

Original Article

Burning emotions: taxonomy of acid attacks in Cambodia and the cultural construction of jealousy and envy

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Background

Acid attacks, a harrowing form of violence often involving intimate partners, are prevalent in South and South-East Asia and are on the rise in the global north. There are major psychosocial and mental health sequelae for survivors and their families.

Aims

This ethnographic study, set in Cambodia, aims to identify the cultural and emotional dynamics surrounding acid attacks. The objectives are to define a taxonomy of acid attacks through the identification of the patterns of attack in intimate relations, and to explore the subjective experience of the informants to elucidate the cultural context of the complex emotions of jealousy and envy.

Method

Over 2 decades, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted with 87 survivors and their families and perpetrators in rural and urban Cambodia. Qualitative analysis was used to identify the taxa and enable a cultural understanding of the attacks.

Results

Three taxa were identified. (a) The most prevalent pattern ($n = 56$) was driven by romantic jealousy, fuelled by perceived infidelity in the context of an explicit 'love triangle' involving a married couple and a rival. (b) The second was intimate partner violence ($n = 18$), for example, a possessive husband maiming

his wife after she had fled the coercive control of an abusive marriage. And (c) the last involved attacks within the community ($n = 13$), perpetrated acts of envy and vengefulness often arising from disputes and pointing at dysfunctional conflict resolution mechanisms.

Conclusions

Acid attacks are a grotesque example of direct violence that leads to severe mental health consequences, including suicidal ideation. The taxa reveal, 'inside out', the cultural construction of the causes and consequences of attacks while demonstrating the cultural architecture of envy and romantic jealousy. This study is relevant to transcultural psychiatry and global health, with implications for culturally responsive psychiatric intervention informed by the intrapsychic, interpersonal and structural dimensions of violence.

Keywords

Acid attack; intimate partner violence; coercive control; romantic jealousy; envy.

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This article reports on an ethnographic exploration of acid attacks, one of the most heinous forms of direct violence and one of great relevance to global psychiatry. This study, set in Cambodia, aims to identify the cultural context of acid attacks and, in so doing, gain an understanding of the cultural construction of the underlying emotions fuelling the violence. The first objective is to define a taxonomy of acid attacks. A parallel objective of this study, through exploration of the meaning of the emotional drivers of acid attacks, is to clarify the cultural context of the complex emotions of romantic jealousy and envy. There are cross-cultural studies of jealousy^{1–11} and envy,^{5,7–9,12–14} but few take into consideration the deeper cultural construction of the emotions, particularly in the context of violence. A better understanding of how culture shapes jealousy and envy could add to our knowledge of the drivers of personal violence, in all its forms.

Acid attacks

Acid attacks, acid violence, chemical assault or vitriolage are dramatic expressions of violence. Such attacks often occur in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV) and tend to be depicted as examples of gender-based violence (GBV).^{15–17} In most cases, they are perpetrated with impunity. Acid attacks have mainly been associated with Africa, Asia and Latin America and appear to have been concentrated in South, South-East and East Asia, specifically

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand.¹⁸ It is not generally appreciated that there has been a rise in the numbers of cases reported in Europe, North America and Australia: for example, the UK now has the highest number of recorded attacks in the world.¹⁹

An acid attack can leave survivors with third-degree burns to their eyes, face, ears and nose, as well as permanent disfigurement. The injuries can lead to systemic complications, including renal failure, septicaemia and death.²⁰ Survivors experience severe psychosocial and mental health sequelae, including anxiety, stigmatisation, social isolation and exclusion,^{21,22} post-traumatic stress,²¹ depression^{23,24} and substance abuse disorders.²⁵ Moreover, they can be left with lifelong suicidal ideation^{26,27} and some die by suicide years after the attack,^{20,26,28–30} although religious beliefs and practices can function as a protective factor against suicide.³¹ Moreover, the stigma imposed by the local culture can result in further victimisation,²² denying the person access to psychosocial rehabilitation and mental health services.³² To some extent, the outcome depends on the person's psychological make-up.³³ Specialised non-governmental organisations, sometimes in collaboration with local religious institutions, have made invaluable contributions in various countries towards alleviating the physical injuries and mental health issues caused by acid attacks. For the most part, however, these interventions are at arm's length from what is

going on beneath the surface in terms of the cultural shaping of aggression, grief and loss and mental suffering.

