Piecing Together Past and Present in Bhutan: Narration, Silence and Forgetting in Conflict

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Vol. 12/2018

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What happens when conflict is silenced in official narratives but not forgotten among a population? This article explores this question using interview data from anthropological fieldwork in Bhutan. In Bhutan, the ethnic conflict of the early 1990s is surrounded by silence and is not openly discussed. Despite this silence, young Bhutanese have formed a multiplicity of narratives about the conflict. The article highlights three different narratives of conflict, as well as the oblivion found among informants. The main argument is that the silence surrounding the conflict in Bhutan has contributed to two forms of societal rift: between the authorities and the people, and between people themselves. The article contributes to the discussion about what role social memories play in conflicts, by suggesting that silence may cause wariness and hinder processes that help societies to move past conflict in a constructive way.

Keywords: conflict, narratives, silence, forgetting, Bhutan

In 1990, ethnic tension erupted into demonstrations and violence in Bhutan. More than eighty thousand members of the Lhotshampa ethnic minority ended up leaving the country over the subsequent two years. At this point, this amounted to one-sixth of the population (DeGooyer 2014, 105). Amnesty International called it "one of the largest ethnic expulsions in modern history" (2003). Yet this period of domestic unrest is not discussed in the media, among politicians or in educational institutions in Bhutan.

Most of the informants encountered during my seven months of fieldwork in Bhutan have, however, encountered the ethnic conflict in their country.[1] Choki,[2] an informant who grew up in the south of Bhutan, told me that her parents never talked much about "what happened" – but in the house where she grew up, there was a hockey stick in the hallway. This was the only "weapon" Choki's father was equipped with, when he patrolled the streets during the peak of the conflict in the early 1990s: "As children, when we wanted to play hockey with the stick, my aunt would jokingly say 'don't play with that – it's a dangerous weapon!'" (informant Choki, 2013). The "dangerous weapon" in the hallway allowed Choki to encounter the conflict at an early stage in life, and her narrative of the conflict

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[1] Pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of informants.

[2] Choki: female, Ngalung, from a southern district.

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is coloured by what her aunt told her at that point. Other informants had quite different understandings of what happened and why, and how it influences society today. In this article three such narratives about the conflict will be presented. This article asks: What happens when conflict is silenced in official narratives but not forgotten among the population?

The article contributes to the discussion about what role social memories play in protracted conflicts, by showing how silence may cause societal rifts in two ways: between the authorities and the people, and among people themselves. Exploring narratives and silences may help identify possibilities for resolution, because both provide windows on the political context they are situated in.

The article works from the assumption that narratives of the past shape understandings of present situations and society, while at the same time representing selective re-creations that draw on contemporary context, beliefs and aspirations for their meaning (Argenti and Schramm 2010, 2). In this way, narratives provide a window on the present, rather than the past. Narratives can give us insights into the political situation of a country, since they are steeped in power relations (Bell 2006, 5). Silence is part of narratives: omissions and forgetting are central features of "selective re-creations". In this capacity, narratives are concerned with both remembering and forgetting.

The article contributes to the limited understanding of the ethnic conflict in Bhutan. The challenges of Bhutan are in general in need of nuanced and holistic research (Hutt 2017, 26).

No other research has mapped out how the conflict is understood by the Bhutanese people. What has been explored are the historical roots of the conflict (Hutt 1996a, 1996b, 2003, 2005), narratives from the refugees from the conflict (Evans 2010), and how the Bhutanese state has dealt with the issue (Bothe 2011; Whitecross 2009). This article offers an insight into how young Bhutanese – who did not experience it themselves – see the conflict: what they know and do not know about it, and how they interpret this as part of present-day Bhutan.

To explore what happens when conflict is silenced in official narratives, but not forgotten among the population, this article analyses interview data from anthropological fieldwork in Bhutan. In the period 2013–2015 I undertook seven months of fieldwork in Bhutan.[3] My informants were students at a Bhutanese college,[4] mainly social science and media students born in the years 1992 to 1996. My data includes informants from sixteen of the countrys twenty districts,[5] and from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. During my fieldwork in Kanglung I shared a college dorm room with two first year students. I attended classes, wore the national dress and followed/broke the strict rules of the college alongside my informants.[6] I employed a range of qualitative research techniques. My data consist of: individual interviews,[7] focus group interviews, participant observation from sixty-three lessons I attended at college, newspaper articles, and a field diary.[8] I conducted 39 individual interviews and 22 focus group interviews with a total of 75 informants (40 female students, 21 male

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[3] My field work was conducted in the periods: 1 November to 18 December 2013, 12 January to 20 March 2014, and 7 March to 28 May 2015. Prior to the fieldwork I knew the country and had contacts from four other visits.

