ATROCITIES AND CULTURE: REVISITING THE VIETNAM WAR

Kenneth Maddock
Macquarie University

War should be a good subject for anthropologists, but most of those who have studied it have done so in tribal societies. As the suppression of their warfare has tended to follow their inclusion in larger polities, anthropologists with this interest have found themselves with diminishing opportunities.

Many wars have, of course, been fought this century, but they raise difficulties for anthropologists. On the one hand, the scale on which and the fury with which they are waged discourage close observation by non-participants. On the other hand, societies which still use war as a means for pursuing political ends are nearly always at a level of organisation with which we are unaccustomed to cope.

Nonetheless, good material can be found by anthropologists who are sufficiently discriminating in approach and topic. The structural and symbolic approaches, for example, provide ideas which can be used to explicate some of war's many faces. As for the various topics that present themselves, I shall take certain atrocities or war crimes said to have been committed during the Vietnam War. My argument will be that this is a topic which can be illuminated if tackled anthropologically.

I have divided my paper into five parts: first, a statement of recent atrocity allegations against Australian soldiers; second, a discussion of Australian reactions; a third, an examination of the basis of the allegations; fourth, a closer look at some "odd men out" among the atrocity claims, in which an anthropological view begins to take shape; and fifth, a more fully developed account of atrocities.1

ALLEGATIONS

The claim that Australian soldiers committed atrocities was occasionally made during or soon after the Vietnam war.2 It resurfaced in January 1987 after the press obtained an advance copy of an article which Tran Quoc Trung, a colonel in the People's Army of Vietnam, had written for a book due to appear later in the year. One passage achieved notoriety overnight:

The crimes they committed in Phuoc Tuy were in no way less ferocious than those of the US and puppet troops. Savage beatings, rapes, arbitrary arrests, beheadings, the plucking out of people's livers, the exposure of corpses for deterrent purposes, wanton shooting - these were common practices. About 890 innocent people were killed in the period from September 1969 to October 1971. In 1970 alone 188 common people were sent to prison. Mrs Bay Cong from Long Hai was crippled as a result of having been beaten by Australian soldiers for taking to the fields a meal they considered too large for her needs alone. A whole family could be beaten or killed if a secret shelter happened to be unearthed beneath their home (Trung 1987:90).

The use of water torture and the killing of unarmed villagers and of enemy wounded had earlier been alleged against the Australians, but only the first had ever been proven (Frost 1987:81-3, 120-1, 136-7; Ross 1983:94-5). These incidents were given a fresh airing after the leak of Colonel Trung's article. However, in spite of the keen interest which some journalists showed in looking for war crimes, the only new claim was made a few weeks later by Don Tate, a man afflicted with the "recurrent spectre of atrocities" as a result of service in Vietnam in 1969:

On patrol north of Nui Dat with three armoured personnel carriers (APCs), he recalls sitting on top of the lead APC when a woman and child were spotted hurrying along a track. Don Tate claims the gunner on the lead APC said, "Target practice time", then fired on the woman and child. When the APCs reached them, both were dead. A bundle the woman was carrying turned out to be a young baby, still alive. He claims all three were repeatedly run over by the APC, killing the baby (Sydney Morning Herald, 25/4/87).

Towards the end of 1987, Stuart Rintoul published his Ashes of Vietnam, which consists largely of short extracts from many interviews with veterans. According to his preface:

Australia in Vietnam were guilty of acts of barbarity. There were Australians whose morality was so eroded that they murdered villagers, raped women, tortured and killed wounded enemy soldiers and mutilated corpses (Rintoul 1987:xiv).
About eighteen such acts are described in the book (several of them are alleged against New Zealand troops).

