The Anthropology of Violence: Context, Consequences, Conflict Resolution, Healing and Peace-building in Central and Southern Africa

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Running title: Anthropology of violence in Central Africa

Abstract: This essay, with a focus on Central and Southern Africa, offers an overview of best practices and theoretical debates in the anthropology of violence, including the ethnography of situations where violence is pervasive and active efforts are made to deal with it. Although the multiple sites of recent violence in this region are unique in their scale, intensity, and cause, the literature review suggests a typical course of events of patterns of violence and trauma, construction of memory, efforts at mediation and healing, or, persisting conflict and confronting the aftermath of violence at home or in exile. The essay suggests that political reconciliation, healing, ritualized memory, and restoration of justice often accompany, singly or in combination, a break in the cycle of violence. Ethnography and anthropological analysis offer tools for policy-makers, therapists, and leaders to deal with the consequences of violence.

Key words: violence, trauma, memory, ethnography, judicial proceedings, displacement
Introduction

Many national societies of Central and Southern Africa have experienced violent upheavals in recent decades. Some conflicts have been cross-border wars between nation-states over territory and resources. Most have been internal conflicts with ethnic or sub-national divisions, often class related, in which the combatants contest access to resources or control of the state. In other cases, the collapse of the state has led to conflicts over control of institutions and territories. These wars and internal conflicts have created many victims: people killed, injured, or driven out of their homes or forced to flee to safety. The toll in lives, resources, property, and human energy has been devastating. Increasingly, citizens and experts have assessed the cost of violence and tried to figure out ways to lessen the toll, to resist a return to violence.

Anthropology offers practices and theoretical insights regarding the sites of violence, of trauma, memory, healing, and social justice.

The ethnography of violence

The ethnography of violence describes the context of recourse to violence and the distinctive underlying causes and consequences of particular conflicts and upheavals of violence. Such ethnographic description yields observations of the site of violence, the social context of the events, and, most importantly, individual narratives from actors who experienced the violence. Analysis of the narratives and accounts of the contexts of violence demonstrate that the chaotic course of events in a community or region is in fact punctuated by some individuals perpetrating and experiencing far greater violence than others; some acting heroically to rescue others. Ethnographies of differential violence and corresponding trauma are an important corrective to the frequent society-wide generalizations of the mass media. Also, therapeutic and conflict resolution interventions, and policy discussions, are more productive if narratives recognize such diversity of experiences.

This author, in an ethnography of two Rwandan communities studied after the 1994 genocide and war, reconstructs the pattern of violence, using the concept of “emotional-moral profile” to distinguish “instigators of the massacres,” from “those who killed to save themselves,” “those who risked their own lives to save the threatened,” “survivors of assault,” and “the true victims, the dead.” Following these profiles are alternative kinds of “sequels” that include “revenge or retribution,” “seeking justice,” “forgiving those who threatened you or your kin,” and “remembering.”

Anthropologist Veena Das, in her ethnography of the violence at the time of Indian independence, focuses on individuals and families who experienced the massive relocations of peoples by the outgoing British colonial government. Muslims were moved from India to what became Pakistan; Hindus were moved from Pakistan to India. She also gives close-up accounts of the experiences of the Sikh community and the reprisals against them following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by a Sikh bodyguard. In these cases, the nature of the context of violence and subsequent actions vary from individual to individual, family to family.

Sites where violence has not occurred within a larger war, where civility has held, are equally important in understanding the underlying causes of violence and the forces and personalities at work to keep the peace. Attention to this dimension of ethnography in war led this author, on a suggestion of Murray Last (1994, personal communications), to focus on a commune in Rwanda where the mayor and his staff resisted instructions to prepare a massacre,
while all around neighboring districts were engulfed in violence.\textsuperscript{4,5} This ethnography of resisting violence included the official narratives that incited and justified the violence.

Narratives are the centerpiece of ethnographies of violence. Whether they represent the victim’s apparent need to “tell the world,” and perpetrator’s to justify their actions, or the public statement of officials in institutions or government, they reveal intent and motive. However, the scholar and analyst should recognize that narratives may also harbor double, even contradictory, meanings. The victim’s account may reflect the self-censorship resulting from fear and terror. The perpetrator’s story may be a self-justification of the actions taken. Especially challenging are narratives of individuals who are both perpetrator and victim, or individuals who killed to save their own lives. In such cases, the emotional load of the narrative requires in-depth analysis and interpretation of its contradictory messages\textsuperscript{6} that offer valuable evidence of the complex cross-currents underlying the conflict.

