes the abuser's mind to become deluded through ignorance (*avijjā*), leading to perversions that take what is painful (*dukkha*) as pleasurable (Dhammasami, de Silva, Shaw, Peoples, & Cresswell, 2012). Even more so than in intimate partner violence, where a man might beat his wife without a second thought, raping a child—even his own—does not trouble a man in a state of *mohā*.

4.1.7. The road to ruin

Apāyamuk has been shown to be a popular cultural notion of dissolute conduct leading to violence (Eisenbruch, 2018a). It is expressed by ordinary people in the phrase "alcohol, women, and gambling," too often the vices of impoverished, unemployed, and desperate parents, and likely to be a tinder box for the abuse of their children. In other words, whereas violence against women is associated with the *apāyamuk* in that generation, child abuse likely reflects the *apāyamuk* of the previous generation.

Gang rape of children and teenagers (*bauk*) is a cause of growing public concern and increased publicity. It occurs at a higher rate in Cambodia than anywhere else in the region (Fulu et al., 2013). Most cases of rape involve females under the age of nineteen (Wilkinson, Bearup, & Soprach, 2006). In a multicountry study by Partners for Prevention, gang rape was the least common form of rape in every country except in Cambodia, where it was more common than non-partner rape (Fulu et al., 2013). In this study, juvenile delinquents who engage in substance abuse and commit crimes such as gang rape are called "young *piel*," which expresses two shades of meaning: "youthful ignorance" (Sanskrit *bāla*, meaning "young") and the phonetically interchangeable "mean and delinquent" (Pali *vāla*). They had entered the road to ruin by consorting with evil companions—the fifth of the six *apāyamuk* listed in the *Sigalovada sutta*, the 31st discourse of the Dīgha Nikāya of the Pāli Canon, often referred to as the "householder's Vinaya" (Keown, 2004).

Although older informants were familiar with these Buddhist teachings, fewer young people were. Nevertheless, the core values are disseminated. The "modern" way to get the message across is through the growing number of songs broadcast on MY TV and CTN and uploaded on scores of websites. In one called "The Tears of the Juvenile Delinquent," the youth scorns the "right way" and espouses the "wrong way." He steals his mother's funds for his education and spends it all on drugs, drinking, and fighting. Eventually arrested, he is sent to a detention center for reeducation. Reformed, he tries to go back to family life, only to discover the family home desolate, its contents—including photos of his parents, who presumably died of sorrow at his delinquency—covered in ashes. He laments that he has destroyed his parents and himself.

4.1.8. Moral blindness

Chhuon Nath (1967) defined *mo baŋ* as complete darkness in which a person's thoughts are mixed and muddled—the person does not know right from wrong. This has previously been identified as an important cultural attractor for violence against women (Eisenbruch, 2018a). This study's findings show the importance of moral blindness in child abuse, especially in cases of incest, where

the perpetrator temporarily loses his ability to recognize the child as his own flesh and blood or, despite such recognition, to see that sex with her is wrong Legends help people make sense of this and work through their trauma. Sam Ath recounted a Moggallāna legend of drowning in sexual desire and *apāyamuk*, leading to a state of *mo baŋ* and the murder of loved ones. The punishment was to become trapped for 100,000 million years in hell, deep in blood and pus, and forced to swim through a crevasse filled with family members' tears (*crʊəh crɨv lvɨŋ-lvəəy*).

It might be difficult to imagine that a man who abuses children, including his own, would not feel shame. The findings suggest, however, that though the perpetrators of child abuse might feel public shame when caught and exposed, they do not necessarily feel an internal sense of shame (even in cases of incest), as their act might not have felt wrong at the time of its commission. For both violence against women and child abuse, abusers' impunity makes sense when viewed through the lens of Buddhist teachings on which mental qualities are needed to act in a moral, responsible way: "a sense of shame, a fear of blame," called the two "Guardians of the World" (De Silva, 1976). Here, one can view *hiri* as a healthy sense of shame and *ottappa* as the fear of being blamed or punished; both deter a would-be perpetrator of child abuse. People need not be steeped in Buddhist *dhamma* to understand how the psychology of shame and blame regulate any tendency to commit child abuse (Tin, 1990).

While incest is morally forbidden in any Buddhist society, the phenomenon persists (Sasson, 2014). The present study reported incest perpetrated by fathers. While ancient Buddhist texts depict mother–son but not father–daughter incest, and there is an "Indian Oedipus complex" (Silk, 2008), this study found many reports of incest perpetrated by fathers. Despite karmic theories, the cases reported here cannot be regarded as "normal" in Cambodian Buddhism. Moreover, the fact that many of the fathers were intoxicated while committing incest does not excuse their crimes.

This study's findings extend critics' concerns regarding the tendency to "feminize victimization," creating the impression that boys are invulnerable, less frequently abused, and less seriously affected than girls (Hilton et al., 2008). Research is increasingly showing this issues to be much larger than is commonly presumed.

