



Obstructed Engagement
with Past Acts of State Violence
Among Urban Youth in
Post-Conflict Cambodia

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Abstract

Whereas there is already a large body of research on transitional justice mechanisms and their impacts on the Cambodian society, studies mainly focus on survivors and victims. The post-conflict generation remains largely underrepresented. The main objective of this research paper is therefore to advance the understanding of post-conflict generations' realities with regard to past acts of state violence. The paper aims to include voices of the Cambodian youth into the academic discourse. Research findings center around four dimensions - the education system, an inter-generational conflict, the institutionalization of fear, and the unique factor of Khmer versus Khmer violence during the Khmer Rouge era - that

are considered to have an impact on how Cambodian youth engages with (past) acts of state violence will form the basis of the discussion. It will be argued that in present day Cambodia the post-conflict generations have only little incentives to engage with the country's history of state violence, as those four dimensions obstruct an active engagement. As a consequence of such an obstructed engagement, a corrosion of the overall process of reconciliation is highly likely. The findings of the paper were established on the basis of an inductive and qualitative, three-stage process of semi-structured interviews among (n=20) respondents. The convenience sample included Cambodian university students and young professionals between 18 and 26 years of age, who were based in Phnom Penh during the research. The interviews were recorded and digital transcripts were analyzed based on grounded theory methods.

Keywords: transitional justice, youth, post-conflict.

1. Context and Methodological Aspects

Transitional justice (TJ) mechanisms focus on the needs of survivors and victims of mass atrocities, but this focus neglects that post-conflict generations also suffer from the imminent effects of past atrocities and state violence. In the case of Cambodia under the rule of the Khmer Rouge (KR), the complete devastation of educational and religious infrastructure, forced marriages, disruption of families, and involuntary resettlements are only a few of the gross human rights violations that up until now directly affect the Cambodian people and the Cambodian youth in particular. In order to advance peace-building and conflict transformation, the academic discourse should therefore consider the needs of post-conflict generations when

designing TJ. Although “the views of affected populations should play a major role in TJ choices” (Thoms et al, 2008; p.7), up to this point there are very few studies that are concerned with the views of the Cambodian youth. Whereas there is already a large body of research on TJ mechanisms and their impacts on Cambodian society, such studies mainly focus on survivors and victims. The post-conflict generation remains largely underrepresented; for example in one of the few studies that take this generation into account, only 13.8% of the respondents in a random sample of 1,000 Cambodian adults were between 18-25 years (Pham et al, 2011; p.18). Literature commonly agrees upon the importance of local actors in the transitional process, as “ultimately, it is they who will decide how to come to terms with the past and build relationships for the future” (Fischer, 2011; p.424). In the case of the Cambodian population, which has approximately two thirds of the population below the age of 30 (according to a 2008 census¹), ‘they who will decide’ without a doubt refers to the Cambodian youth.

In order to make their voices heard this research paper highlights four dimensions that have a direct impact on how Cambodian students respond to past atrocities and state violence. It will be argued that in present day Cambodia the post-conflict generations have only little incentives to engage with the country’s history of state violence, because those four dimensions obstruct an engagement with the past. It is yet unclear whether such obstacles ultimately lead to a reconstruction of victims and survivors narratives by the Cambodian youth and/or towards indifference and disconnection with transitional justice mechanisms.

¹ See: United Nations Statistics Division 2016.

The paper uses data that has been gathered for the author's master's thesis "Refusal or (Re-)construction: The Current Status of Collective Remembrance among Urban Cambodian Youth" (ongoing research) as a basis of argumentation. This study aimed to advance the understanding of post-conflict generations' realities with regards to the design of transitional justice mechanisms and efforts of collective remembrance in the aftermath of mass atrocities. As the voices of the Cambodian youth were central to the study and are prominently featured throughout this paper, it was designed in terms of a constructivist grounded theory. Hence, the field was approached only through an initial interest in the question of why individual Cambodian students respond differently to transitional justice mechanisms, such as the so-called Khmer Rouge Tribunal (KRT), and without a hypothesis. The main findings were established on the basis of an inductive and qualitative, three-stage process of semi-structured interviews (n=20) with a preliminary analysis of the findings after each step. The sampling was based on the researcher's ratio and therefore a convenience sample. Respondents had to be Cambodian university students and young professionals between 18 and 26 years of age, who were living in Phnom Penh during the time of the research. Additionally, they had to be fluent in English to minimize misinterpretations and ensure a more accurate enquiry. In the first stage, the questions focused on the respondents' connection and their feelings to Cambodia's KR history in general and the KRT as the main mechanism of TJ in particular. Guided by the data, the focus shifted during the second stage. The questions at this stage were connected with collective remembrance and followed on from dynamics revealed in the first stage. As a third step, two experts were questioned about their responses on the findings