The focus here on ethnography of violence as a foundation for scholarship and practice reveals a complementary range of studies: psychological and medical,\textsuperscript{7,8} economic,\textsuperscript{9} anthropological-historical,\textsuperscript{10,11} sociological, political science,\textsuperscript{12,13} legal-historical,\textsuperscript{14,15} and fictional literary.\textsuperscript{16,17}

**The memory of violence and trauma**

The memory of violence may become literally embodied in the sufferer. Actions, scenes, sounds, words, dreams, persons, remind the sufferer—consciously or unconsciously—of the original insult, and may reawaken the experience with all its terror. Sometimes sufferers associate the trauma with paralyzing fear. Individuals having experienced trauma may suffer physical symptoms, difficulty concentrating, or difficulty with relationships. Trauma such as mental torture or psychological punishment that inflicts no physical wounds may be even more damaging than that which is physical, as Daniel discovered in his work with Sri Lankan victims of the civil war between Tamils and Sinhalese.\textsuperscript{18} In other situations traumatic memory is held in narratives of the experience, in drawings\textsuperscript{2} or in stories shared between family members, or stories that are held in consciousness but rarely told because they are too painful. Parents may withhold them from children because they do not want to frighten them, or do not wish to pass the painful memories on to the next generation.

Narrative memory of violence and trauma may harbor distortions that justify the victim’s point of view, or paint their experience in a light that is favorable to their reading of history, such as the constructions among Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania that Liisa Malkki called “mytho-histories.”\textsuperscript{19} The situation may suppress such memory, or shroud it in secretive “silences.”\textsuperscript{3,20,21} The passing of time may suppress from consciousness such silent areas of former experience or carry them forward into what Ghazali, writing about the Somali Bantu of the Midwest U.S., calls “absences.”\textsuperscript{22} They rather become a part of a collective memory of enslavement and brutal harassment.

In sum, the consequences of individual and collective trauma may have long-term and pervasive impact with a wide range of manifestations. Obviously, such long-term, or even intermittently manifested, traumatic memory may affect peoples’ ability to carry on normal lives and relationships, or to work in a focused and productive way. Melissa Filippi’s study of Somali refugee-immigrants in Kansas City found that men generally had more difficulty returning to normal life, whereas women were more able to focus their energies on rebuilding their homes and communities.\textsuperscript{20}
These ethnographically specialized studies of trauma may be situated within a more general theory of trauma that encompasses biological, clinical, and cultural aspects of the phenomenon; in studies on how violence and traumatic memory affect subjectivity or sense of self, or the way that the effects of war and war trauma upon soldiers and veterans helped shape the construction of post-traumatic stress disorder in professional psychology.

Plates of violence: sacred shrines and rituals of re-enactment

The widespread Central and Southern African practice of commemorating the places of violence with shrines and rituals that engage disturbed spirits of the dead confirm the postulate explicated above that the memory of violence does not disappear but “descends into the everyday.” In Rwanda, following the genocide of 1994, many communities focused their attention and resources on gathering and reburying the remains of the dead with careful attention to the cultural norms of giving the dead a respectful passage to the hereafter, assuring that they would be remembered. Rwandans memorialized some of the sites of horrendous massacres by leaving them in their post massacre state, with commemorative signs and recreation of the site as a place of pilgrimage. Eventually states sponsored the erection of monuments to remember those who lost their lives in the genocide.

Rwandans deemed it necessary to remember the dead respectfully to avert possession by vengeful spirits and ancestors that are an aspect of the legacy of former wars. Thus, several categories of possessing spirits among the Nguni societies of southern Africa are those who died a violent death, or drowned, or simply disappeared and were not properly buried during early 19th century wars. Richard Werbner has documented a similar phenomenon in the aftermath of the long civil war in Zimbabwe where ritual commemorations of those who died a violent death are intended not only to remember them, but to remember them with respect. This protects their living descendants, and those troubled members of society who are possessed by such spirits, so the living will not act out the vengeance that such spirits often demand of the victims’ descendants upon the perpetrators’ descendants. In some sites of massive violence, officially-sponsored and organized public truth-telling sessions play this same role of respectfully remembering the dead, at the same time, linking their deaths to the actions of the perpetrators.

Judicial procedures and violence

The place of courts and judicial procedures needs to be kept in mind in an anthropological perspective on violence and war. Often recourse to violence by aggrieved parties accompanies, or follows, the collapse of the courts or other official judicial processes. Then, once individuals or groups take revenge or justice into their own hands, the courts may not be able to handle their impunity. Thus begins the dangerous cycle of violence that often escalates into widespread unrest. Years after the shuttering of the courts in Burundi, one of the most fearful dimensions of daily life was the likely encounter in a market, or on a path, with an individual who had murdered one’s kinsman (a Burundian informant, in reference 2). In Rwanda, the mayor of a commune who resisted the rush to violence, noted that where the courts failed to take up cases due to complicity with higher party orders, violence began against property — cattle, houses — and then escalated to attacks on people, and finally to systematic massacres.

The relationship of judicial procedures and institutions (and their breakdown) to violence may be noted in case after case of intra-society violence, as well as the restoration or reform of
pre-existing institutions or judicial processes. In Rwanda, neo-traditional *gacaca* tribunals were re-instituted to deal with the thousands of cases of crime against property and person that remained after the international and national courts had dealt with the high profile cases. In Burundi the government newly legitimated the multi-ethnic *ushingantahe* courts, alongside the re-opening of the national courts that had been paralyzed during the conflicts of the 1990s. Where courts and judicial processes have been paralyzed for a long time, a national sense of urgency and a conscious commitment to truth-telling may be required before old grievances can be dealt with effectively, as exemplified by the role of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Healing, mediation, building networks of understanding

Despite the widespread and sober scholarly insight that the trauma of violence may live on in various dimensions of memory—conscious, narrative, unconsciously embodied, shrines, dreams, possessions, paralyzed social structures—scholarly and professional communities continue to seek ways to heal the traumatized, mediate the conflicts, restore institutions, and build networks of understanding. Indeed, amazing stories abound of reconciliation, rebuilding, justice restored, and general victory of the noble impulses of the human spirit.

