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Understanding the innermost nature of genocidal rape: a community-based approach.

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Abstract

Apart from massive participation of ordinary citizens in killings during the genocide against the Tutsi, another truth revealed by the Gacaca courts is that rape of Tutsi women had become an “ordinary” behavior praised by murderers.

What is more shocking is that perpetrators relied on atypical behaviors such as the rape of neighbors’ wives and children, the rape of mothers and daughters in the same place, the rape of old women by young boys, the mutilation of victims’ genital organs, etc. Why did the perpetrators break such ordinarily existing references regarding such “sanctified” behavior in African cultures and did not feel guilty afterwards?

This article shows that existing explanations of wartime rapes that are the biosocial, cultural and war strategy approaches do not capture sufficiently the innermost nature of genocidal rape. It proposes a new theoretical framework, the community-based approach, and confronts its premises with the real-life experiences of forty survivors.

With regard to results, the uniqueness of genocidal rape is observed at three levels: the deliberate breaking of societal norms,

values, rules and taboos making sense of normality in sexual intercourse, the refusal of any link with the victim recalling togetherness, and the dismissal of humanity characterized by a total lack of guilt.

Key words: genocidal rape, normality, togetherness, humanity, community-based approach, Rwanda

1. Introduction

Apart from the massive participation of ordinary citizens in killings during the genocide against the Tutsi, another shocking truth revealed by the Gacaca courts is that the rape of Tutsi women had become common among murderers. It is estimated between 250,000 and 500,000 Rwandan women were victims of genocidal rape (Baines, 2003; Smeulers & Haveman, 2008). Apart from these awful statistics, the genocide against the Tutsi was also characterized by some atypical rape behaviors never witnessed in other contexts. These included the rape of old women by young troopers, the rape of children by mature men, the rape of neighbors' children or wives, and the rape of colleagues or acquaintances! What is more surprising is that such very atypical behaviors did not arouse any form of culpability and remorse! What could explain this total absence of shame even when the rapist faced well-known persons? How was such rape different from other types documented in existing literature?

A careful assessment of existing studies on wartime rapes show that they are underpinned by three dominant approaches. The first

approach considers wartime rapes as results of biological drives (Gottschall, 2004). Its main assumption is that the biological constitution of men is different from that of women and that men are unable to refrain from sexual “urges” when they are deprived from sex for a long time.

This hypothesis is mostly applied to warriors who have lived in the jungle for a long time. Its underlying postulation is that when these combatants meet women in their frequent travels from one place to another, the accumulated biological tension erupts like steam from a pressure cooker and “urges” them to assault these women (Seifert 1994). Baaz & Stern’s interviewees met in East DRC seem to rely on this idea while defining what they call the “need rape”:

“There is the rape when a soldier is away, when he has not seen his women for a while and has needs and no money. This is the lust /need rape” (Baaz & Stern 2009, p.495).

This explanation is problematic for the following reason: if men share the same biological disposition driving sexual behaviors, then all could be considered as potential rapists. This supposes that most of them could rely on rape when placed in extreme conditions of sex deprivation. Then why do some warriors yield to this presupposed “urge” for sex and engage in wartime rape while others placed in the same conditions of privation do not succumb to rape?

Thornhill and Palmer (2000) consider that the biological “urge” should not overshadow rapists’ willingness to perpetrate the crime.

For these authors, even if the biological constitution of men is a determining factor, people still have the choice to assault or to refrain from attacking the victim. In other words, rapists do not behave intuitively, but rather evaluate the pros and cons of their decision to rape. Hence, the suspension of rule of law that characterizes wartimes offers a favorable context to potential assaulters. They expect that their crimes will be confused with other “madness” occurring in wartime. In Hurd’s words, such behaviors increase in wartime because assaulters perceive the price as affordable and expect to escape punishment (Hurd, 1999).

The second dominant explanation of wartime rape is cultural. Its main assumption is that violence, including wartime rape, is embedded in socialization mechanisms. Authors like Zurbriggen (2010) support that the socialization to traditional masculinity behaviors including status and achievement, toughness and aggression, restricted emotionality; power, dominance and self-control are implicitly involved in the promotion of violence and wartime rape.