in order to contextualize the findings within the broader field. The data was analyzed through a mix of initial coding and memo-writing, which was initially based on constructivist grounded theory methods in order to move “beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytical interpretations” (Charmaz, 2006; p.43). Once the initial interviews are conducted, Charmaz suggests to “do coding and thus label bits of data according to what they indicate” (ibid; 12). Through coding, which is defined as “categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data” (ibid; 43), it would become feasible to analytically process the information. Through such an analytical processing of data, I was able to crystalize certain meanings and individual actions in the data after each stage; such crystalized codes became the foundation of the whole analysis (ibid; 45). Charmaz suggests to write “extended notes called memos” (ibid; 12) in a next step, as such memos help to compare the data and progress data gathering if new topics emerge (ibid; 12). After the initial coding, hand-written memos were entered to enable links from different codes to be visualized, which provided the main argument.

2. Impacting Engagement

The data revealed in total four specific dimensions that impact how young Cambodians respond to past acts of state violence; the education system, an inter-generation conflict, the institutionalization of fears, and the unique factor of Khmer versus Khmer violence during the KR era. These dimensions will be elaborated upon in the following sections in order provide the frame for a discussion of the obstacles to remembrance.

2.1 The Education System

R.1² mentions prominently at the beginning of the very first interview “education is the most important thing for the country” (R.1). This view is mutually proposed by many of the respondents. R.4 also believes “that education is one of the important things. Everything starts from education” (R.4). In turn, it is acknowledged that insufficient education around the KR history might lead to a decline in interest among young Cambodians, which might result in an instance where “some of the young generation is not interested in the KR regime” (R.2). This is an important factor, as R.8 mirrors that when s/he was in high school s/he “was not interested in history, because the class was so boring!” (R.8). Hence, one has to grapple with the question of how young Cambodians learn about the KR history. One of the respondents simply found “if they (Cambodian students) finished high school, they should know at least something about the Khmer Rouge” (R.3B). This is problematic and impacts responses to mass atrocities in two ways. Firstly, due to the focus on high schools, it is questionable whether students that are only attending primary or secondary education are receiving any formal knowledge about the KR at all. And secondly, it is also problematic whether learning ‘at least something’ about Cambodia’s genocidal past will suffice to reconcile the society. One of the main problems appears to be that history classes related to KR history are “not very deep in story” (R.2). Another respondent elaborates, “when we study in the school, it is just only one half-hour session that is talking about

² With regard to sensitive data, anonymity was offered and respondents will only be referred to as “R.(x)” throughout this paper. “(x)” indicating a randomly assigned number in order to assign quotes to respondents.

the history of Cambodia and then just let it go” (R.1B). A lack of thorough formal KR education becomes obvious. In fact, it is only recently that a compelling textbook has been used – “A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)” by Khamboly Dy (2007). Prof. John Ciorciari, associate professor in international politics at the University of Michigan and a former legal advisor to the Documentation Center of Cambodia, mentioned in an expert interview that “certainly, once you get into primary and secondary age range, then there is a clear and confounding factor in Cambodia, which is that until recently there was almost no mention of the Khmer Rouge period in the schools” and Khamboly Dy asserts that “in 2002, Hun Sen ordered the withdrawal of all 12th grade social studies textbooks, which were not returned until May 2011” (Khamboly, 2015; p.166). Many respondents stated concern about not learning about this period thoroughly enough, yet Khamboly Dy also found that the content of the government textbooks was “far too brief to ensure that young Cambodians understood what really happened at that time, or to allow for more critical thinking and deep inquiry into the history” (ibid.;163). Such expert observations are mirrored in the data.