REACTIONS

The response to Colonel Trung’s claims was swift and impassioned. Not only were his allegations strong stuff but, as the newspaper which first reported them took pains to point out, his article would appear in a book due to be released:

... during a conference sponsored by Macquarie University in the week following Anzac Day weekend. The following week, the Vietnam Veterans Association will hold its annual national conference in Sydney – the venue for hundreds of Australians who fought in Vietnam. Timing of the book’s release in an aura of Anzac Day ceremonies and reunions and the VVA’s conference, will spark bitterness and controversy among veterans, serving troops and families of soldiers (Sunday Sun, Brisbane, 25/1/87).

The same issue printed a number of denunciations. John Thompson, president of the Queensland branch of the Vietnam Veterans Association (VVA), described the claims as “horrendous and unbelievable”. Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Edwardson, a public relations spokesman for the Defence Department, dismissed the allegations about “beheading and ripping people’s livers out” as “preposterous rubbish”. The most extreme reaction was by Sir William Keys, national president of the Returned Services League (RSL). Colonel Trung’s article was “absolutely scurrilous”; the Foreign Minister and the Minister of Defence should stop its publication; and the federal government should inquire without delay into Vietnam’s contribution to the book in which the article would appear.

Reactions of this kind continued in the press and on radio and television for several days, but the government (not surprisingly) took no action. In fact, Ian Sinclair, deputy-leader of the opposition and its defence spokesman, stated that he respected “the decision of the book’s editors ... to include the article as the official view of the Vietnamese Government”, though he regretted that such “vicious and baseless” claims were made “so close to Anzac Day when many Australians would be mourning relatives and friends killed in Vietnam” (Sydney Morning Herald, 29/1/87).

Controversy flared up again near Anzac Day (25 April), when Don Tate made known his story of the killing of a woman and two children. He was almost immediately threatened with death, according to the Sydney Morning Herald (27/4/87), which also reported the thoughts of Sir William Keys on the matter:

... the RSL would not encourage an investigation with the Vietnam War so long over. He said it was enormously difficult to distinguish friend from foe in Vietnam, and that sometimes unfortunate and unavoidable incidents happened. “I don’t think an inquiry would be at all helpful,” he said. “It would be time-wasting, costly and counter-productive... at the end, if anything was clearly established what good would it do for anybody?”

War: Australia and Vietnam, the book for which Colonel Trung had written his article, appeared several months later, though originally its release had been planned to coincide with the Macquarie University conference (27 April – 1 May).\(^3\) No new storm broke out. Some reviewers ignored the colonel, while others dismissed his claims as unsubstantiated or incredible. Similarly, no uproar greeted Rintoul’s Ashes of Vietnam at the end of the year, in spite of his allegations of barbarity and the shocking incidents recounted by some of his informants.

Perhaps public taste for the atrocities of yesteryear is easily satiated, or perhaps the media felt that nothing more could be wrung out of the subject. In any case, once War: Australia and Vietnam went on sale Colonel Trung’s article could be put in context as one of fifteen chapters, and it could be seen that even he gave less than half a page to Australian atrocities.

BASIS

Atrocity stories accompany modern wars. The motive for telling them need not even be to show the wickedness of the other side, since they may be told for domestic motives, as when “doves” and “hawks” clash over foreign policy. Even if the stories are not completely fabricated, they can be difficult to verify. Colonel Edwardson commented on Colonel Trung’s report that:

Basically it’s propaganda. These claims are generalised, there’s no evidence provided... except there’s one name in there. Obviously if there was some formal complaint or submission made by the Vietnamese, it would have been investigated, but there has been none (Sunday Sun, 25/1/87).
Don Tate said he wanted his claim to be “fully investigated by an official inquiry” (Sydney Morning Herald, 25/4/87). A Defence Department spokesman, Colonel John Weiland, replied that:

... Australian troops had an unblemished record in respect to atrocities and that no allegations had been proved. But if the incident took place as described by Mr Tate, then it was “an act of murder. ... If he’s serious about these allegations and can provide details, then we would certainly investigate them” (Sydney Morning Herald, 27/4/87).