Cambodia

As one of the worst affected countries in the world, Cambodia is an apt setting for this study.^{32,34} Acid attacks have been a common occurrence in Cambodia since the first publicly reported case in 1999, and Waldron et al³⁵ found that men and women were almost equally likely to be targets of such attacks. According to Human Rights Watch,³⁶ people believe that attacks arise from love triangle disputes and, therefore, those targeted seldom receive sympathy. Although it is claimed that Cambodia has seen an 80% reduction in attacks since the 2012 Acid Control Law was introduced, this claim is debatable and attacks continue.^{34,37,38} Assuming that acid attacks are (to some extent) gender based, with most involving tension over the gender of the perpetrator or their target, the prevalence of acid attacks in Cambodia is consistent with the finding that almost one in four women experiences physical, emotional or sexual violence, a proportion that has proved difficult to reduce because it seems to be culturally embedded and forms part of a general climate of violence and impunity.³⁹ The study of acid attacks falls within the scope of IPV and, more broadly, GBV. This is certainly true in Cambodia, a Theravāda Buddhist society where there happen to be high levels of violence against women,^{40,41} including between intimate partners.⁴²

Taxonomy of acid attacks

This study presents clinical ethnographic material organised around three clusters: attacks in the setting of a love triangle and intimate partner violence within a marriage and in the context of social and political disharmony among unrelated members of the community. Each of these clusters is considered using Eisenbruch's framework^{37,43,44} of 'cultural attractors', popular cultural explanations for direct violence within families. Among these are (a) 'blighted endowment', or 'bad building' (*samnaan min l'aa*), which is determined by deeds in a previous life (*kam*); (b) the pre-ordained meeting in this life of a perpetrator and their target from a previous life, thereby ensuring that abuse will occur (*kuu kam*); (c) the 'triple poison', also known as the three unwholesome roots (*Pāli akusala-mūla*), of a perpetrator's craving and greed (*lobha*), anger and aversion (*dosa*) and delusion, being blinded from right and wrong, and ignorance (*mohā* or *avijjā*); (d) 'entering the road to ruin' (*apāyamuk*); and (e) confusion and loss of judgement (*mohā*) leading to moral blindness (*mo ban*). It makes sense to utilise these cultural attractors as a template for investigating the presumed motives and forces involved in acid attacks in the present study. It is also suggested that, together, these three clusters form a coherent taxonomy of acid attacks.

This taxonomy leads to a reconsideration of two complex emotions: jealousy and envy. Jealousy has long been important in psychiatry, as in the pathology of passion;⁴⁵ pathological jealousy within non-romantic relationships or where sexual infidelity is not the concern;⁴⁶ the distinction between pathological jealousy and pathological love;⁴⁷ attachment styles,⁴⁸ gender differences in attachment styles and hence in romantic jealousy;^{49,50} evolutionary perspectives;^{51–53} and the neural substrates (for example, in the basal ganglia).⁵⁴ The transcultural evidence, on the other hand, is sparse at best; other than Bhugra's seminal review,⁴ most studies are clinical reports or sociological surveys. There are cross-cultural studies of cultural triggers.⁵⁵ of salient emotions such as jealousy, anger and fear;^{1,2} comparisons between the expression of jealousy in patriarchal or egocentric countries as compared with Thailand;¹¹ and sex differences in jealousy as a function of type of infidelity in Spanish-speaking language groups.⁵⁶ As Bringle summarises, this

sort of cross-cultural research reveals important differences between cultural groups in the types of behaviour that are perceived as being the most or least threatening.⁵⁷ Similar considerations apply to the cultural studies of envy.^{5,12,14,58–62}

Method

The cross-cultural studies mentioned above, valuable as they are, tend to rely on questionnaire and survey methodologies and seldom tap into the deeper cultural construction of the emotions. The ethnographic methodology adopted in this study allows for a more in-depth exploration. I am a Khmer-speaking transcultural psychiatrist and medical anthropologist who has conducted almost 40 years of research on the cultural health context in Cambodia. In the course of this work, supported by male and female Cambodian assistants (particularly Chou Samath and Chhun Phally), I have engaged with over 2000 monks, traditional healers, mediums, Buddhist ritual officiants, male and female Buddhist devotees and their 'patients' across Cambodia. This study is part of an ongoing ethnographic research programme on GBV. All procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation, and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975 as revised in 2013. All procedures involving human subjects/patients were approved in Cambodia by the National Ethics Committee for Health Research in Cambodia (NECHR) for the 'Aṅgulimāla Walks' project (ref. no. 0212 NECHR), and in Australia by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee for the 'Culturally Responsive Prevention of Gender-Based Violence in Cambodia' project (ID 11370). Apart from the usual ethical emphasis on participant safety and beneficence, we were mindful, in working with acid attack survivors, of the need to avoid unwittingly exploiting the survivors' injuries and to be considerate of vicarious trauma and ethical issues noted by Pio and Singh.⁶³