First in primary, then in secondary, and in high school there is not really... They don't really understand about the Khmer Rouge. There are only some assignments for them to read, but the teachers in the high schools do not mainly focus on the Khmer Rouge. (R.3)

It appears that in primary and secondary schools the student generation, which is now in their early 20s, did not receive any KR education at all, and only insufficiently during their high school years.

R.8 clarifies “I started to know about the (Khmer Rouge) history when I was in high school. (...) But it is not much!” (R.8). Reports on when, how and to what extent students learn or desire to learn about the KR period in school were differing. A possible factor for such contradictions and the difference in quality and amount of KR education could be differences in public and private education. R.1 finds that a public university “probably has more restrictions to the topic” (R.1). R.5B, who went to a public school, affirms “if we come in the round council meeting, then the guard in the school is going to ask ‘What are you talking about? Is it related to politics?’ and then they will break our meeting” (R.5B). Other factors in formal education include political influences or the quality of the teachers. R.3 found the instance of teachers drawing from personal experiences most problematic

The quality of the teachers is not so good, because they, with regard to the Khmer Rouge, just know from the experiences that other people were talking about. All teachers, they just know experiences and they do not know much about the history. (R.3)

And teachers that rely on their personal experiences face even more challenges when it comes to being judged by students. R.8B provided a critical account of the teachers

Our teachers, they do not really know well. They just tell us their own experiences. Not what is written in the books. So if they are biased..., if they just support the movement of the Khmer Rouge or the current government, they will just tell us something that is not neutral. (R.8B)

Another respondent uses the suspicion of bias to justify the lack of proper KR education “I think that (bias) is one of the reasons why in this time most people are trying to exclude it (KR education), because they are trying to reach a really non-biased, untainted analysis” (R.3B). The lack of thorough KR education combined with the respondent’s critical stance on education contrasts with their desire to learn more. R.7B expresses that “we really want to know what, the stuff..., like, what they did during the Khmer Rouge. They (the students) want to know clearly” (R.7B). Such desire seems to be ever increasing with a higher degree of education. “I can say if they (the students) can get higher education, talk to a lot of people and get different perspectives, I think that it will be the time that they can have more motivation and support to do so” (R.4B). Interestingly, this is contrasted by a presumed overflow of information, as some students “heard about it (the KR history) all the time. Everywhere (laughing)” (R.5). This overflow of knowledge and learning is used as an explanation by R.6 for the limited degree to which Cambodian youth learns about the KR in school. S/he summarizes “in high school, actually, they (the teachers) will not... They teach history in high school, but they are not focusing much on that”, because the “young generation know what happen during that time. So we (the students) do not have to focus much on it. There is nothing we change. Like we know, it is better or not” (R.6).

2.2 An Inter-Generation Conflict

The data suggests an inter-generation conflict between the parental generation and the respondents as a second dimension that impacts individual responses to mass atrocities. R.9 finds that “you actually can see the difference” between the generations with regard

to her/his mom's experiences with starvation and begging in the KR period. The respondent highlights the difference between those who lived through the period and those born after the country was liberated; between victims and survivors of the KR era and conversely the young generation that has not directly suffered from the KR and "who actually enjoy that privilege of peace" (R.3B). The most obvious form of this division is the way people give value to daily life activities. Activities such as eating, leisure time, etc. are given much higher value by the older generation, whereas the younger generation takes those for granted. This is most apparent within the family, as R.5 states "and also, they are always comparing. When we do not eat the food and then they say 'Oh in my generation, during the Khmer Rouge regime, we had nothing to eat' (laughing). Something like that they are always mentioning" (R.5). But there are also other institutions next to the nuclear family where such a division in generations becomes obvious, as the same respondent also remarks "the teachers keep talking about the Khmer Rouge regime. They keep comparing our generation to their generation" (R.5). Being subject to such an ongoing comparison in family and school has a direct impact on how Cambodian youth engages with the KR history. Being asked about how s/he feels about the comparison between her/his parents' generation and her/his own, R.6 admits "sometimes I feel angry with her. I just do not feel good when she compares" (R.6). The data suggests that such a feeling is common among the youth, as R.8B remembers

When I was young, I was just like 5 or 6 years old, they used this kind of thing. It is not about telling me history, but about threatening me. Like, obeying something and it is kind of very cruel to do something like that. (R.8B)

Crucial at this point is not the individual respondent's feeling when being subject to an inter-generation comparison, but to what actions such a comparison and the attached feelings lead. Being asked why s/he would not feel good about such a comparison, s/he highlights the fact that "it passed already" only to conclude, "so they (the parents), you (everyone else), have to forget it" (R.6). R.8B comes to an almost similar conclusion with regard to her/his feeling towards being threatened by comparisons, as "kids hate to listen to rules (...). But when you threaten me, I just ignore it. Actually, it was not the matter that I did not believe (the KR history), but I just ignored it, because I did not want to listen to the rules" (R.8B).