I am not aware that matters have been taken further, either by Mr Tate or by the Defence Department. The allegations made in Ashes of Vietnam, which are similarly lacking in supporting detail, appear to be in the same boat.

In May 1987, I was able to discuss Colonel Trung’s article with a Vietnamese diplomat stationed in Canberra. He was sceptical of the atrocity allegations which, he suggested, probably originated with peasants in Phuoc Tuy; their testimony could not be relied on, in his opinion.

In February 1988, I met Colonel Trung himself in Hanoi. Like Major-General Cao Fa, who accompanied him and joined in discussion, he is attached to the Institute of Military History. Working through an interpreter, I asked the colonel about the atrocities.

He said that he had not been to Phuoc Tuy, but had had assistants (“cadres”) collect material there. When this turned out to include atrocity claims, he had given careful consideration to whether to repeat them in his article, for he was conscious that the War was over and that one should let bygones be bygones. However, as the claims were part of the record, he had decided to report them.

According to Colonel Trung, Australian troops who came across a secret shelter would kill not only the man but his entire family. He considered this to be a medieval practice – it was the way in which the feudal kings of Vietnam had often behaved. Because Australians had been in joint operations with Americans of the 173rd Airborne Division, especially in the Iron Triangle near Saigon, it could be difficult to distinguish their respective acts, but he was emphatic that both were guilty.

General Fa interrupted to say that blame attached to the policies of the Australian government of the time, not to the troops. He added that the best way of finding out how Australians had behaved in the province would be to ask people there when we visited it.

Colonel Trung concluded by suggesting that Australian crimes in Phuoc Tuy were comparable to those committed by other expeditionary forces (presumably he had the French and possibly the Japanese in mind, though he could have been thinking of the other “Free World Forces” who took part in the Vietnam War). People were killed, bellies cut open and livers removed. But it was all in the past, and one had to remember that atrocities could be committed in any war.

When the party I was with visited Phuoc Tuy, we met veterans of D445, a main-force unit of the National Liberation Front (NLF). The visit included much conviviality, but although the course of fighting in the province was discussed at length the subject of atrocities was not raised on either side. One Australian veteran was told in conversation that the Australians had been kind to villagers and had not raped women, but an incident was recounted to him of two babies dying in the hot sun after the villagers had been removed to a place without shade during a cordon-and-search operation. Another veteran in the party had been told on an earlier peacetime visit that women and children were killed in underground shelters – this was considered cruel.

Beatings, rapes and mutilations, wanton killings and arbitrary arrests – these are the very stuff of atrocity stories. In general, the allegations against Australians (whether from Vietnamese or Australian sources) are expressed very broadly, with very little by way of supporting detail. Mrs Bay Cong of Long Hai is, to my knowledge, the only named victim.4 This is not to deny the interest which allegations can have when considered from perspectives other than the forensic. They may show how political criteria and cultural values, for example, can colour the characterisation of conflicts of recent date.

It is almost inevitable that fictional and semi-fictional accounts will reflect this emerging consciousness of the past, perhaps causing fresh controversy and perhaps even reshaping the memories of participants. An example might be the reaction to an Australian TV mini-series on the Vietnam War which Channel Ten screened in 1987. Several American and Australian veterans promptly denounced the portrayal of American troops (Daily Telegraph, Sydney, 28/2/87). Graham Walker, a Vietnam veteran and retired lieutenant-colonel, who had been military adviser to the makers of the series, replied:

There was also considerable criticism of the scene in which a platoon of US soldiers committed murder and rape. Unfortunately such incidents were not rare, and along with Viet Cong violence (also shown in the mini-series) they had a significant effect on the villagers. ... Initially, the series’ writers searched for an incident of violence against civilians involving Australian troops, but were unable to find one. Such events among US forces were more easily discovered, and an actual incident, described by an American
soldier, was used. In the later years of the war, there were many American units like that depicted in the atrocity scene... (Daily Telegraph, 21/3/87).