[4] I did my fieldwork at Sherubtse College, which is a part of the Royal University of Bhutan located in Kanglung, a rural town in eastern Bhutan. Students from all over the country come to study there. Free admission to colleges such as Sherubtse is granted to students who graduate at the top of their school classes. Hence, the students in Sherubtse College are from different socio-economic backgrounds.

[5] The four districts from which I do not have any informants are: Zhemgang (population 21,470). Bumthang (population 18,946). Trongsa (population 15,936). and Gasa (population 3,664) (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan 2015). The three districts I have most informants from are: Paro (population 42,830). Punakha (population

21,037). and Thimphu (population 123,255) (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan 2015).

[6] Kira is the national dress for Bhutanese women. The kira is a floor-length rectangular piece of woven fabric wrapped around the body. Women wear the kira over a blouse, with a short jacket. The male national dress, a knee-length robe fasted by a belt, is called a gho. All Bhutanese citizens are required to observe the national dress code while in public. It is mandatory to wear the national dress in government offices, schools and at formal occasions.

[7] Autobiographical interviews were conducted with key informants to help shed light on behaviour and attitudes (Crewe and Maruna 2006). This information is excluded in order to ensure anonymity of informants

[8] I consider my field diary to be part of my data. I wrote it in Danish as a way of keeping conversations and observations safe in a living situation where I had close to no privacy since I was sharing

a room with two students. All classes and newspaper articles were available to me in English, which is a widely used language in Bhutan. At all levels of education subjects are taught in English, while the national language is taught as a second language. English is also used by media outlets. This meant my informants spoke English to a very high standard, and interviews were conducted in English to avoid use of translators. I believe the nuances possibly lost by conducting interviews in English are preferable to the disadvantages in using a translator for discussions on politically sensitive issues. Quotes from informants are verbatim excerpts from recorded interviews (except the very first quote in the article, from Choki 2013, which is quoted from my field diary). The colloquial English spoken by my informants is a result of the widespread use of the language in Bhutan and perhaps also the con-

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students, eight employees of Sherubtse College, and six family members of key informants). The interviews varied in length but tended to take more than an hour and were captured on a voice recorder. Individual interviews followed Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Spradly (1979). These interviews were done in places convenient for the informants: in their college dorm rooms, or on the lawn in front of the lecture hall or in the cafeteria close to the football field. I did many of the focus group interviews in a storage room in the back of the College Library. It was a cold and messy room, but it had a large table and many plastic chairs and, most importantly, privacy. For focus group interviews I followed Dawson, Manderson and Tallo's (1993) instructions from *The Focus Group Manual*.

In Bhutan people born after the turbulent events of the early 1990s – such as my informants – represent an interesting section of society when exploring conflict and narratives, as their knowledge of the ethnic conflict rests entirely on intergenerational transmission. Since this generation did not witness the conflict, it allows us to explore the transmission of narratives and silences. As Tint also found in her research: if the goal is to study memory as internalized over time, one must choose informants who have "learned the significant aspects of their cultural history through social transmission rather than direct experience" (2010b, 372). It is not suggested that understandings found among these informants can be generalized to the older population of Bhutan. The generations who witnessed the conflict themselves will likely have different narratives than generations that rely on intergenerational transmission. What we can infer from the narratives and silences found among the students is which narratives are chosen for transmission by those who had direct experience with the conflict. In this way, the conclusions drawn in this article reach beyond the informants actually interviewed. The narratives, silences

and lack of knowledge are not just theirs; they are an expression of intentions of those around them. In my informants, we see to a certain extent older generations, the media, the education system and the political context of Bhutan mirrored back to us.