This study was conducted between 1998 and 2022. The ethnography included encounters with 69 informants, including family members of those directly affected by acid attacks, perpetrators, Buddhist monks, ritual officiants and men steeped in cultural knowledge, experience and wisdom about acid attacks. The informants also included female Buddhist devotees, some of whom were survivors of family violence and who had an intimate understanding of women's experiences. Informants were recruited through snowball sampling in the following provinces: Battambang (3), Kampong Cham (21), Kampong Chhnang (3), Kampong Speu (9), Kampong Thom (13), Kampot (3), Kandal (20), Koh Kong (2), Kratie (3), Phnom Penh (34), Pailin (1), Prey Veng (8), Pursat (15), Takeo (18), Tbong Khmum (10), Banteay Meanchey (2) and Svay Rieng (4).

There were 87 acid attack cases. Some incidents involved multiple perpetrators and survivors (or fatalities), meaning that there were 102 perpetrators and 97 targeted survivors (some died). The average age of those attacked was 40 years. The socioeconomic backgrounds of perpetrators and those attacked are as follows: business or trading, such as hair stylists, food retailers, cosmetics and moneylender (19 perpetrators, 24 survivors, total 43); unskilled workers, such as labourers, hairdressers, casino workers, food-stall holders, plantation workers and tuk-tuk drivers (20 perpetrators, 18 targets, total 38); garment workers (7 perpetrators, 13 targets, total 20); housewives (15 perpetrators, 4 targets, total 19); rice, fish, vegetable or orchard farmers (7 perpetrators, 9 targets, total 16); services – for example, administration, soldier, waitress, government official, karaoke (2 perpetrators, 13 targets, total 15); gangsters (11 perpetrators); children (6 targets); high-status,

military or political power or wealth (4 perpetrators, 1 target, total 5); Buddhist clergy (1 perpetrator, 2 targets, total 3); and unknown (16 perpetrators, 7 targets, total 23).

The participants were de-identified, and the names in this article are pseudonyms. My research assistants or I met with key informants at their homes, or occasionally at a temple. As far as possible, male and female assistants interviewed men and women, respectively, and all encounters were conducted in Khmer. Oral consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with the ethics approval procedure for ethnographic fieldwork. In encounters with survivors and their families we were mindful of the stigma that many faced.

Interviews were conducted at their homes, with as much privacy as possible. We explored their lived experience of the attacks, their understanding of the reasons for the attacks and their feelings, including painful emotions of grief, anger and revenge, and gave them time to work through these feelings, thus minimising any possibility of the interviews traumatising them. Many of them felt relieved that, with time, their personal stories mattered and were considered sufficiently important to be heard. We paid attention to their cultural registers, such as the concept of karma. Assistance was offered – for example, by taking survivors to health and support services when indicated and requested by the survivors. Over the years following the attack we observed the interventions conducted by monks and healers, and we also followed up with a proportion of the affected families, in some cases for 15 years or more.

Rather than using transliteration, Khmer terms are spelled in Roman characters using Huffman et al's⁶⁴ adaptation of the International Phonetic Association phonetic transcription to help non-Khmer speakers pronounce the terms more accurately and consistently. In each case, the word is shown in parentheses in KhmerOS font. Names follow the Khmer convention, with the person's family name preceding their given name.

Results

Before presenting the analysis of the results that form the basis of the taxonomy being presented, a single detailed case study will serve to illustrate many of the key elements that underlie such incidents, with the main focus here on romantic jealousy.