The influence of hegemonic masculinity was investigated in relation to gender stereotypes (Martin, Wood & Little 1991), gender roles (Brannon 1985; Brannon & Juni 1984), negative attitudes towards women (Biernat, 1991) and male violence (Braudy 2003; Cheng 1999; Levant 1992, 1995, 1998; Levant, Hall, Williams & Hasan 2009; Levant, Hirsch, Celentano, Cozza, Hill, MacEachern, Schnedeker 1992; O’Neil 2008 and Thompson & Pleck 1986). If the need to dominate is the driving force of wartime rapes, then why did strong and much feared soldiers rape

vulnerable children during the genocide? Why did young boys rape older women who could have been their mothers and even their grandmothers? Such questions do not find a relevant explanation in the cultural approach, that is mostly based on the socialization of men to pride.

The third dominant explanation conceives wartime rape as a weapon of war. This approach is underlain by the assumption that rape serves as a deliberate strategy aiming at a well anticipated harming effect. Depending on the context, rape could be motivated by the need to humiliate the vanquished group (Baaz and Stern, 2009; Enloe, 2000; Goldstein, 2001; Stern and Nystrand, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 1997) or to disintegrate its social fabric by sullyng women, who are considered as the revitalizing force of the community (Card, 1996; Mukwege, 2010). Hence, the “strangeness” of victims matters in such type of rape. But the extreme rape behaviors described above could hardly be explained by this approach because, in many cases, rapists assaulted victims that were well known to them and with whom they had positive social relations before the crisis. This article investigates the nature of the genocidal rape and documents its specificities in reference to the community-based approach.

2. A new theoretical framework: the “community- based approach” to rape

This new approach developed in an African context is mostly underlain by the work of Gasibirege (see Gasibirege, 1997ab, 2000, 2009, 2013; Gasibirege, Van Billoen, & Digneffe, 2015). For this author, the key to understanding the genocide and its

consequences lies in its potential of destruction of societal references that were shared by community members before the crisis.

He defines a human community as a virtual assemblage of people adhering to the same communication, solidarity and conflict transformation mechanisms (Gasibirege, 2013). In this perspective, what makes an individual a fully fledged member of a community is not so much his ancestral affiliation or his physical characteristics (as it is supposed to be for clans or ethnic groups' membership) but rather his adhesion to these shared mechanisms and subsequent social norms and values making sense of togetherness.

Communication channels useful pieces of information among community members and plays an educational role. Solidarity defines aspects of shared life that necessitate the involvement of the members. These include mutual help (e.g. transporting sick persons to hospital), solidarity during happy and sorrowful events (e.g. participating in marriage or in burial ceremonies) and mutual protection (e.g. aiding persons in danger). Finally, the conflict transformation sphere defines the way quarrels or disagreements emerging between members will be handled peacefully.

Gasibirege's framework is contextual par excellence and helps to observe what is going on inside the community at the present time. However, a coherent community takes time to emerge. It cannot be established within one or two generations. Going beyond Gasibirege's framework, we can say that members of a coherent community share a fourth sphere that can be labeled as "symbolic". This sphere defines norms, values and rules making

sense of normality, togetherness and humanity inside the community.

These norms emerge when some positive behaviors promoted through the three other spheres defined above take root, become crystallized and are taken for granted by a big number of community members. With time, new generations consider them as superior principles guiding life inside the community. For fully fledged members of the community, behaviors going against these superior societal principles are simply inconceivable and become taboos.

Thus, societal norms, values and rules making sense of normality not only define accepted behaviors but also take root in the subconscious of fully fledged members, the repertoire of unconceivable behaviors inside the community. In the same way, norms, values and rules making sense of togetherness not only define the sphere of solidarity but also prevent unconceivable behaviors in community life.

Finally, humanity is considered in this article as an innermost characteristic of humankind that encourages people to adhere to and feel comfortable with norms defining normality and togetherness and to feel guilty when they have failed to comply with them. Hence, in the perspective of the community-based approach, deliberately perpetrating behaviors labeled as inconceivable vis-à-vis these superior values is equivalent to dismissal of societal norms making sense of normality, togetherness and humanity!