1. The Conflict in Bhutan

Bhutan is a small landlocked country located in an important geo-strategic position between the two giants of China and India (Kharat 2004; Walcott 2011). Despite a small population of 765,600 (World Bank 2014), Bhutan can be characterized as a multi-ethnic, -cultural, -lingual and -religious country with three major ethnolinguistic groups (Giri 2004). Historically, the Dzongkha-speaking Ngalung resided in north-western Bhutan, the Tshangla-speaking Sarchhop in the east, and the Nepali-speaking Lhotshampa in the south along the Indian border.[9] The majority of the first two groups practice Buddhism,[10] while the majority of the Lhotshampa practice Hinduism.[11] Today, approximately 20 percent of the Bhutanese population is Lhotshampa, who according to Human Right Watch face discrimination regarding employment, education and citizenship (Human Rights Watch 2007). The gradations of citizenship currently used in Bhutan place a significant number of Lhotshampa in a liminal legal space without full Bhutanese citizenship, which influences their civil rights (Whitecross 2009).

During the 1980s, Bhutan embarked on a "national identity project" with an essentialist underlying understanding of culture and state (Bothe 2012). The aim was to have "one nation, one people", which meant that the culture of the country's political, cultural and economic Ngalung elite – including their dress, language and etiquette (Driglam Namza) – was to be accepted by all Bhutanese (Muni 1991, 145–47).[12] Many of the policies implemented under this project seemed to be aimed at the Lhotshampa population, and were inspired partly

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sumption of American and British movies, television and music. Entertainment from India and South Korea is also popular.

All data collected during the fieldwork was categorized using open coding in the software NVivo.

[9] In present day Bhutan, the geographical divisions are less sharply defined due to migration (as discussed by Ansari [2017, 70]). However, many Bhutanese express a strong attachment to (and

have continued ownership of) the land of their forefathers even if they reside in a different part of the country.

[10] The Dzongkha-speaking Ngalung of north-western Bhutan practice Drukpa Kagyu Buddhism and the Tshangla-speaking Sarchhop of the east practice Nyingmapa Buddhism.

[11] A minority within each ethnic group follow other religions those associated with their ethnicity.

[12] Driglam Namzha is traditional Bhutanese etiquette. It dictates how to serve, sit and eat at ceremonies, as well as guidelines for wearing the national dress and instructions on how to receive guests, gifts and blessings (National Library of Bhutan 1999). It originally only applied to officials but has since spread out to the general public (Whitecross 2002, 93–94).

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by the role the Nepali population of Sikkim played in the downfall of that country's monarchy and its subsequent absorption into India (Bothe 2012, 31; Muni 2014, 159–60). When stricter laws of citizenship were introduced in 1985, many Lhotshampa were deemed illegal immigrants and lost their citizenship (Hutt 2003). By 1990, Bhutan saw its first Lhotshampa demonstrations demanding equal rights and democratic development. The authorities responded with force and Lhotshampa started fleeing Bhutan. Even though bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan were initiated in 1993 (Kharat 2003), the Bhutanese refugee situation remained unresolved (Hutt 1996a). Rizal suggests that the Bhutanese government showed little interest in finding a solution to the problem: while bilateral talks about possible repatriation were under way in Nepal, back in Bhutan the land of the exiled refugees was given to others (Rizal 2004, 168; Giri 2004). The refugee situation dragged on and became one of South Asia's longest-standing refugee problems. Since 2007, the refugees have been offered resettlement in third countries, as there is still no hope of repatriation.

Although the previous government of Bhutan acknowledged the refugee issue as "the biggest political, social and security challenge for Bhutan" (Thinley 2011, 118), the conflict itself remains a taboo in the country. We may understand the Bhutanese government's approach to the conflict not as literal denial – the occurrence of the conflict is not denied – but rather as what Cohen (2001) calls interpretive denial: the authorities present the events as a situation where they dealt with an anti-national terrorist movement (Department of Information 1991). This interpretation has not been paired with any acknowledgement of the events or their victims. According to Neumann and Anderson (2014, 7), acknowledgement and knowledge are both vital to moving on from conflict: "Reconciliation is premised on an acknowledgment of wrongs. Such an acknowledgment in turn requires ready access to knowledge about the exact nature and extent of the wrong in question." In Bhutan both acknowledgment and knowledge are absent, as the conflict has been largely ignored by media, researchers, politicians and, it seems, the Bhutanese people. Fear that the authorities might punish anyone speaking about issues relating to the conflict is widespread (Christensen

2017) and part of a larger culture of silence that characterizes present-day politics in Bhutan (Schmidt 2017, 3). Despite the silence, most of my informants knew about the conflict. They possess narratives pieced together from what family members have said and rumours that friends have shared.

