

Spring 2004

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Recommended Citation

Hamad, Allison (2004) "Myth & Manipulation," *ESSAI*: Vol. 2, Article 13.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol2/iss1/13>

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Myth & Manipulation

by Allison Hamad

(Anthropology 130)

The Assignment: Make two to three cogent and significant generalizations about trauma and transcendence, focusing on 1.) the context (geography, history, culture, etc.), 2.) the trauma itself, and 3.) the recovery process, using data from Cambodia, Bosnia, and Africa (Sudan and/or Rwanda). Be sure to use specific supportive data from readings and films, including information from *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*.

Cultures and cultural practices around the world are wonderfully diverse, but while religion is different in various parts of the world, and while menus vary widely and ideas about family differ, genocides look strikingly similar wherever they occur. Genocide occurs around the globe to people of all colors, faiths, and economic backgrounds. Many similarities can be seen in the genocides perpetrated in Cambodia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Sudan. Two factors that are of particular significance are that each of the genocides was fueled by official myths that contradicted the realities on the ground, and that each of the tragedies required the separation of families in order to destabilize the groups against which the genocide was being perpetrated.

Behind most genocide is the other-creating myth: ideas that separate one group from another, demonizing the “other” and inciting violence. These myths are not based on reality; on the contrary, these myths often present a picture so different from the reality that the people know and experience that they do not readily accept them. Such was the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Underlying the Balkan conflict was the Serbian claim that Bosnian Serbs, Croats, and Muslims could not live together. Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serb nationalist leader, proclaimed, “We cannot live with the Muslims and the Croats, for there is too much hatred, centuries old hatred” (Bringa 197). Yet while Karadzic insisted on the impossibility of living together, Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and Croats were living together peacefully as neighbors and as friends.

This is well illustrated in the film *We Are All Neighbors*. The film follows families in a Bosnian village just outside of Sarajevo near Kiseljak; a village that is both Croat and Muslim. The relationships between the families in the film are amiable and pleasant. Before the violence reached their village, there was no emphasis on ethnic or religious differences. The people of the village viewed themselves as Bosnian rather than Croat or Muslim. The neighbors visited each other, exchanged gossip, and lived their lives in relative harmony. This was the reality prior to the violence. Even when the talk of nationalism and ethnic division reached the village, the residents found it ridiculous, insisting that division would not be realized in their village. “We will always have coffee,” one Muslim woman said of her lifelong Croat friend.

The people who lived together as neighbors in Bosnia would not accept the idea of separation until violence touched their village. It was then that they retreated to the ethnic boundary lines that had previously been no more than propaganda. Friendships dissolved and trust disappeared, not because of “centuries old hatred” but because of an official myth and the violence that accompanied.

A similar situation of co-existence was present in Rwanda. Though the Hutu and Tutsi are from different tribes, prior to the genocide in Rwanda, the people lived together and intermarried. In order to bring about the right climate for violence against the Tutsi, Hutu extremists circulated what Liisa Malkki called “mythico-histories”: tales of the foreignness, the laziness, and the deceptiveness of the Tutsi (Taylor 140). As in Bosnia, these myths contradicted what most people experienced in their daily lives, but the persistence of the extremists, along with the circumstances surrounding the death of Rwandan President Habyarimana, led to the acceptance of the myths and the horrible brutality that ensued.

The official myth took a more direct approach in the Darfur region of Sudan. In order to avoid direct conflict, ruling parties have often followed the mantra “divide and conquer”. The government of Khartoum did precisely this when the Sudanese Minister of the Interior, Abdel Rahim Muhammed Hussein, announced to the media that the Massaliet, a non-Arab tribe in the region, had slaughtered all of the Arab Omdas of Darfur (Yahiya). This official myth was all that was necessary to incite Arab tribes in the region to attempt to obliterate the Masseliet.