I first met this family in 1998, and we had the opportunity to follow up with them until 2019. Ly Ny, just 16 years old, was said to have 'stolen' her cousin Ly Yana's husband, Phan and, as a result, was attacked with acid and eventually died. During the follow-up, we met Ny's former lover, Phan, Ny's daughter and son-in-law and the perpetrator, Yana. Popular opinion had it that Ny had cast love magic on Phan to make him fall for her, and she then plundered Phan's assets to feed her gambling habit. A poor cycle driver, Phan saved his money for a piece of land for Ny to live on, but she sold it and gambled it all away. Even then, Phan could not be angry with her. As was true in other cases we came across, people seemed convinced that Ny had mixed her menstrual blood into his food, and Phan himself said that this was true: he had been under a love spell. This type of love charm is believed to be especially difficult to counteract. Eventually, so Phan thought, Yana had consulted a traditional healer in efforts to dilute the force of the love charm. Ultimately, Phan abandoned Yana and their children to live with Ny. One day, one of Yana's children fell gravely ill and she repeatedly called Phan to come home to help look after the sick child, but Ny was determined not to let him go. This was the final straw and, enraged, Yana decided to hurl acid at her cousin, grotesquely disfiguring her.

Ny suffered from severe mental and physical pain. She underwent several surgical procedures but eventually refused to

accept any more, because she was terrified when witnessing other post-acid attack patients bleeding after surgery. She repeatedly attempted to end her life and, each time, her family tried to support her. Eventually, Ny gained some comfort when she bought a radio to listen to Buddhist monks preaching the dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha. Disfigured and overcome by shame at her repulsive appearance, even though the community did not discriminate against her, Ny preferred to withdraw into isolation and resorted to begging until her eventual death.

Looking back, the illiterate Yana, who was very familiar with popular Buddhist accounts of punishment for moral wrongdoing, believed that the acid attack was only the beginning, for Ny and Phan would get their just desserts in the next life as they would be forced to perpetually climb the 'iron kapok tree' /daəm rɔkaa daek / (ឈើម្រក់ដែក), a legendary tree with iron thorns that grows in hell to punish adulterers by ripping their genitals.

Phan, for his part, felt remorseful, wishing he could wind back the clock to before he became trapped in the love triangle, saying, 'If only I had died, life would have been far better than living this life, stepping on two boats'. To reduce his karmic risk for all this wrongdoing, Phan became a Buddhist devotee, spending his day listening to dhamma teachings, his favourite being the Sutta concerning *Āṅgulimāla*, the legendary mass murderer turned adherent, and practising *samādhi* meditation to release himself from mental suffering over his past faults and the associated remorse (Pali *vippaṭisāri*), and thereby disconnect himself from any further bad karma in his next life.

The tragedy of Ny, Yana and Phan illustrates the psychological reality of an acid attack, the devastating effects upon all concerned and the compelling line of cultural drivers and perspectives. The remainder of this article seeks to unpick these dimensions.

Based on the data gathered, three taxa of acid attacks were identified in this study.

Taxon 1: romantic jealousy in explicit or suspected love triangles

The most prevalent reported cause ($n = 56$) of acid attacks was romantic jealousy, in the context of an explicit 'love triangle' involving a married couple and a rival. There were at least ten cases of acid attacks perpetrated in the context of triangular love in which a penile mole (believed to give a man the power to 'lasso' women) was said to have been instrumental. Overall, four groups were identified in this study.

Group 1: In the predominant pattern, the spouse, suspecting their partner of infidelity, hurled acid at them ($n = 29$) when either the wife attacked her husband ($n = 21$) or the husband attacked his wife ($n = 8$). These attacks mostly occurred while the couple was still married. In one case, a husband brought a girl to the marital home shortly after his wife fled to seek temporary refuge, but she returned to the house only to catch them having sex and attacked them. Sometimes, the husband tried to continue a sexual relationship with his first wife after moving on to live with his paramour. Typically, the enraged wives said something like, 'Why do you come back just to have sex with me! Don't you have your other woman any more! Better that you stay with your new woman!' Pushed to the limit, the enraged first wife attacks her former husband when he arrives at her house wanting sex.

Sometimes, the attacker was a violently aggressive womaniser who would eventually accuse his partner of infidelity and attack her with acid. Song Vanna, 30, had been trying to get rid of his fiancée, Yean Sophany, 21 but, when she eventually got engaged to someone else, he threw acid at her. As she tried to escape to a nearby pond, Vanna pursued her and hurled more acid at her. Initially, the villagers, aware of the situation involving the two fiancés, held back

from helping her because ‘it was a private family matter’, until eventually the village head called the police. Vanna, remorse-stricken, said he was unable to live without Vanna; he swallowed the remaining acid and later developed an oesophageal stricture. Sophany’s parents said it was just crocodile tears, a ruse to avoid being sent to prison, because ‘he wanted to show the world that he was a true and sincere lover’.