2. Narratives, Silence and Forgetting

Narratives are, for the purposes of this article, understood as being deeply embedded in, and at the same time reflective of, social context: they are not an exact record of what happened, but rather reflect human interests and present aspirations (Bold 2012). This means we can gain insight into people's understanding and experiences of the world by focusing on the narratives they tell about their lives, society and conflicts. People actively engage with experiences of the past (Tint 2010a) by inserting pieces of acquired knowledge into larger cultural narratives to create meaning (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 5). In this way, people understand experiences through socially shared frameworks (Fivush, Bohanek, and Zaman 2010).

These socially shared frameworks include silence and forgetting. Passerini (2003, 247) is suspicious of public silence, but does not reject the possibility that silence can have a positive meaning when used to create distance from the past in order to (re)establish solidarity in society. Silence or forgetting may be part of a society's "need to eliminate segments of its social memory which are interfering with the society's present functions" (Misztal 2010, 30). Connerton suggests the term prescriptive forgetting when silence is prescribed by a state based on the belief that it is in the interests of all parties (2008, 61). This kind of forgetting can be publicly acknowledged because it is understood to serve the greater good, and Connerton remarks that: "societies where democracy is regained after a recent undemocratic past, or where democracy is newly born, must establish institutions and make decisions that foster forgetting as much as remembering" (2008, 62). Moving on from conflict may include silences that need to be observed; however, this has consequences: "the move towards resolution may leave gaps that cannot be filled, holes in the fabric of memory that simply have to be stepped over or around" (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 237).

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In cases where the silence is controversial, repressive erasure may be employed by the state to deny, eliminate or abolish memories. Repressive erasure is employed most forcefully in totalitarian regimes; however, such "cancellation of memory" also happens in democracies and transitional political regimes (Passerini 2003, 241). This process requires the complicity of those who are not in power: they need to accept the imposed silence for it to be successful (243). It is not always those in power who initiate silence; communities can take on silence in "a self-decided attitude" (244). Humiliated silence is an example of that; it is characteristic that this form of self-imposed silence is widespread but unacknowledged by those participating in it (Connerton 2008, 67). This kind of silence "may be an attempt to bury things beyond expression and the reach of memory" (67) because the "things" are experienced as shameful.

Silence can have many causes, but only two ultimate ends: either the silence is eventually broken or the events are eventually forgotten:

> Something may be unsaid because its memory has been actually repressed – by trauma, contrast with the present, conflicts of individual and collective nature – or because the conditions for its expression no longer (or do not yet) exist. Sometimes the change in these conditions may break the silence and allow memories to be expressed, while at other times silence can last for so long and under such conditions that it may contribute to the effacing of memory, and induce oblivion. (Passerini 2003, 238)

For silence to break, a change in conditions is needed. The conditions needing to change will depend on the silence at hand. A silence connected to political issues requires a change that is political in nature. Memory is deeply political (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 5), and the past is often used to justify current political projects (Bell 2006, 6). Hence, new political projects carry within them the potential for new versions of the past to be sought after and in that process silences to be broken.

These theoretical underpinnings will aid the discussion found after the presentation of the empirical material. The ethno-graphic account found in the next pages presents the narratives of conflict and silences as expressed in interviews and conversations with informants during seven months of fieldwork. The anthropological data have been categorized and distilled into three meta-narratives of conflict based on how the narrative in question made sense of the past and present. For length and clarity only a single informant is quoted for each meta-narrative. Before presenting the three narratives the article will first discuss the oblivion encountered during the field work.

2.1. Oblivion

During my field work I encountered informants who said that they had never heard about the conflict: they had no narrative to share. This could be explored as a narrative position but poses challenges: Is the silence pregnant with meaning? Does the informant simply not know or not care about the issue raised? Does the issue or interview situation make the informant uncomfortable to the extent that silence is a defence mechanism? The lack of narrative was encountered in both private and focus group interviews. The private interviews were with informants I had rapport with. They would answer other questions with interest and eagerness. However, asking them about the conflict resulted in confused facial expressions and attempts to guess what I was talking about:

> Not really sure. Not getting it [the question being asked] (...) I don't know much about that one (...) I don't know, seriously, I don't know about that. Conflict about...? Was it about clashes in religion? (...) I don't know – this is brand new information. (Sangay, 2013[13])

Silence can be a tool for self-protection; however, nothing in my interactions with informants like Sangay leads me to think that this was the reason for their lack of discussion of the conflict. In focus group interviews the silence was even harder to classify as a strategy for self-protection: As other informants around the table pieced a narrative together about what happened in the 1990s, a few of their classmates sat back with

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[13] Sangay: female, Ngalung.