"BIZARRE" ALLEGATIONS

In 1986, when I first read Colonel Trung’s article in manuscript, I was struck by his claims about beheadings and the removal of livers. They seemed too odd to be treated simply as propaganda, if only because the Australian audience for which the article had been written would be unlikely to credit their own troops with such acts. At the same time, I was unable to believe them myself. My feeling was that the claims probably had a basis of some kind, without being true.

Suppose that atrocities are culturally specific, both in the sense that members of a given society are “programmed” to commit certain kinds of violence but not others, and in the sense that they are “programmed” to fear that they will suffer certain kinds of it but not others. A Western example might be anxiety about sexual assault on one’s wife or kinswoman – tribunals hearing applications for exemption by conscientious objectors are said to have been preoccupied with how a pacifist would react to his mother or sister being raped by an enemy. If Vietnamese suffer a culturally induced anxiety about the liver, might they not fear for it at hostile hands?5

It appears that the Vietnamese do, in fact, worry about their livers. They may have been influenced in this by Chinese thought, or their worries may reflect a substratum of ideas and obsessions common to themselves as well as the Chinese. In any event, there is some cause for alarm in Indo-China. Stanley Karnow, for example, in his history of modern wars in the region, describes rival “gangs” of Cambodians “hacking each other to pieces, in some instances celebrating their prowess by eating the hearts and livers of their victims” (1984:606). My research has led me to believe that the Cambodian connection is at the bottom of the story about Australian removals of livers.

It is not widely known in Australia that after the Task Force withdrew at the end of 1971 a large number of Australian advisers, who had been scattered all over the country, were concentrated in Phuoc Tuy. There they helped train brigades of Cambodian regulars who were rotated through the province before returning to fight in their own country. Advisers accompanied the Cambodians on operations, fighting with them against the NLF and units of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).

One adviser told me that the Cambodians used to eat Vietnamese livers after battle. A liver would normally be eaten raw, being passed around for each man to take a bite or two. Livers were also cut into thin slices and added to vegetable soup. He was unable to say whether any of the “donors” were still alive when their livers began to be removed.

This ritual cannibalism, as anthropologists would call it, is apparently not practised by Vietnamese. I suggest that indulgence in it by Cambodians fighting alongside Australians is the likely basis of Colonel Trung’s startling claim. After the Cambodians and their Australian advisers moved on from the scene of battle, the Vietnamese would doubtless have returned to recover the bodies of their dead, which they would have found to have livers missing.6 It should surprise no one if the Australians, who had had a long association with Phuoc Tuy, were seen as implicated in these mutilations.

I had been less puzzled by the allegation about heads, if only because it stirred vague memories of newspaper photographs in which American or South Vietnamese soldiers posed, trophies at their feet, like old-fashioned sportsmen. I do not know whether the head has some special significance in Vietnamese culture which would explain anxiety about its treatment. But it is interesting that one of Rintoul’s informants describes the collection of heads by a Maori in his unit (1987:165). The practice is made to sound idiosyncratic, but given that the Vietnamese used to try to recover their dead it could be the basis (or part of the basis) for allegations that Australians went in for decapitation.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Anthropologists need no excuse for taking an interest in the truth of a matter. However, when the subject is as emotional as atrocities, it can be next to impossible to ascertain what really happened. Moreover, societies differ in their fact-finding procedures and in their criteria of what counts as an atrocity (assuming they have the concept). Anthropologists might well feel unable to go beyond an account of the results a particular society arrives at through the application of its procedures and criteria. Indeed, that is as far as we might be expected to go, in view of our notorious proclivity for relativism.