Group 2: The wronged spouse attacking their rival was almost as common ($n = 24$). In all but two cases, the wife was the perpetrator. The attacks were usually perpetrated while the couple was still married ($n = 13$) or, in some cases, after they had broken up ($n = 6$). There was a tendency for the wronged wife and her family to attribute the husband’s behaviour to his having been bewitched by a love charm cast by the rival. Sometimes, a woman seeking to steal a married man was thought to have used magical love spells to break up the couple and make the man fall in love with her.

Group 3: In a reversal of this pattern, the rival attacked her lover’s wife ($n = 2$), either while the partners were still together or even after the rupture of the marriage.

Group 4: In one case, the person attacked was the wrong target.

Taxon 2: IPV

A second taxon involved IPV between a husband and wife (in Cambodia, many relationships are recognised as marriages, even without being legally recognised, if the cohabiting couple has participated in a ritual for their ancestral spirits). There was no explicit love triangle, and the acid attack was perpetrated in the context of IPV ($n = 18$ cases). One common pattern in IPV was where the wife suffered emotional abuse; her husband was chronically unfaithful, having sex outside the marriage with random women. He would habitually go back and forth between his family and ‘outside’ only to return to his original home; as people said, ‘go down and up and down and up’, /coh laəŋ coh laəŋ/ (ចុះឡើងៗ), a powerful conceptual metaphor in which the topography of the house (sleeping with his wife in the upstairs level and descending the stairs to sneak off to his sex partner) represents his oscillating up-and-down morality in ‘going down’ to his lover and returning periodically to his marital home. Usually, the husband would have abused his wife for years, to the point that she would have attempted to flee the marriage and rejected his offers of reconciliation. Typically in such cases, her estranged husband, filled with possessive longing, would say something like, ‘I love you so much that I could not be separated from you, darling’, which would escalate into, ‘Don’t you forget! If I can’t have you, nobody can have you’, leading him to destroy her beauty by burning off her face, robbing her of her identity and turning her into irremediably damaged goods ($n = 15$). In one case, a wife trapped in a coercive marriage hurled acid at her husband as a last resort.

Taxon 3: social/political disharmony and dysfunctional conflict resolution

In the final taxon, perpetrators, fuelled by envy rather than jealousy, attacked people in the local community ($n = 13$). Attacks were perpetrated in a broader social and political context, involving disharmony and dysfunctional conflict resolution. Community conflict is nuanced in three overlapping forms.

Gratuitous fighting among family or peers ($n = 6$ participants): Acid attacks ensued from quarrelling and fighting among members of a peer group. For example, a drunken fight broke out between two young men. One was severely injured, but the assailant’s aunt was unwilling to pay as much compensation as the young man demanded; he retaliated by hurling acid at her. In another, a poor schoolboy resented his wealthier classmate’s

popularity with girls, so he broke into his house, stole his valuables and threw acid at him. Acid attacks could also take place as an expression of family violence; for example, a father-in-law driven by alcohol threatened and intimidated the family, and threatened his son-in-law at knife-point. He felt compelled to stop this by throwing acid at his father-in-law. In many cases, a person was attacked seemingly at random in the streets, at home or in or near markets. In these cases, either the perpetrators could not be identified because they concealed their identity, the survivors did not want to name them or the attacks took place late at night or in the early morning.

Rivalry over business ($n = 4$): Attacks can be driven by envy of the target for their success in business dealings. For example, a newcomer set up a business in competition with a local in the neighbourhood. The local business branded the profit-taker ‘a wild hen’, avaricious in wanting to control the market and crowd out the competition, felt envious, /cranaen cnie niih/ (ប្រណែនណ្ឌនីស) and held a grudge, /kumnum saən sək/ (កុំនុំសងសឹក), which culminated in the acid attack. In another case, a landowner attacked a squatter. Many monks were also renowned traditional healers and could gain revenue from their patients. In one case, the arrival of a renowned monk-healer at a temple provoked an acid attack by an established monk-healer whose reputation (and business) was eclipsed by that of the newcomer.