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puzzled expressions on their faces. The mild teasing from others at the table made it clear that the students in question were not facing pressure to hold back; if anything, they were under pressure to participate but were unable to do so. It seems that so little information about the conflict circulates in the Bhutanese society that some of my informants knew nothing at all.

The strategy of prescriptive forgetting or repressive erasure works to a certain degree: official narratives of the past have created an understanding of the Bhutanese society as peaceful and harmonious for some informants. Such understandings can only arise because the population at large participates in establishing amnesia. However, the following three narrative positions will illustrate that the silence encountered should not be understood as implying that the conflict has been buried beyond expression in humiliated silence. Rather, "amnesia" or cancellation of memory is imposed, implying widespread complicity among the Bhutanese people. The silence seems to land somewhere between what Connerton calls repressive erasure and prescriptive forgetting: unacknowledged, rather than articulated as for the greater good by the authorities, but at the same time not challenged by the population, as evident in the lack of public calls for discussion or resolution. We may understand this prescriptive forgetting as a means to establish solidarity in the newly established democracy. Bhutan's democratic project and Gross National Happiness concept leave no room for narratives of conflict.[14] Even narratives sympathetic towards the actions of the authorities are deemed unacceptable. Rather than having a national narrative about the conflict that "legitimates a present social order" (Connerton 1989, 3) and current political projects, there is a wary silence in Bhutan. The conflict of the 1990s is not glorified in narratives of bravery and defence of the country. The events are not honoured on a national scale: no holidays are celebrated or monuments built to commemorate the events, nothing is mentioned in the school curricula or museums. The conflict is simply not part of the national narrative and this silence has lasted for so long

that it has induced oblivion among some informants, as illustrated here.

2.2. The Ngolop Narrative

While not especially widespread among my informants, some subscribed to a "Ngolop Narrative", where the Lhotshampa are categorized as illegal immigrants who revolted against the King. The term *ngolops* (anti nationals) is used to describe these people in the national language, Dzongkha.[15] Essentially this narrative sees the Bhutanese authorities as having rightfully acted to protect Bhutanese territory, culture and monarchy. The claims made by those who rebelled are considered invalid because of their status as illegal immigrants: the anti-nationals are not considered bona fide Bhutanese people. Dawa,[16] a 22-year-old media student, explained that she has little sympathy for what she understands to have been a movement of people asking for land of their own: "It was their fault. I feel like, you can't go to someone else's house and say, 'okay I want a place of my own, I want a room of my own!'" (Dawa 2014). The metaphor Dawa uses illustrates how the anti-nationals are considered guests in Bhutan and hence not in a position to initiate political reforms.

The narrative includes references to what are today – as in the 1990s – promulgated as symbols of Bhutan: the national language of Dzongkha, the national dress, and the king. A common theme within this narrative is that innocent people were forced to collaborate with anti-nationals in the rejection of these symbols; that loyal Bhutanese were asked to burn their national dress in protest and forced to participate in demonstrations:

> I am not sure about this, because we weren't born at that time, so my dad did tell me a bit of it, but I am not sure (...) I heard from other people also (...) They wanted to, you know like, bring people all together and then revolt because they wanted to have land of their own (...) I think, most of the Nepali people (...) they were forced, most of the people were not willing, but they were forced. So, like because they wanted to gather a large group of people (...) even the kids and even the women were all brought out (...) When war actually broke out – it could be called a war,

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[14] Bhutan's development process is guided by the philosophy of Gross National Happiness, which emphasises the emotional and spiritual well-being of the people and commitment to preservation of

Bhutan's cultural heritage and natural environment (Mathou 1999).

[15] Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan. Nineteen languages are spoken in Bhutan and only

an estimated 160,000 speak Dzongkha (Simoni and Whitecross 2007, 176).

[16] Dawa: female, Sarchhop. (Tenzin: female, Sarchhop).

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right? [Tenzin answers yes] It is said that (...) the road was flowing with blood, it was as if it was raining blood. There was blood everywhere. You know, a lot of people died. Some people still remember how it was running blood everywhere [sic] because it was so terrible. (Dawa, 2014)

This narrative does two things: it minimizes the involvement of Bhutanese people and thereby refutes any validity of the political agendas of the movement. The Ngolop Narrative furthermore emphasises the violence of the events – which partly also serves to illustrate the injustice of the protestors' behaviour. How these events influence the present society is not a part of the Ngolop Narrative. Rather, the conflict is viewed as over since the anti-nationals "went away".