As far as the mass rapes observed during the genocide are concerned, what atypical behaviors could be qualified as a “self-

discharge” of these superior attributes of humankind? How are they different from other types of rape observed in other conflicts that are documented in literature?

The different type of rape documented in literature are based on a rationale, however unscrupulous it may be. Biosocial rapes are motivated by a biological “urge”; culture-based rapes are induced by the need to dominate women considered as weak creatures; war strategy rapes are induced by hatred. Our hypothesis is that being able to guiltlessly rape old women, children, neighbors, acquaintances and friends is a consequence of a total dismissal of societal norms, making sense of normality, togetherness and humanity inside the community.

3. Research methodology

This research was designed in the form of an in-depth case study. In reference to Yin (2003), we moved progressively from an exploratory to an explanatory posture. The study involved forty women cared by “Life Wounds Healing Association”, a local organization that uses this new approach in healing programs of sex-based violence. As this association works on two sites that are Mageragere in the suburb of Kigali city and Mbazi in Huye district, twenty women were retained per site.

Respondents were selected on the basis of three criteria: being a victim of rape that occurred during the genocide, having witnessed a case (or cases) of rape during this period or knowing sufficiently about a case (or cases) of rape inside the family circle and its consequences. Furthermore, each respondent had to accept to

voluntarily share this experience in order to be included in the sample.

With regard to data collection, the field work was conducted in the form of in-depth individual interviews. Questions focused mainly on the following aspects: the dominant traits of the reported case, the context in which the rape was perpetrated, the rapist's (or rapists') characteristics as perceived by the victims, their attitudes towards the victims, the intended effect of their behaviors (as perceived by the victims) and their attitudes towards societal norms making sense of normality, togetherness and humanity inside the community.

With regard to the dominant traits of the reported rape, we intended to find out whether it was perpetrated by known or unknown assaulter(s), whether the rapist(s) operated individually or collectively, anonymously or publicly, whether the rape was accompanied by humiliating acts, political discourse, the mutilation of organs, etc.

As far as the context is concerned, we intended to find out about the circumstances under which the rape was perpetrated, whether or not the reported rape displayed an anticipated and organized character, etc. Furthermore, we intended to determine whether rapists selectively targeted unknown victims in order not to be recognized or if their attacks indiscriminately included neighbors, friends and acquaintances.

As for the rapists' characteristics, we aimed to determine whether rapists come from groups of non-politicized idle onlookers, ordinary farmers, members of militias, active members of right-wing political parties, the intellectual elite, etc. With regard to rapists' attitudes, we asked whether the victim had perceived the assaulter(s)' posture as motivated by biological factors; culture; political hatred or something else.

With regard to the intended effect of rapists' behaviors, we asked whether the victim felt that the assaulter(s) sought to appease a biological need (and did not display any disdainful behavior), to dominate the victim perceived as a weak creature, to harm or silly the victim perceived as an enemy or simply by the dismissal of shared norms making sense of normality, togetherness and humanity.

One respondent considered her case as not motivated by biosocial, cultural or political hatred but rather by a sort of voluntary dismissal of shared norms and references. We asked her to describe specific behaviors displayed by the rapists which she considered as typical characteristics of dismissal of societal norms defining normality, togetherness and humanity in Rwandan culture.

4. Findings

Referring to the structure of the interview, our findings are presented in three sections. The first section describes the atypical context in which rapes were perpetrated in Rwanda during the genocide. The second section briefly describes the types of rape and characteristics of the rapists, their attitudes towards the victims

and the intended effects of their behaviors. The last section specifically analyses cases that meet the assumptions of the community-based approach to genocidal rape.

4.1. The atypical context in which mass rapes were perpetrated during the genocide

With regard to the context in which rapes were perpetrated, the Rwandan case presents four atypical characteristics that have not been observed in other armed conflicts where mass rapes were committed. First, in other great conflicts of the 20th century, wartime rapes were predominantly perpetrated by rebellious, armed militias and by victorious regular troops. In addition to the above categories, rapes perpetrated from April to July 1994 in Rwanda also involved thousands of “ordinary” people without any criminal background and who were not politicized before the genocide. This phenomenon was observed in all regions and could explain the considerable number of raped women reported in existing literature.