Money-lending disputes ($n = 3$): Microfinance through informal money-lenders at exorbitant interest rates pushes many people into a spiral of poverty. The money-lenders are inevitably envied for their wealth and often hated at the same time. One example, in which racial enmity added an additional layer and illustrated the role of envy, repays closer scrutiny.

Nieng Vany, 43, was a Cham woman from the minority Islam community who had become wealthy through her cattle-slaughtering enterprise and had also become a money-lender. There was a neighbouring Khmer family so destitute that the husband had been driven to rob a bank. When he desperately needed \$1000 for bail, his wife was forced to borrow it from Vany but inevitably could not afford to make any repayments. When Vany made a final demand, she promised to sell the family’s sole asset – their rice field – to raise the money. Vany had nightmares for three successive nights of falling into a deep pit and being unable to climb out and, when she woke up, she noticed her arms twitching helplessly. Her mother, interpreting the dream as an omen of an imminent attack, urged her to seek a ritual of ‘banishing the astrological misfortune’, but Vany, as a Muslim, did not adhere to the Buddhist belief in destiny from a previous incarnation and, moreover, she had never caused anyone harm and did not see why she should become a target for revenge. Vany was mistaken, for shortly after experiencing the dreams the borrower attacked her with acid and disfigured her. In a sense, the destitute borrower chose to ‘repay’ the debt the only way she could – with acid rather than money. Looking back on the dream omen, Vany said that the body and mind have different responses to the real world: the body could tell us what is going to happen, but the mind does not. Vany lost all her wealth paying for rehabilitation at private hospitals, especially since the compensation ordered by the court never materialised. Now it was Vany’s turn to feel worthless, her suffering ‘greater than the sky and the earth’. Despite her Muslim teachings, she thought only of dying by suicide.

In another case, a lender demanded that a debtor discharge their debt in full and requested the village head to enforce this. However, the village head mediated and, realising that the lender had no funds, proposed that the debt be repaid in instalments. The lender was infuriated and, shortly afterwards, the village head was attacked with acid.

Discussion

Acid attacks, whether in the context of IPV (involving two people) or a love triangle (involving three), illustrate the lengths to which people can go when driven beyond their tolerance levels. The underlying motives for acid attacks have been described by Mannan et al⁶⁵ as including domestic disputes (Taiwan), rejected romantic advances (Bangladesh) and a woman attacking other women on account of infidelity (Jamaica). The findings reported here reveal how the cultural architecture of these motives, at least in Cambodia, revolves around culturally defined constructs of jealousy and envy.

These findings led to a proposed taxonomy of acid attacks. Each taxon highlights a significant psychosocial and cultural insight, with implications for the comparative understanding of the psychology of romantic jealousy and envy.¹ Melanie Klein depicted envy as dyadic and jealousy as triadic.⁶⁶ However, it would be wrong to conclude that the taxa represent neat bifurcations between jealousy (as in taxa 1 and 2) and envy (as in taxon 3), and the findings suggest an overlap. Wurmser and Jarra⁶⁷ in considering pathological jealousy from a clinical perspective, make the point that conflicts of closeness in dyadic relationships can hide unconscious jealousy and, conversely, the triadic conflict involving jealousy hides a deeper dyadic conflict related to envy, and that these reciprocal conflicts often conceal one another. Adding the cultural dimension shows even more clearly how the neat bifurcation of jealousy and envy falls apart. For example, in Buddhist psychology, despite the translations into English in a vainglorious attempt to match up the emotions with their presumed English equivalents, the indigenous taxonomy of the emotions that is detailed in the classical Buddhist texts simply cannot be shoe-horned into clear categories of jealousy or envy.

The aggression arising from sexual jealousy is culturally shaped,³ as amply demonstrated in the findings on the first taxon in the context of triangular love (see above). This study provides cultural texture to romantic jealousy, here metaphorically conceptualised as 'the fire of jealousy' burning in the perpetrator's heart, consuming them with burning rage and driving them to commit the acid attack and thus, ironically, burning the target of their jealousy. Popular culture draws on Buddhist textures of deterrence and justice, such as the popular belief, drawn from Buddhist sources, that adulterers are condemned to hell, where they will be forced by the Yāmapāla to climb up and down the iron-spiked trunk of the kapok tree. Images of this punishment abound on social media and are similar to those reported in neighbouring Thailand.⁶⁸ There is no need for the cuckolded partner to seek vengeance for, sooner or later, the one who stole the partner will face their just desserts in the next life. Such beliefs, to a greater or lesser extent, provide comfort to those at the wrong end of the love triangle and, at least in theory, should curb the drive for vengeance.