Although anthropologists may despair of establishing what really happened on some occasion, they can develop a perspective on it. To take an example, the possibility that sacramental ritual has a certain social significance or exhibits a certain symbolic cohesion can be explored without committing oneself to an opinion about real changes in the inner state of participants or about the real existence of the divinity to which it is addressed. By analogy, we can study the cultural significance of atrocities, without having to decide whether they actually occurred.
Shortly before the 1987 Anzac Day a veteran was rung by a journalist in search of atrocity stories. The veteran replied by posing a question. If war is the ultimate atrocity, what do you mean? His was a gut reaction. But common usage suggests that two deliberately inflicted injuries could be identical from a medical perspective, yet only one count as an atrocity. Thus I commit a war crime by shooting a prisoner in cold blood, but it was no crime to have shot his comrade in the heat of battle while he was attacking the position I was helping to hold. Our cultural consciousness draws a line, and says that it is atrocious to overstep. We then have the ambiguous position of the enemy who was shot neither in cold blood nor in the heat of battle but in the “no-man’s-time” in between.

Atrocities, on this view, have to do with boundaries and their transgression. It is a view which owes much to Durkheim’s concept of the sacred as that which is set apart and forbidden, hedged about with interdictions, and to Mary Douglas’s concept of dirt as matter out of place (see Durkheim 1912; Douglas 1966). By analogy, an atrocity is an act done in a war context (sacrilege is an act done in a religious context), but it is more than that (sacrilege is more than an act done in a religious context). A line has been crossed. It is like desecrating a sacred place, profaning sacred time, or making mock of sacred ritual. But things are not clear-cut, for there can be doubt about where the line should be drawn.

More work needs to be done on this perspective on atrocities. In the meantime, however, it throws some light. If boundaries are cultural (i.e. artefacts of the imagination), general agreement cannot be expected on whether an act is atrocious. To take out an enemy’s liver may be an atrocity or war crime by Australian or Vietnamese criteria, but by others it may be an acceptable mode of behaviour that anthropologists would put under the neutral heading of ritual cannibalism.

The perspective helps us understand why such anger was provoked by the association of Colonel Trung’s claims with Anzac Day. The latter is a time set aside for commemorating people and events in the light of idealised conceptions of citizenship, of manhood, of warrior virtue; it is also an occasion on which participants recall that kinsmen and husbands fell in a cause for which they, but not necessarily the cause, can be honoured. It is quite likely that some Anzac Day celebrants accept that Australian troops should never have been sent to Vietnam; it is most unlikely, however, that they would accept that the troops acted badly in Vietnam.

Anzac Day is the more poignant, because it has to do with lives cut short. To suggest that the men who fell, and their comrades who lived, were guilty of war crimes is to dirty the sacred day by making it out to be a lie at the heart of the culture.

No scandal is caused by associating Anzac Day with Christian sacrifice. Moreover, if ritual cannibalism were a time-hallowed part of the culture, it could be invoked without offence. The point is that Christian sacrifice is in place (as ritual cannibalism would be in the hypothetical case), but atrocities are out of place. To commit them is to cross the line into forbidden territory, contrary to what is expected of the citizen-soldier. That the same acts might be unexceptionable, or even commendable, in the eyes of members of some other society is irrelevant. They draw the line somewhere else.

NOTES

1. My interest in atrocities is part of a broader interest in the Vietnam War and its impact on Australian (and New Zealand) values and society. I am indebted to Macquarie University for a research grant which enabled me to visit Vietnam for three weeks in February 1988, and for sponsoring the conference on the Vietnam War held at the University during the week after Anzac Day in 1987. Among the Australian veterans with whom I have discussed the subject of this paper, I have learned a great deal from discussion with Graham Walker, Greg Lockhart and Brian Day, but I should not wish any of them to be saddled with my opinions.

2. It has been described as Australia’s longest war. Thirty military advisers went to Vietnam in 1962. A full battalion followed in 1965. It was soon increased to a Task Force, which included New Zealand units. The Task Force was withdrawn in 1971, and the last military advisers in 1972. The Australians operated mostly in Phuoc Tuy, a coastal province east of Saigon, which has since been included in Dong Nai. For an account of the Australian part in the War, see Frost (1987).

3. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, who had originally contracted to publish the book, were alarmed by the atrocities controversy. They did not wish to be associated with a controversial book; in addition, they feared being sued for libel by someone who, offended by Colonel Trung’s article, went through all the other articles with a fine comb looking for something actionable. It was with relief that they transferred their rights to Harper & Row, who were not afraid of controversy. To be fair to Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, who had signed a contract before a word was written, they made it clear that they would publish the book themselves if no other publisher could be found.

4. Twenty or so years after the event, it would be difficult to recapture details of what happened on a particular occasion. I suppose that one would, as a minimum, want locality, date (approximate), military unit, and names of persons involved, especially officers or NCOs, as well as a description of the atrocity. It does not seem unreasonable to expect them to be supplied by an Australian who belonged to the unit in question. From the
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Vietnamese side one might reasonably expect locality, date (approximate) and names of victims, as well as a description of the atrocity. I understand that the case of Mrs Bay Cong has been looked into by an Australian veteran on a peacetime visit to Vietnam. According to his information, she was arrested by two South Vietnamese and two Australians, and was later beaten by the South Vietnamese.

5. Cultural analogies are legion. One thinks of Australian Aborigines, who fear that sorcerers will attack their kidney fat, and of the New Zealand Maori concern about the treatment of heads.

6. Neither General Fa nor Colonel Trung knew of Cambodian regulars in Phuoc Tuy, though both knew that Cambodian mercenaries fought in Vietnam. It is puzzling that the colonel’s sources made no connection between Cambodians and the removal of livers (at least he mentioned none). Of course, ritual cannibalism would probably have been practised only on occasions when the NLF/NVA had been driven from the field, so their men would not have observed exactly what happened.

REFERENCES


THE ANCESTRESSES OF THE MIYANMIN AND TELEFOLMIN: SACRED AND MUNDANE DEFINITIONS OF THE FRINGE IN THE UPPER SEPIK

George E.B. Morren, Jr

Rutgers University, New Jersey

This paper is an examination of belief, everyday practical behaviour, material context and their interrelationships as they mark and describe the separation of regions and peoples. Thus, following Ralph Bulmer (1979a and b), I suggest that the material and mystical attributes of the world are integrated in metaphors. Here, belief is presented in a text, a sacred history that is distinguished from other kinds of literature. A “sacred history” or myth differs from “mundane history” and other literary objects because of the context in which it is told including who is authorised to hear it. Among the Miyanmin and other Mountain Ok groups, sacred histories are associated with rituals, especially initiatory rites advancing boys and men in the ancestral cult. They are held in secrecy from women, children and uninitiated boys. The Miyanmin also have “mundane histories”, actual epics pegged to lineage genealogies, that present group and regional histories in terms of the acts of great men... the proverbial “list of kings”.

I begin by presenting one such sacred history, a narrative describing the separate founding of the Miyanmin and the Telefolmin (and certain closely related) peoples and the creation of features of their respective spiritual, material and social worlds. This account also marks the division of the Miyanmin from other Mountain Ok groups (of which the Telefolmin and Faiwolmin are probably the best known). It was gathered from several informants between 1968 and 1981. It contributes to a regional perspective on the Afek cycle, a series of tales which have excited great interest among anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike almost from the beginning of recorded history of the Telefolmin area (Barth 1975:278-9, Brumbaugh 1980, n.d., Craig 1969, Jorgensen 1981, 1983, Quinlivan 1954, Wheatcroft 1976).

I am, however, also concerned about human activity, the wider context in which it occurs, and the degree to which elements of a sacred history provide an explanatory rationale for purposeful individual behaviour. Thus, a key issue is the degree to which these myths provide metaphors embodying presuppositions, appreciations, prejudices, values and perceptions of or about the mundane realities differentiating this fringe people from core groups of regional centres. In this instance, the distinction is between the “fringe” Miyanmin...