2.3 Internalization of Fears

R.9 suggests another dimension present throughout most of the interviews – fear. "If you would ask any of the elder generation (about a possible return of the KR), they would think that it could happen any day of the week" (R.9). In contrast to the inter-generational conflict around individual experiences with the KR regime, fear seems to be a feeling that is mutually shared by young Cambodians and their parents alike. Most of the respondents suffer from fears drawn from their (grand-) parents' traumatic experiences and their fear that Cambodia will be subject to state violence once more. R.9 specifies "if you would go ask any elders 'Is there a possibility of a second Khmer Rouge overtake?', hundred out of hundred would say 'yes'" (R.9). Such fear has to be contextualized by Kiernan's finding that the KR "exerted more power over its citizens than any state in world history. It controlled and directed their public and private lives more closely than government had ever done" (Kiernan 2005: 464). "They (the grand-parents) are afraid of Khmer Rouge coming back is

the only reason. (...) And that's why they prefer to stay silent rather than to speak up or vote for the people. (...) I think in my generation as well, because I used to think so" (R.4B). Such insecurity leaves a remarkable impact on the youth. R.3B elaborates, "it is the influence that the younger generation receive from their parents. They got that fear that they had during the Khmer Rouge regime" (R.3B). This in turn impacts their stance towards politics and the transitional agenda on the one hand, and remembrance on the other.

It's like they do not want to talk about politics or they do not want to talk about the thinking about the government, about the Organization, about the Ongkan and that kind of stuff. If they talk about it, there will be bad results. And nothing ever changed. (R.3B)

R.1B supports this claim by stating that "people are thinking of that stuff and they are really scared about that", and highlights, again, the fear saying "and if you and me are trying to raise up our voice very loud without thinking about our environment, we will be put in jail or we will face danger" (R.1B). This *fear* is more specified, as it is not portrayed as an abstract fear of future events, but a more specific fear of having to go to jail – it is a fear of the state's abuse of power. Analyzing this line of thinking, R.3B concludes

It is the influence of the history, which leads the younger generation to not think about politics. Not just because politicians use their, our history. Of course we are scared of talking about politics. It is just..., we are just scared of talking about politics. (R.3B)

That such fear is truly internalized becomes obvious when the fear turns into self-censorship. For R.6b “I think that it is OK that we can’t speak what we want, because, we, we do not want to polarize, we do not want to blame one another or something” (R.6b). The fact that s/he is aware where the fear comes from “the older people. It is like my parents told me again and again ‘Do not mess with the politics’” (R.6B), but still is not questioning it, evokes an even stronger impression of internalization.

2.4 The Auto-Genocide Dimension

The fourth relevant dimension that impacts responses to state violence in the Cambodian case is concerned with the singularity of the Cambodian mass atrocities. R.2 expresses how the specific acts of Khmer versus Khmer violence influence her/him in a way that causes her/him to second guess what s/he learned about the KR. “Then we studied the KR and I remember that my first thought was ‘Unbelievable!’ and ‘How can they kill each other?’. They killed their own nationality.”(R.2). Ciorciari describes this dimension in the following terms “there is something about what I would refer to as an auto-genocide that appears to be particularly difficult for people to come to terms with on a personal level” (Ciorciari expert interview).

And indeed R.6, representative for many of the respondents³, asked rather desperately during the course of the interview

Why? Why did they have to do it with their own people? We are Khmer. So why? Why they did they do this? Why did they do it to our people? (R.6)

Several respondents were struggling with the fact that many of the victims of KR inflicted violence, be it directly through executions or indirectly through hard labor and starvation, were ethnically Khmer.