Secondly, in other wartime rapes documented in existing literature, rapists mainly assaulted unknown victims and tried their best to hide their identity by assaulting people from villages situated very far from their know area of operation. But in many cases reported by our respondents, rapists did not dare to go far from their villages or to target specifically victims who could not recognize them. They indiscriminately assaulted unknown and known victims including neighbors, friends and acquaintances and did not seem threatened or ashamed when they were recognized by victims.

Thirdly, our respondents reported cases of pseudo-protectors who raped women, teenagers and sometimes children hidden in their compounds and to whom they had promised support and protection during the genocide.

Fourthly and most surprisingly, it is only in Rwanda where we found some cases of rapists who had “rationalized” and “normalized” such a terrible crime to the extent that they planned to marry their victims if they won the war. A respondent from Mbazi even reported a case of a rapist who attempted to legalize his marriage with a victim hidden in his compound and contacted the local authorities of the time in this regard! This initiative was not conclusive because a few weeks later, this area was taken over by Rwandan Patriotic Front soldiers and the rapist fled to Gikongoro Camp then to East DRC and became a refugee.

4.2. Categorizing rapes that occurred during the genocide

Based on the six variables defined in the methodology (dominant traits, context, rapists’ characteristics, their attitudes towards the victims, the intended effect of their behaviors as perceived by the victims and their postures towards societal norms), three types of rapes were identified by our respondents: opportunistic rapes, rapes motivated by political hatred and genocidal rapes.

Considering the forty cases analyzed in this article, fourteen can be categorized as opportunistic rapes. Most of them were perpetrated individually and anonymously. Taking advantage of the state of confusion that prevailed at the time, opportunistic rapists assaulted women considered as “unreachable” in peacetime. In addition, such types of rape were not selective. Victims were assaulted

because they were perceived as objects of sexual lust and not necessarily because they were perceived as the enemy's women as was the case for rapes motivated by political hatred. Thus, opportunistic rapes were not merely politically motivated, even if they increased drastically during the genocide.

As far as the context is concerned, opportunistic rapes reported by our respondents occurred mainly at the beginning of the genocide. The state of total insecurity induced by the genocide propaganda followed by massive participation of citizens in killings was perceived by opportunistic rapists as an unexpected occasion to perpetrate reprehensible acts and escape punishment.

With regard to opportunistic rapists' characteristics, most of them were not politicized and apart from threatening them, they did not show political hatred against their victims. Such rapists lacked self-confidence and had generally a very bad image of themselves and of their potential to attract women's esteem, sympathy and love.

As most of these rapists came from groups of idle onlookers disdained by other community members, their attitudes towards victims were more characterized by covetousness than by arrogance as was the case for rapes motivated by political hatred. During peacetime, they used to gaze lustfully at such women but were not able to establish normal relationships with them.

Thus, the intended effect of their behaviors did not go beyond individual satisfaction. They tried to appease a psychological vacuum induced by a frustrated personality through forced sexual intercourse with coveted women perceived as "unreachable" in the ordinary way of establishing men and women relationships.

As for their posture towards societal norms making sense of normality, togetherness and humanity, opportunistic rapists were very conscious that their wrongdoings were not worthy of “normal” men. Contrary to the rapes motivated by political hatred and genocidal rapes discussed below, opportunistic rapists were not confident when facing their victims. Their assaults were generally anonymous and were not accompanied by premeditated humiliating discourses. Thus, opportunistic rapists were worried about their behaviors and tried their best to hide their crimes and their identities.

The second type of rape can be labeled as a “rape motivated by political hatred”. Among the forty cases studied, twenty can be categorized in this second group. In many cases, such types of rape were accompanied by humiliating discourses and sometime by mutilation of genital organs. Contrary to opportunistic rapes, those motivated by hatred were only selective in nature and displayed many features of anticipated and organized actions.

Some rapes perpetrated secretly and individually by isolated rapists could also be categorized in this type if the rapists’ behaviors aimed at hurting those catalogued as “not one of us” or as enemies. Thus, the individual and secretive character of rape does not make it necessarily opportunistic. It is the intention behind that is a determining factor.