In Rwanda and Burundi, two societies torn asunder by collective violence, accounts surfaced of survivors and kin of victims not only forgiving the perpetrators of these criminal acts, but of confronting the perpetrators with forgiveness because that was the only way to convince them that their victim’s kin’s awareness of the act would not result in a revenge attack. Such “pre-emptive forgiveness” could also be seen as a survival strategy in the absence of functioning courts. Psychologists, psychiatrists, pastoral counselors, social workers, and traditional healers all have their approaches to dealing with deep and widespread trauma. Western-oriented therapists often despair at the massive ‘case load’ in African post-war settings. Perhaps the sheer volume of cases alongside the small number of such therapists contributes to the view that individualized therapies are not as effective as family and community interventions.

In Mozambique and northern Uganda, communities used informal care or rituals of cleansing and initiation to similarly reintegrate former child soldiers and rape victims into their families. Some Western therapists with wide experience in post-war and conflict situations in Africa recommend both individualized therapies where individuals have autonomous self-identities, but also community therapies and ritualized interventions where sufferers display strong other-directedness or strong group identification. African healers have a variety of therapies for those we now recognize as “war traumatized.” However, these therapies are usually embedded in other rituals and social settings that have served wider purposes.

A different type of intervention in situations of conflict and post-conflict might be called ‘diplomatic’ or ‘institutional’. Here the subjects of attention are public leaders, elites, or power brokers who represent combatants or who are seen as being in a position to exert pressure on combatants to begin negotiations. The East African Council of Churches in Nairobi invited politicians to regularly meet with them for meals, discussion, and negotiation of issues. Other negotiators associated with peace institutes such as the U.S. Institute of Peace, or academic peace studies centers, played important roles in bringing combatants to the peace table in such intractable conflicts as Somalia, Darfur, and South Sudan.
have reviewed these and other initiatives in peace-building, a process that includes both the facilitation of negotiation as well as the construction of a viable civil society. (4,37,38)

Displacement, flight, refugee-seeking or returning home

At the time of this writing the media reports more globally displaced persons and refugees than at any time in the past several decades. For many persons the circumstances of initial leaving home are in the chaotic flight from advancing armies or escape from plunder and attacks on them. In the combined war and genocide of Rwanda in 1994, fully half of the total national population of 7 million moved outside of the country, to neighboring Tanzania, Burundi, Zaire/Congo, or Uganda, or to more distant Kenya and South Africa, or even to Europe and North America. Camps overseen by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) eventually accommodated them. This international agency is involved in most large conflicts in one way or another, and coordinates further involvement of dozens or hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Most individuals who flee their homes in such conflict situations hope to return home. As time goes on, and days turn to months, months to years, and years to lifetimes, many realize that they will never go home. The UNHCR and NGOs actively try to persuade combatants to make peace, so that the population in the camps can return home. But many are fearful of reprisals, or of chaos left behind, or of other, often antagonistic parties having taken over their homes, fields, and businesses. Burundian administrator turned author, Katihabwa Sebastian, depicted the situation of a generic African refugee’s perspective of exile in a country neighboring his own, of the longing he felt for home, and the revulsion that welled up within him over the corruption of the leadership that made his return impossible (reviewed in reference 38). For those who return home, the welcome will most assuredly be bittersweet, as discovered by the lead figure in our book ‘Do I still have a life?’ who felt unwelcomed and ill-at-ease in his very own home community. For many displaced by conflict, the eventual option is that of finding a new home, either in a neighboring country, or in a distant land where economic opportunity beckons and other kin and countrymen have already established themselves. In the years after the collapse of the Somali government, Somalis relocated in at least a dozen countries of the world. Other African immigrants who have fled war zones have to deal with the burden of traumatic memory, the uncertainties of the fate of next of kin. The elder generation often has difficulty overcoming the split identity of the situation, and they usually lament their children’s and grandchildren’s apparent abandonment of their own language, religion, and family values. Others in such communities of refuge find new energy to succeed and to raise their children in their adopted home. Educated young adults who seek the opportunity of new lives in new places often have few regrets over having left their home settings.

Conclusion

The conflict settings and anthropological studies reviewed here show that careful and detailed ethnographies offer comparative insights into multiple ways that individuals, families, societies, and helping agencies work to overcome cycles of violence. These studies have included: strategic planning of mediatory initiatives; understanding the complex nature of memory; noting the variety of practices that effect healing of individuals and relationships; initiating judicial action to redress past wrongs and to assure on-going social justice; learning of ways to restore
civil society.

About the Author

John M. Janzen, PhD, is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Kansas. He is currently completing a book on the legitimation of power and knowledge in the struggle against chronic diseases in Western Equatorial Africa.

References


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