3. Obstructed Engagement

After having established four dimensions that impact responses to (past) state violence as the main findings, it will now be argued that in present day Cambodia the post-conflict generation has only little incentives to engage with the country's history of state violence, because those four dimensions take the form of obstacles to engagement.

³ "I can't believe that the KR soldiers did that to the same people as the Cambodians. I do not believe that."

(Respondent 3);

"And they are Cambodian! I would never ever believe that this would happen in my own country and there were many people suffering a lot in the past."

(Respondent 8);

"How can the same race be killing... like the same group killing off themselves?"
(Respondent 9)

In the case of the education system, which is of highest importance for Cambodia, as was commonly agreed upon by the respondents, one has to attest that it is at best providing insufficient KR education or that at worst it is flawed. This instance might lead to an increased disinterest with Cambodia's genocidal past among young Cambodians, as superficial history classes, which are 'not deep in story' are not engaging the students in a way that they develop an interest in the KR history. This process is even amplified by the fact that, while the respondents went through the formal educational system, their textbooks, if existing at all, only offered limited genocide history as well. The students highlighted that they only formally received KR education in high school. Before high school they only were subjected to their elder's narratives. But such narratives were described as biased and this suspicion of bias was also found with regard to the teacher's narratives, which – in absence of well compiled textbooks - were depicted as their main resource while teaching history. In summary, it seems that the Cambodian youth's, which are now in their early 20s, suspicion of bias, in combination with insufficient formal genocide education, leaves students indifferent towards past acts of state violence. As of now, the education system can be identified more in terms of an obstacle to engagement with the KR history.

An inter-generational conflict was found to be another dimension that can possibly impact how young Cambodians engage with past acts of state violence. For the case of the study's respondents, it seems that it shapes their responses crucially in a way that leads to anger and disinterest. Respondents perceived differences between survivors and victims of the KR regime on the one hand,

and the post-conflict generation on the other hand as rooted in their 'privilege of peace'. Such differences are disclosed through an inter-generational conflict about individual experiences. The respondents' accounts show how Cambodian children are subjected to their parents' individual narratives from early childhood onwards. (Grand-) parents and teachers are using comparisons of war and peaceful times as educational tools. Such comparisons fuel the respondents' skepticism towards any form of dissemination of knowledge about the KR and the suspicion of bias, which can leave some students attaching negative feelings to their parents' use of the history as an educational measure. The attached negative feelings include reacting with a call to either ignore what their parents told them or willfully forget what happened under the rule of the KR. Hence, such inter-generational conflict can also be identified as an obstacle to an engagement with the KR history.

The third dimension, the internalization of fears, proves to be such an obstacle as well. In contrast to the inter-generational conflict, the survivors, victims, and post-conflict youth feel fear alike. Such fear draws from past experiences of state violence and a perceived possibility of its return. Young Cambodians internalize their (grand-) parents' fear.

It's like they do not want to talk about politics or they do not want to talk about the thinking about the government, about the Organization, about the Ongkan (the Khmer Rouge leadership) and that kind of stuff. If they talk about it, there will be bad results. And nothing ever changed. (R.3B)

There is clearly a political dimension in present day Cambodia that takes the form of being scared of challenging authorities for the sake of peace. Interestingly, the comment ‘that nothing ever changed’ is common and indicates that some students would rather not talk about the KR period and current political issues, as they believe that this will lead nowhere positive and offers the opportunity for this information to be used by an authoritarian government.

Ciorciari mirrored these statements in his input. He stated that he finds that “it is also clearly true that in some instances government intimidation is a factor in young peoples’ decisions, whether or not to take up causes” (expert interview). A possible conclusion of such intimidation and actions that are accordingly taken by young Cambodians can be

The leaders (of protests) can run away to other countries, but for us as a follower, one will be subject to violence or put into jail. This is the problem that currently happens. We, as the academic students, chose not to do in that way. We chose to do it in a silent way, in an academic way. (R.1B)

Ciorciari speculates in this context

That it is socially uncomfortable for people to stake out clear political positions. Another possibility is that they are concerned about adopting positions that would put them at odds with the government, where they either seek future employment or where they have family connections or where they fear some sorts of adverse effects on their career or academic prospects. (expert interview)

In summary, it is likely that the internalization of fears and a government that seems to facilitate such internalization for its own purposes results in an instance where Cambodian students would rather be subject to self-censorship than to jeopardize Cambodia's fragile peace. Although such thoughts are not backed by thorough investigation, they raise the question of incentives. In the case of many young, urban, educated Cambodians, it appears that there are fewer benefits from engaging with the country's genocidal past than disadvantages. Internalized fears cause respondents to choose to be silent rather than raise their voices. Again, the lack of appropriate incentives to do otherwise causes students to turn their back on the history, and hence poses an obstacle to an engagement with the KR history.