2.3. The Discrimination Narrative

The Discrimination Narrative focuses on two separate, but related, discriminations of the Lhotshampa population: the discrimination that was the core of the conflict in the 1990s and the discrimination that the group continues to face in Bhutan today. The narrative focuses on how the Lhotshampa increasingly faced pressure from and discrimination by authorities. The rebellion was an answer to this pressure and is narrated as a struggle for freedom or civil liberties. The most striking feature of the narrative is the overwhelming focus on the present. The Lhotshampa's history in Bhutan – where they came from, how and why – is not part of the narrative. Neither is the violence and escalation in the 1990s. The focus on the present illustrates that the conflict is narrated as "not over". When asked about the conflict of the 1990s informants speak of the Lhotshampa population's continued problem with gaining citizenship in Bhutan, problems with land ownership, and discrimination on the job market. In this narrative, students discuss educational institutions as micro mirrors of these larger discriminations: Lhotshampa are called *ngolops* when children fight in the school yard, and some teachers treat Lhotshampa students with less kindness. The lack of citizenship is narrated as problematic for the way it hinders educational opportunities

for Lhotshampa, as illustrated by a female Lhotshampa student, Anjana.[17] Her grades could have qualified her for a government scholarship to study abroad, but her lack of citizenship hindered this:

> You know, like, I don't have ID card. I am born here and still then, even though I have not done anything (...) despite of trying every vacation [to apply for citizenship], deprived of, you know, some opportunities, places I could go and study (...) These things – not getting things, you know – being born here and not getting citizenship that kind of thing makes us have some questions: "what is happening, what's up?". I mean, we are supposed to have some response if it is democracy. (Anjana, 2015)

The narrative about missed opportunities for Lhotshampa students does three things: it focuses on the innocence of the current victims, it highlights the past and present discrimination, and it points to an institutionalized form of exclusion and refusal to deal with the conflict.

Informants subscribing to this narrative would tell me that they got most of their information from rumours, parents and observations. One book was also cited by informants: the book "full of nasty pictures" of the violence that had occurred during the conflict (focus group interview with Lhotshampa students, 2014). Informants did not know the title or author of this book, but many had encountered it in school libraries as young children. The fact that the book seemed to have disappeared at some point was problematized in the narrative. One informant said that the copies at her school were burned (focus group interview with Lhotshampa students, 2014). I asked the college library about this book, which turned out to be a booklet published by the Department of Information in 1991 under the title "Anti-National Activities in Bhutan – A Terrorist Movement".[18] The librarian told me that the copies of the booklet had recently been thrown away to make space for new books in the library. The librarian had taken it of the shelf because he "could not imagine anyone being interested in such things" (field note 04/03/2014). The lack of information about the conflict – and disappearance of the little documentation that

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[17] Anjana : female, Lhotshampa (no citizenship).

[18] I was able to access this book with the help of an informant who had found it in the college library before it was taken off the shelf. The informant had

photographed the pages of the book and provided me with copies. The front page states the title, year of publication and the Department of Information as the publisher/author. The front page also had a clear stamp from the college library, confirming the

assertions of the informant and the librarian that the book had been on the library shelves.

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exists – was narrated as connected to a larger democratic problem regarding access to information.

2.4. The No Blaming Narrative

The third narrative position which my fieldwork allowed me to identify is the No Blaming Narrative. This narrative is focused on both the past and the present, but differs from both the understandings found in the Ngolop Narrative and the Discrimination Narrative. Informants who narrated this version of what happened in the 1990s and how that affects the present typically had less to say about both the past and current situation than those who subscribed to the other two narratives.

Essentially this narrative focuses on how the Lhotshampa population came legally to Bhutan, and how the government was later forced to send them out of the country because rebel forces were challenging the existing order in Bhutan. The narrative does not choose sides in the past events, as expressed by Dechen,[19] a female informant:

> They were not original from Bhutan. And then, our fourth king had to make the decision that was right for the country. I don't know if it was right decision for them – but then, for the country yes. Because if they were here, I don't know, our culture would have diminished. But then like, I am sure they feel like they have been wronged. But then, I guess there is no blaming anyone here. It was just an ancestral thing, you know. They came here to work, but then they thought it was permanently. I don't know (…) I think it's no one's fault. (Dechen, 2014)

An acknowledgement of faults on both sides is central to this narrative. Many things are left out of this narrative: the violence of the conflict, the reasons for rebellion, and the reasons for the government's actions. The narrative includes lack of citizenship as a current result of the conflict, but does not touch upon the many other effects that the Discrimination Narrative includes. The narrative thus presents the conflict as less influential on current affairs. These missing pieces in the narrative result in events of the past being considered less significant, and the need to address the conflict currently is established as unnecessary.