The second consideration is the salience of love magic and love charms as an explanation of why a spouse would risk everything for an extramarital relationship in a village community that values social norms. This formulation is consistent with the cultural traditions, certainly in South-East Asia, of magical love cast by charms^{69–71} that might be thought of as sowing the seeds of triangular love and a recipe for acid attacks. The magical sense that love triangles can be magically mediated by a love charm is further extended by the popular belief, which I have described elsewhere, that a man endowed from birth with penile moles possesses a magical power to 'lasso' women into toxic relationships, setting the scene for jealousy and acid attacks.⁷²

The second taxon, acid attacks in the context of IPV within a marriage, illustrates the cultural colouration of extreme possessiveness by a husband towards his wife as a recipe for morbid jealousy.

In such a case, the husband who loses her to another says, 'If I cannot have you for myself, no one else can have you either' – a refrain found even in settings such as the UK, where Berlina Waters, on trial for pouring sulphuric acid over her ex-boyfriend, who subsequently died, uttered similar words as she hurled the acid at him.⁷³ It seems reasonable to suggest that such powerful motives as romantic jealousy, for example, in perpetrating such horrific acts of violence, are culturally shaped.

This second taxon, in the context of IPV and coercive control, shows how difficult it can be for a partner to escape an abusive situation without the fear of retribution. A husband may not care much about respecting his wife while he has her in his possession, but extreme possessiveness and morbid jealousy set the scene for acid attacks. In examining this issue, this study responds to calls from researchers⁵⁵ for future studies to explore romantic jealousy in couples from various cultural backgrounds. This adds to our understanding of the cultural context of morbid jealousy, extending the seminal work of Buddhist psychologists such as De Silva and De Silva⁷⁴ in Sri Lanka, which, like Cambodia, is a Theravada Buddhist society.

The third taxon provides insight into the cultural context of envy, as Gillian Rathbone has written in this journal: 'Envy is in the vandal who defaces the only thing of beauty in a wasteland; in the patient who would rather suffer than admit his neediness by accepting help. Envy spoils what we secretly desire, and in so doing spoils ourselves'.⁷⁵ In Cambodia, with its ever-growing disparities in wealth, people remain trapped in cycles of debt and poverty that only fuel envy of those thought as being successful in small business or moneylending. The popular Khmer saying, 'a forest hen will scatter and destroy a domestic hen', /moan prey kamcaay moan srok/ (មាន់ព្រៃកំបាយមាន់ស្រុក), is a metaphoric depiction of the threat posed to a community by a potent interloper, one whose success provokes envy.

It might appear that the cultural drivers – here, 'cultural attractors' – for acid attack are specific to Cambodia: for example, the perspectives pertaining to karma and the culturally particular gender relations. It is clear that all these 'drivers' are present to some degree and that, in the view of the informants, they powerfully shape the outcome. There are two possible ways to proceed. One could take the view that the emotions are culturally specific, giving rise to cross-cultural studies of the emotions of jealousy and envy. Conversely, one could argue that emotions are universal, that culture merely shapes the expression of the emotion and that anyone subjected to the circumstances described in this article could be inflamed to experience jealousy or envy and, in turn, express it through violence, in this case by acid attack. Either way, the problem, as numerous anthropologists such as Bierdtet and Stodulka, in their interdisciplinary study of envy and culture, warn, is that 'culture' cannot simply be reduced to being 'an independent operational variable' or, on the other hand, be 'extended arbitrarily to global cultural groups'.⁷⁶ Similarly, Hughes⁷⁷ is critical of the 'naturalisation' of Euro-American notions of envy. See, too, warnings that emotions cannot easily be mapped across culture and language.⁷⁸

Psychiatrists reading this article might assume that the clinical task is to translate what the patient presumably 'feels' (e.g. jealousy or envy). Anthropologists, starting with Lutz and White,⁷⁹ warn that emotions are not merely what the person 'feels' within their body, 'not simply as labels for internal states whose nature or essence is presumed to be universal', but are 'serving complex communicative, moral and cultural purposes'. In his review of the cross-cultural aspects of jealousy, Bhugra,⁴ citing Lutz and White's 'two-layered theory of emotions', argues for the interactions of interpersonal and intrapsychic factors, with the observed emotions being only the tip of the iceberg. Here, the emotions we tag as

‘jealousy’ or ‘envy’, even if we retag them in the local language, could help psychiatrists – providing they exercise caution not to oversimplify – to relate to an ‘experience-distant’ emotion.