As for the context, rapists motivated by political hatred attacked selectively those considered as enemies whether because they were Tutsi or because they did not adhere to the “Hutu power ideology” or they attempted to hide or to help Tutsi fugitives. Such types of rape occurred generally after assaulters were informed that they

had the “carte blanche” to harm those labeled as “enemies” and got the briefing that the genocide was backed by officials.

With regard to rapists’ characteristics, most assaulters who perpetrated such a type of rape were active members of militias, youth affiliated to right wing political parties that adhered to the so-called “Hutu power ideology” or members of other less organized groups but who adhered to or at least tolerated this ideology. In many cases, these rapists operated in a coordinated way and collectively assaulted fugitives gathered in the same places where they attempted to hide from killings.

As for rapists’ attitudes towards their victims, their dominant attitude was characterized by hatred, arrogance and by a sort of disdain which in addition, was extended to all members of the targeted group. It was as if raping “enemies’ women” procured more power on their “men”, one interviewee explained.

Contrary to the opportunistic rapes whose motives were merely biological or psychological, the expected effect of politically motivated rapes were mainly humiliating, harming or even sullyng their victims. In this type of rape, “enemies’ women” represented a threat because of their potential to renew the targeted group. “If they survive, they could once again give birth to new kids” said one interviewee, recalling a discourse pronounced by a militia man in April 1994. Thus, assaults were sorts of “rational behaviors” aimed at implementing a “war strategy” defined by their “leaders”. Rapists considered themselves as cogs in a strong machine aiming at hurting those considered as “enemies”. This could explain why during the Gacaca courts, many rapists falling in this category

attempted to discharge themselves and to reject the responsibility on planners and organizers of these crimes.

With regard to societal norms making sense of normality, togetherness and humanity, rapists falling in this second category were not irrational. What they did was redefine existing norms, values and rules in favor of “insiders” and against those catalogued as “not one of us”. This is why rapists did not feel guilty after raping Tutsi women and even Hutu women who attempted to hide Tutsi fugitives. During the genocide, things functioned as if societal references were not applicable to those labeled as “enemies”.

4.3. The atypical nature of genocidal rape

The opportunistic and politically motivated rapes discussed above were observed in other conflicts including Burundi, DRC, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and even recently in South Soudan. But one type of rape seems to be embedded in the nature of the genocide itself. One atypical trait of this type of rape is the total denial of any form of link with their victims, even if these were neighbors, friends, colleagues or acquaintances! Among the forty cases analyzed in this study, six fell in this last category. What makes this kind of rape exceptional compared to other types of wartimes rapes?

As no predefined indicators helping to categorize such atypical rape were available in existing literature, we relied on what respondents perceived as a total dismissal of societal references making sense of normality, togetherness and humanity in sexual behaviors.

The first case considered by a respondent as a real-life example of dismissal of societal norms making sense of normality in sexual behaviors implied the rape of a little girl by an adult man. What made this case exceptional beyond existing explanations of wartime rape was expressed by the respondent as follow:

“All societies codify through socialization mechanisms not only legitimate behaviors accepted inside the community but also those that are not part of the repertoire of conceivable conducts. For example, as an adult, being sexually attracted to a little girl is not part of the repertoire of sexual behaviors conceivable in Rwandan culture and even all societies. Perpetrating such a rape is equivalent to defying normality itself. What is surprising is that this guy continued to live peacefully and did not face any moral pressure from acquaintances. This sort of passive acceptance of abnormality by his acquaintances constitutes the atypical nature of the genocidal rape”.

The second case considered by a respondent as underpinned by a total dismissal of societal references making sense of normality implied the rape of an old woman by a group of boys during the genocide. As in the first case, what makes it exceptional is the reaction of community members. This appears clearly from the interpretation of its atypical nature by the respondent who reported the case:

“How can a group of boys face an old woman who could be their mother or grandmother and rape her? For me what make this rape exceptional is less the rapists’ behavior

than the incapacity of their family members to say this is enough, from now on you are no longer “one of us”.