The aspect of Khmer versus Khmer violence proved to be one of the most important findings and also an obstacle when it comes to questions of responses to state violence in the Cambodian case, as it provokes a mutual (initial) disbelief of the country's history among adolescent Cambodians. Khmer versus Khmer violence, in combination with limited formal KR education, has a remarkable impact on the judgments of the youth. This causes a situation in which "to a considerable extent, when young Khmer hear when parents tell the story, they simply find it implausible that the country would self-immolate in that fashion" (expert interview Ciorciari). The most pressing question in this context seems to be the desire to know why Cambodians would inflict violence upon fellow Cambodians. Nonetheless, this question is neither answered by the education system, nor do students speak out and discuss the issue openly, because of internalized fears. In contrast to the other three dimensions, as outlined above,

the auto-genocide dimension nevertheless appears to be the first of the so-called obstacles that also bears the possibility to progress the discourse around past and recent acts of state violence. To some experts the mistrust towards or challenging of established historical accounts – asking about the ‘why’ could also be considered as an act of non-compliance - is a healthy impulse. So Farina, the head of the Documentation Center of Cambodia’s Cham Oral History Project which records experiences of Cham Muslim survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, finds “it shows that young people they are smart. They also want to make sure that there are different sources that they can believe. I mean reliable sources” (expert interview). The tendency to second-guess the recent Cambodian handling of the country’s genocidal past, as orchestrated by the government, is the starting point of what Bagot-Jewitt calls “bottom up” acts of remembrance that are “driven from the heart of the community” (2011). The ambivalence around the auto-genocide debate is yet a rather neglected field and deserves future research.

For the scope of this paper and taking all the above discussed obstacles into account, it shall be sufficient to state that these obstacles to a greater or lesser extent impact on how young Cambodians engage with past acts of state violence, as they bear the potential to either prevent the post-conflict youth from engaging with Cambodia’s genocide history, or, should all the dimensions be re-evaluated by survivors, victims, and educators alike, to enhance the post-conflict generation’s understanding of the Cambodian tragedy. An enhanced understanding of the terror under the KR is necessary not only since reconciliation, which is defined as

a societal process that involves mutual acknowledgement of past suffering and the changing of destructive attitudes and behavior into constructive relationships toward sustainable peace (Brounéus, 2009)

depends on mutual acknowledgment, but also because “failing to acknowledge violations of the past, far from fostering reconciliation, is an invitation to instrumentalize the past” (de Greiff, 2016).

4. Concluding Remarks

This research paper shed light on four dimensions that are hold to be obstacles for engagement with past acts of state violence among urban youth in post-conflict Cambodia. It was argued that Cambodian youth have only few incentives to actively engage with the country’s genocidal past and that this could well lead to a corrosion of the overall process of reconciliation. What is at stake at this point seems to be nothing less than the overall goal of transitional justice. Although the dimensions are manifold and likely go beyond the scope of this paper, it nevertheless highlights the importance of a re-evaluation of national and international educational policies and mechanisms of transitional justice as responses to state violence.

Due to the necessary limitations in the scope of the study, the findings could only offer a glimpse into the complex reality of young Cambodians. Factors such as a non-representative sample, the focus on only Phnom Penh as a study site, the neglect of individual factors such as familiar backgrounds, and peer pressures deserve further research. Such research might provide answers to open questions

such as “Would less or no formal genocide education at all serve as a catalyst to the processes outlined in this paper? Or to more active involvement with the country’s transitional agenda?” Research into such questions would not only further amplify their voices, but possibly provide important insights into how to improve the tailoring and programming of transitional justice mechanisms to the needs of post-conflict youth. An improved tailoring is urgently necessary in order to meet the needs of post-conflict generations with regard to past acts of state violence and the process of reconciliation.

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