4.2. Implications

Child abuse interventions, like those to prevent violence against women (Eisenbruch, 2018b), must be culturally responsive. To take one example, recent initiatives such as the *Clinical Handbook: Health Care for Children Subjected to Violence or Sexual Abuse* (Ministry of Health, 2017) need to be culturally responsive in the following areas: (1) *Safety*: how to overcome stigma and families' fears about disclosing details of abuse. (2) *Privacy and appropriate confidentiality*: how to respect this, even if not anticipated by people in traditional cultures. (3) *Stigma*: using culturally appropriate language and terms. (4) *Consent*: explaining the procedures and being mindful that Western forms of consent, such as signing, may be perceived as surrendering rather than protecting rights. (5) *Physical violence*: recognizing how to modify what is culturally viewed as normal and appropriate discipline. (6) *Misbelief about child rape*: understanding traditional beliefs—for example, that rape has not occurred unless there is evidence of bleeding. (7) *Misbelief about the sexual assault of boys*: understanding the traditional belief that only a man can sexually assault a woman, as in the saying, "To be a man, you should not be under a woman." (8) *Misbelief that a sexually abused child did something to deserve it*: working through the lens of the cultural belief that karma led to bad merit. (9) *Misbelief that only foreigners sexually abuse children*: working with local beliefs about family members, such as the father, who is traditionally known as a wild beast (*tiracchāna*) or a "fish that cannibalizes its own child" (*trəy cdao sii koon ʔaeŋ*). (10) *Misbelief that children are untruthful about having been abused*: being mindful that, traditionally, a child holds back from telling their parents about unpleasant things that happen to them—not as a lie, but as a way of respecting their parents. (11) *Deception by the parent*: hiding abuse is culturally driven by the belief that shameful family secrets should be kept private. (12) *Children who deny the abuse*: traditionally, a child may view their father as trustworthy, and so might not accept abuse by a father as something to report.

The epigenesis of child abuse presented in this article provides the elements needed to grasp local cultural understandings of child abuse; it could underpin a theory of change in which behavioral and social-change outcomes could be achieved.

4.3. Limitations

It must be acknowledged that the views of child abuse derived from adult narratives pertain to quite distinct forms of abuse with different etiologies. Different categories of abuse warrant different interpretations by the subjects.

Inevitably, participating families were selected from a sample known by community members to be "affected by child abuse." Including only publicly recognized cases could represent a selection bias. Moreover, selection was based on definitions of abuse by different community members that might not be unitary and might overlook cases that would be classified as abuse in Western countries.

It is clear from media reports that most perpetrators of child in Cambodia abuse go unpunished, reflecting the cultural and social norms of impunity. It would be useful to link this situation with the concrete beliefs in affected communities on the enforcement of laws pertaining to child abuse.

5. Conclusion

The fight to end sexual and physical violence against children requires a comprehensive understanding of the cultural drivers behind abuse. The cultural epigenesis proposed in this article has probably never been more relevant. The enormous changes resulting from recent economic development have undoubtedly affected daily life and values in Phnom Penh. However, the popular

beliefs in Cambodian Buddhism and local cosmologies continue to prevail in most rural areas, where the majority of the population lives.

This article provides the first comprehensive cultural description of child abuse in Cambodia. The eight cultural attractors of the conceptual framework do not merely list multiple overlapping beliefs, held with varying conviction by different people. Rather, these cultural attractors form a landscape in which child abuse makes sense as a gestalt of cultural logic.

Historically, child abuse studies have focused more on individual explanations, which focus on parents' abusive characteristics, giving less attention to the effects of culture and contextual factors (Nadan, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2015). In light of the significant psychocultural studies cited in the literature review, this article offers a detailed report of the cultural epigenesis of child abuse. I propose that such an approach can elucidate how to "search and destroy" child abuse, no matter the cultural setting, thereby realizing Korbin (1991) aspiration.

Many programs in LMICs, including Cambodia, focus on school- and community-based programs that emphasize education and human rights. These programs are constructed on a particular theory of change, seeking a metamorphosis in "values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and practices … related to violence" (ActionAid & Moosa, 2012, p. 10). The eight cultural attractors described in this study form a conceptual template that, if supported by further work, could be used to enhance understanding of the barriers and to design interventions that make sense in local communities. The cultural attractors could be seen to provide a template for intervention as the stories speak for themselves. The template has the potential to build institutional capacity by including cultural experts, such as monks, in all activities, including training. By providing a culturally coherent language to spur the acceptance of prevention, counseling, and law enforcement, this template can enable police, counselors, educators, mental health professionals, and human rights organizations to provide better services to child abuse victims and their families. This template also has implications for victims and their families who resettle in Western countries, where family trauma and child abuse become greater issues.

The knowledge claims in this paper might be perceived as overly broad. Although this ethnographic research describes the views of scores of families, gathered over decades of fieldwork, it is difficult to quantify and generalize the results. Countries such as Cambodia have undergone huge economic and societal changes, and the cultural dynamics are complicated. I do not claim that the epigenesis identified herein is an immutable cultural bedrock of child abuse; rather, this research should be replicated with larger populations to verify that the qualitative findings can be generalized. With one exception, I have not discussed the abuse by Buddhist monks and lay temple officiants in this study, which is the focus of a separate article.

Readers more familiar with Western rights than those of non-Western societies might interpret the insider views presented herein as feudal and culturally stamped violations of children's rights, especially those of girls. It is a popular view among human rights advocates that, to eliminate culturally encoded violence, it is necessary to first eradicate "wrong" cultural beliefs and practices. To be clear, my findings in no way endorse the perpetration of violence. Instead, I argue that attempts to change behavior must work with, rather than against, local cultural logic.

I hope that this paper's findings will prompt advocates and health professionals to look anew at some familiar concepts, including *karma* ("this child abuse is a result of bad *karma*"), which are widely misunderstood as a stain on Cambodian traditional culture, promoting the worst excesses of violence against children. The findings could also be useful in curriculum materials, such as clinical handbooks for national programs training local and provincial staff in how to respond to child abuse. The results could also be used in training expatriates to better grasp the local language of child abuse and to work more effectively with interpreters, preventing Cambodian concepts from being inadvertently steamrolled by a Western rights-based vocabulary.

As part of a broader program on the cultural context of direct violence—including violence against women and public violence such as land-grabbing—this research adds to evidence on the nature of violence in Cambodia. Further research could confirm the impression that this paper's epigenesis of child abuse forms a cultural template that works across these various violence forms. This template could potentially inform campaigns against child abuse not only in other Theravada Buddhist and post-conflict societies but also in the West.

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