Clearly, emotions are culturally constructed rather than simply culturally shaped. In considering the deeper structures of jealousy and envy in Cambodia, an Indianised society, the present findings touch on deeper structures of the mind, which are rooted in ancient Indian medical and psychological theory and in Buddhist theory of mind. The phrase ‘the fire of jealousy’, /pləəŋ pracan/, conveys two qualities. First, the Khmer /pləəŋ/, fire, depicts how jealousy, once kindled, combusts and spreads uncontrollably. People use this image in describing the kindling of an epidemic such as COVID-19, as in the serial verb /riik riel daal/ (រីករាលដាល), literally, a single burning twig, starts as the budding flower, /riik/ (រីក) which leads to a fever that intensifies /riel/ and finally bursts out uncontrollably as a wildfire /daal/ (ដាល). Second, the Khmer /pracan/ is a loan word from the Sanskrit and Pāli *caṇḍa*, meaning ‘fierce, violent, uncontrolled’. Classical Buddhist sources are rich in describing *caṇḍa* as fierce, violent, quick-tempered, uncontrolled and passionate. In the Agati Sutta and the Off-Course Sutta, jealousy is listed as one of the four main emotions of violence. Other relevant sources include the Sujāta Jātaka and the Chaddanta Jātaka (no. 514) about harbouring revenge, and the Culla-paduma (no.193) and Mahā-Padhuma Jātaka (no. 472) in relation to sexual jealousy. Similarly, for envy, the terms /cranaen/ (ច្រណែន), the Khmer near-synonym /cnie niih/ (ឈ្នើស) and the added layer that the person wishes to destroy the target, /rihsyaa/ (រឹស្យា), are possibly connected with the classical Buddhist material on envy. The anthropological, religious and linguistic textures of these matters are presented in a detailed ethnographic exploration reported elsewhere.⁸⁰

The limitations of this study include its narrow focus on a specific geographical context (Cambodia), which may not capture the diversity of experiences and cultural nuances in other regions. Additionally, reliance on qualitative methods and a small sample size may have limited the generalisability of the findings. In regard to scaling up, Cambodia has historical and cultural uniqueness, making comparisons even with its South-East Asian neighbours difficult, let alone elsewhere in the world.


In conclusion, this study sheds light on the cultural context of acid attacks, with implications for global mental health. Our experience with these and other cases of acid attacks demonstrates that attacks not only result in physical disfigurement but also leave deep-seated psychological scars, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress and suicidal ideation.

The taxonomy of acid attacks, categorised into three distinct contexts – romantic jealousy, IPV and social/political disharmony – provides a nuanced understanding of the emotional drivers and cultural dynamics at play. This study illuminates the dynamics of coercive control within intimate partner relationships, where possessiveness and morbid jealousy can escalate into extreme acts of violence.

Traditional gender roles and beliefs about relationships contribute to the perpetration of violence, particularly in intimate partner settings. Moreover, the compelling popular belief in the power of love magic and genital moles as a sexual attractor highlights the place given to supernatural forces in the cultural dynamics of violence.⁷² Furthermore, the examination of social and political conflicts elucidates the role of envy and economic disparities in fuelling community violence. There is a need for comprehensive interventions that address individual behaviours, structural inequalities and societal norms.

Acid attacks are a grotesque example of gender-based violence and, beyond that, of the underlying structure of the complex

emotions of romantic jealousy and envy. This study contextualises the dire mental health consequences when people yield to these destructive emotions, often condemning those who survive their attacks to lives of unrelenting suicidal ideation. Mental health professionals should collaborate with local cultural experts, including Buddhist monks and ritual officiants, as well as with female Buddhist devotees, who have a certain grasp of the internal workings of society in its enactment of emotions such as anger and jealousy and to responding to patients exhibiting suicidal ideation. By leveraging cultural knowledge and community resources, interventions should be built on a culturally responsive intersectoral approach, one informed by the intrapsychic, interpersonal and underlying structural, economic and political factors of gender inequality and GBV.

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Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author (M.E.) upon reasonable request.

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Declaration of interest

None.

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