In this research, four cases were considered by respondents who reported them as extreme examples of a total loss of the sense of togetherness. Two cases implied assaults of neighbors hidden in rapists' compounds and to whom they had promised protection. The two remaining cases were rapes of former school friends. One respondent expressed the atypical nature of one of these rapes as follows:

“What happens in his mind, when a man decides to face a neighbor hidden in his compound and says “I am going to rape you”? It is simply unconceivable, but it happened in my village and in many other areas.”.

For most respondents, if rapists did not feel guilty after assaulting neighbors, friends and acquaintances or after raping unknown children, mothers and grandmothers, this is a sign of a total loss of the sense of humanity.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the existing literature identified four theoretical approaches to wartime rape. The first approach focuses its explanation on biosocial features of manhood. It is based on the assumption that men have a more aggressive sexual predisposition than women and are unable to fight the “urge” for sex when they are deprived from it for a long time. With regard to the influence of the context, this approach postulates that men are inclined to rape when the price is affordable, meaning when they expect to escape punishment, but tend to abstain when laws punishing such crimes

are severe and applied accordingly. Hence, this presupposed natural inclination for coercive sex finds a propitious terrain in wartimes, when the rule of law is suspended. Considering the results obtained, this approach can help to understand only the opportunistic rape, whose characteristics are defined in the previous section.

The second dominant approach focuses its explanation on cultural factors. Its main assumption is that violence, including wartime rape, is embedded in socialization mechanisms (Connell, 2000, 2002a, 2002b; Zurbriggen, 2010). The results obtained show that none of the reported types of rape could be explained by this approach. As described above, opportunistic rapes were generally perpetrated by frustrated people. Thus, this type of rape is fundamentally an individual and not a culturally shared behavior.

Furthermore, rape motivated by political hatred was not rooted in the culture. If rapists seemed to be in a fit of madness when assaulting those catalogued as “not one of us” and behaved differently when they faced those considered as “insiders”, the rationale behind such behaviors could not be cultural but political. Sufferings inflicted to women responded to a certain type of “rationality” consisting in humiliating or sullyng those considered as enemies.

The third approach considers mass rape as a weapon of war (Card, 1996; Enloe, 2000; Goldstein, 2001; Mukwege, 2010; Stern & Nystrand, 2006 and Yuval-Davis, 1997). In this perspective, rape serves as a strategic and purposeful action, a weapon that intends to disintegrate the social fabric of the targeted group. This

approach explains many features of the second type of rape identified by our respondents, the one motivated by political hatred. These include the selective character of such rapes, the political motivation behind atrocities inflicted to women, and the anticipated effects of such crimes.

But none of the three frameworks discussed above could explain genocidal rape, where assaulters do not at all feel guilty even in the face of neighbors, friends and acquaintances. This is because its rationale goes beyond the biological, cultural and even political motives. The only plausible explanation available is the one proposed by the community-based approach (Gasibirege, 2013). Its dominant view is that when people still adhere to the same societal norms, values and rules defining normality, togetherness and humanity, such atypical rapes are simply inconceivable inside the community. They become possible when these societal references no longer constitute the Hobbesian “leviathan” preventing unconceivable behaviors.

When this point of no return is reached due to a profound destructive process, all unimaginable crimes can occur. Criminals function as if they are competing in defying what is considered as normal and humanly acceptable behaviors. Beyond political hatred, the humiliation of victims and extreme atrocities, the innermost characteristic of genocidal rape lies in the total dismissal of societal references making sense of normality and togetherness in human in sexuality.

Conclusion

As suggested by this research, wartime rape can be motivated by many factors. These include biological drives, cultural predispositions or political hatred. But what makes genocidal rape exceptional, even beyond ideological and political hatred and the need to humiliate, to harm and sully those considered as enemies, is the rapists' fierceness in defying what symbolizes normality, togetherness and humanity inside the community.

When rapists have reached this culminating point, they behave as if dismissing societal norms making sense of normality, togetherness, and humanity has become a "reason de vivre" in itself. As the genocide went on and the magnitude of killings increased, they had tendency to invent new forms of atrocities comforting them in this image of societal norms transgressors.

The process leading to such an atypical mindset is anti-human and fundamentally anti-cultural. Hence, the fundamental explanation of genocidal rape is that such atypical behaviors are an extreme consequence of the degeneration of social references that make sense of community life.

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