In Democratic Kampuchea, the myths did not attempt to create divisions between ethnic groups so much as they sought to cloak the horror of the reality of life under the Khmer Rouge with a frighteningly delusional idealism. In her article “Dance, Music, and the Nature of Terror in Democratic Kampuchea”, Toni Shapiro-Phim refers to the Khmer Rouge and their use of song as a means of instilling beliefs in their utopian ideals. She cites, “the official voice can so strikingly contradict reality and by means of such contradiction create fear” (183). Songs of the freedom and independence that the Angkar brought to the Cambodian people were sung to those people that the Angkar had turned from free men and women to slaves. Songs praising the ingenuity and luck of the Angkar in farming, touting the abundance of the rice crop, were sung to those enslaved people who gave their blood to the ground in order to harvest an insufficient crop. These blatant contradictions were a form of torture in themselves.

One might ask, however, even if these myths are accepted by the perpetrators, why the victims of such atrocities do not rise up or protest? This is where the second factor that is common to these genocides comes into play; the breaking up of the family unit weakens a group in such a devastating way that it becomes intensely difficult to maintain a cohesive societal unit.

Because family is at the core of so many cultures, it is not difficult to assess the reason that the break up of the family unit is detrimental. It is, however, helpful to consider the specific effects of familial fracturing in each case. What is common to each case is that families were separated: husbands from wives, children from parents. Whatever was the support network that functioned in the area to maintain personal well-being and culture, it was disturbed.

In both Bosnia and Rwanda, for example, the prevalence of intermarriage between ethnic groups became particularly problematic as the ethnic boundaries became more defined. If you could not identify yourself wholly with one side or another, you were in dangerous territory. Even if someone of mixed kinship were to choose one part of his or her ethnicity with which to identify, he or she might still be viewed as “other”.

While the dilemma of families who spanned ethnic boundaries was significant, other problems associated with family separation were much more widespread. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, men were taken from the towns and villages and rounded up to be killed. The same thing happened in the Sudan. The title of Loung Ung’s book, First They Killed My Father, reflects the fact that the Khmer Rouge also found this tactic effective.

The removal of men from each society had devastating effects. The Nuba of central Sudan were left with no one to tend their herds, which was traditionally the duty of the men. Cambodia suffered tremendous difficulty because there were so many widows and so few adult men surviving after the fall of the Pol Pot regime. According to the film Samsara, even now, nearly twenty-five years after the end of the rule of the Khmer Rouge, it is difficult for Cambodian women to find husbands. There are still not enough men.

As though it were not destructive enough to attempt to rid entire groups of their male populations, the exploitation of children in these genocidal situations was also common. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge sought to redefine the order of society by turning children into soldiers and giving them authority over their elders. This reversal of roles began with the extermination of honorifics and proper names. Everyone was to be referred to as “Met” (Ung 60). If there were no “sirs” or “madams” or “mas” or “pas”, the Angkar believed that they could redefine roles in whatever way they saw fit. This had an intensely detrimental effect on both the younger and older generations of Cambodians that lived through that period.

The Khmer Rouge were not the only perpetrators of violence to exploit child labor; the “peace camps” of Sudan were created, in part, to make pro-Arab Muslim soldiers of non-Arab, non-Muslim

Sudanese children. If a family was fortunate enough to stay together before arrival, the first thing to happen upon entering a peace camp would be separation. Once the families were separated, children were shipped to other locations where they would be trained as soldiers (Burr). Not only is this type of separation devastating for the individuals during the violence, but it also has long lasting destructive effects on the cultures that it touches.

When families are separated, men are lost, and children are taken away, the struggle for the survival of a culture becomes intensely difficult. There is always a chance that the culture will be lost, if not completely, at least in spirit. The culture that existed, before the genocide might not ever be fully recovered. The same difficulty arises from the power of the official myths. Though they did not reflect an initial reality, overcoming them can prove difficult if they are widespread.

While both reality-challenging myths and family separations are common to the traumas of Cambodia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Sudan, these themes can be the common points of transcendence among them as well. Rebuilding families can be healing. Learning to trust is important to recovery and starts with the family. Though official myths were used as weapons of mass devastation, official truths could heal not only the victims of the violence, but the relationships that are necessary for healthy coexistence. It remains to be seen whether post-genocide transcendence will prove itself as universal as the trauma, but the possibilities are real.

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