3. Silence in Conflict

This section of the article engages the empirical material presented above and the theoretical framework presented earlier as it returns to the question at hand, namely: what happens when conflict is silenced in official narratives but not forgotten among the population?

3.1. Silencing of Conflict Deepens Societal Rift between Authorities and People

Despite the official silence about the conflict, narratives about it do exist among Bhutanese students, as seen in the empirical evidence. The fact that narratives do exist may be a natural result of the events being transmitted across generations as part of group identity: unhealed or unresolved past events are often dwelled upon (Tint 2010a, 247). What is important to note is that most of my informants knew that this issue existed; thus, they know that the government is keeping it silenced, being non-transparent and that discussion of it is beyond the realm of democratic openness. They know that all narratives about the conflict are deemed unacceptable – without any official justification being given. Informants experience that "something" is being kept from them and that answers are not being given, as illustrated by Anjana's case. The silence comes to point to larger democratic problems: a lack of respect for democratic rights to information, as seen with the burning of the booklet. The narratives my informants had pieced together despite the government's effort to forget or silence the conflict in official narratives deepens an already existing rift between population and authorities; the informants experience a lack of access to knowledge, lack of answers and lack of democratic debate. Especially the informants who feel wronged in the present – the Lhotshampa students – expressed an experienced rift between themselves and the authorities, but other informants subscribing to the Discrimination Narrative and the No Blaming Narrative would also speak about this problematic relationship to authorities.

The problematic relationship is deepened by the conflict. The narratives have illustrated that the main disagreement regarding the past is the legal status of those who rebelled. This is

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[19] Dechen: female, Ngalung.

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an important part of the conflict, because it paints two different pictures of the authorities: 1) if those who rebelled were anti-nationals, terrorists or non-Bhutanese, the conflict is about a government reacting to unjust claims and an outside threat to its people and peace, but 2) if those who rebelled were Bhutanese, the conflict is about a government reacting to citizens' discontent with discrimination, violence and expulsion. Since both these pictures exist in the meta-narratives described, it alerts us to the fact that – because narration draws on contemporary context for its meaning and gives us insight into present political situations (Argenti and Schramm 2010) – two different understandings of the authorities exist in the present: 1) the authorities as protectors of the people and country, and 2) the authorities as a potential danger to the people. I thus suggest – based on the narratives and their ability to reflect social context (Bold 2012) – that there are two different views of the authorities among the informants. The view of the authorities as a potential danger to the people, combined with the experienced lack of access to knowledge, lack of answers and lack of democratic debate paints a problematic picture of some of the informants' relationships with authorities. Interestingly, the older generations in Bhutan are wary of the authorities based on their lived experiences of the conflict in the 1990s (Bothe 2017) – the silence connected to the same conflict contributes to the wariness of the younger generation. In this way the conflict influences relationships with authorities across generations in different ways but with the same result.

3.2. Silencing of Conflict Means Only Parts of Society Move On

The silence in Bhutan has created an interesting situation where some informants seemed to think the society had largely moved on from the conflict, some did not realize that there was anything to move on from, while others saw the conflicts as persisting. Quite diverse understandings of the present have been established through the silence, just as diverse understandings of the present can be established through narration. The pieces of knowledge the individual gathers are given meaning by being inserted into larger cultural narratives (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003). I suggest that my informants largely observed the same patterns of exclusion, but inscribed these

with dissimilar meaning because they were inserted into different frameworks. The informants who saw the conflict as "over" or were oblivious to it did not see discrimination as connected to conflict. The informants who narrated the conflict as ongoing were likely to see discrimination as institutionalized and connected to the conflict. What this suggests on a larger scale is that some of the informants saw their present as peaceful, while others saw present society as in conflict. The protractedness itself is experienced as either existing or not existing depending on the narrative subscribed to. Thus, the oblivion and narratives presented in this article alert us to the fact that not only is the experience of conflict subjective, the experience of protractedness is subjective as well. In other words, people may not only disagree about what is *in* a conflict but also – more fundamentally – about *if* there is a conflict. This is an interesting rift between informants which has its roots in conflict being silenced but not forgotten. There will always be diverse understandings of the present coexisting in societies; what makes this diversity significant is that silence in Bhutan is simultaneously letting some of the informants live in a peaceful society while others are experiencing continued conflict. This is a feature unique to silence, as opposed to the way open narration of conflict impacts society.

While not suggesting that this rift can be generalized to the whole population of Bhutan, I will still argue that the different narratives found among informants reflects the attitudes towards conflict found among the older generations in Bhutan. Both the narratives and the lack of information come from intergenerational transmission. What is known among my informants is an expression of the intentions and understandings of those around them. At a minimum, my data illustrates that there are different attitudes among the older generation regarding what knowledge should be transmitted to the young Bhutanese. These attitudes provide us with a window on the present political situation in the country (Bell 2006). We see that despite democratic development in Bhutan silences are observed.

Disagreement about what is relevant knowledge for the present is problematic because it can hinder societies from moving on from conflict in a constructive way. According to Misztal a cooperative attitude can only be established if groups can

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reflect on their past in ways that encourages tolerance and mutual understanding (2010, 35). A fixed or closed version of the past – which does not include such reflection but rather insists on a particular "truth" – can aggravate conflict by drawing stronger political, ethnic or cultural boundaries (35). The silence in Bhutan creates such closed versions of the past: the different narratives never get the opportunity to engage with each other, groups are given no chance to reflect on others' experiences. Hence, the different understandings of the present are problematic not because they are different, but because they are situated in a political environment that discourages dialogue. Political, ethnic or cultural boundaries are allowed to grow stronger in such an environment. These boundaries, and the lack of acknowledgement and knowledge (Neumann and Anderson 2014), do not aid Bhutanese society to move on from conflict. Rather, these elements sow the seeds for future aggravation of conflict by creating rifts between people.

The empirical evidence illustrates that some events are not possible to construct out of existence with silence. Among my Bhutanese informants, narratives about the conflict resurface, without being anchored in official narratives to give them meaning and room for reflection. In a boomerang effect, the conflict that is pushed away comes back around for a new generation to interact with – but in limited and hushed ways due to the lack of information and openness on the part of the authorities.

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that two forms of societal rift may be deepened when conflict is silenced in official narratives but not forgotten by the people: between the authorities and the people, and between people themselves. It has been illustrated how silence in the case of Bhutan contributes to a situation where the democratic project is tainted by wariness, lack of openness and lack of access to information. Forgetting is a natural part of society's development, but when it comes to conflict, silence is not a useful way to "speed up" such amnesia. Some events – like the conflict in Bhutan – are impossible to silence into complete oblivion. Narratives about conflict can coexist and it may be beneficial to have an official version of

the conflict narrative instead of silence from the authorities: unless forcefully impressed upon people, an official narrative allows other voices to come forward as well. The rift between people and authorities is part of the political context of Bhutan and key when considering the possibilities for resolution. If acknowledgement and knowledge are both vital to moving on from conflict, this rift is hindering Bhutanese society from moving on in a constructive way. The second rift identified in this article is among the Bhutanese people themselves. Some informants have been surrounded by enough silence for oblivion to set in; others are aware of the "holes in the fabric of memory" which are being "stepped over or around" in Bhutan. Some understand these holes to be mainly in the past while others see them as part of the present. I would argue that to a certain degree we see the older generations, the media, the education system and the political context of Bhutan reflected through the informants quoted in this article. Hence, the rift should not only be understood as relevant to this younger generation, but as reflective of contemporary context, beliefs and aspirations found elsewhere in Bhutanese society. The multiplicity of these – as illustrated in the narratives – is not problematic in and of itself. The lack of opportunity to reflect on the differences is what is problematic, as it hinders development of tolerance and mutual understanding.

Conditions for expression of conflict narratives do not exist in the present political environment of Bhutan. Perhaps the focus on creating solidarity in the newly established democracy is too strong. Either the silence will eventually be broken by changes in conditions brought on by political projects or the events will eventually be forgotten. I consider the latter an unlikely outcome and believe the best we can hope for is that the silence will be broken in peaceful and democratic ways before political, ethnic or cultural divisions spark violent outbreaks once again.

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