

BOOK REVIEW

Violence

Neil L Whitehead (Ed), School of American Research Seminar Series,
James Currey, 2005, 310 pp

REVIEWED by Egoitz Gago¹

¹ Egoitz Gago is a PhD candidate at the University of Bradford Peace Studies Department, UK.

This book is the first serious attempt to analyse the cultural meaning of violence outside the peace studies field. In it several anthropologists try to explain the phenomenon of violence from an ethnographic point of view. Each chapter is an essay describing the cultural approach to violence in a different setting. The book is the product of a seminar that was held in May 2002, called *Culture and conflict: The Poetics of Violent Practice*.

The first chapter, written by the book's editor, introduces the other essays. The author identifies violence with different and complex cultural contexts in an interesting way. More than that, he addresses the idea of violence as the central element in some cultural practices. It is in this context that the idea of the importance of the *poetics* of the violence is introduced – how violence can be found and described in different aesthetic contexts. The rest of the chapter is used to describe the book's contents, explaining the issues that occur.

The second chapter explains how violence is perceived culturally by Indonesian people. The author takes up the ideas of Clifford Geertz and makes a good case that Geertz's ideas are a contribution to understanding violence as a cultural system. After that, the author applies those ideas to a Balinese cockfight and finishes the essay by explaining the presence of those ideas in several Indonesian paintings.

The third essay tries to explain the concept of violence and the poetics variable. Indeed, they are the main aspects to this essay. The author offers an exhaustive description of the definitions of violence in the field of anthropology, and highlights the imaginary facts that surrounds violence. The author focuses on his own research about violence among the Amazonian tribes, describing how violence permeates their cultural life. The author explains how cultural facts are, indeed, fonts of violence that explains the why and the how of some violent practices.

The fourth essay is very interesting. It explains the radicalisation of Hutu ethno-nationalism in Rwanda just before the genocide of 1994. It examines and explains the myths contained in the Rwandan king figure, as this appeared in cartoons in the media in 1994. The author explains how all the myths and violence that underlined Rwandan society

appear in these cartoons. For example, one of them makes reference to the importance of rivers; another to the symbolism of body fluids.

The fifth essay explains the symbolism of the Liberian war. One phrase by the American journalist Keith Richburg, cited on the essay, shocked me: *It's a war with a general named Mosquito, a war where soldiers get high on dope and paint their fingernails bright red before heading off to battle. It's a war where combatants don women wigs, pantyhose, even Donald Duck Halloween masks before committing some of the world's most unspeakable atrocities against their enemies.* First the author describes the origins of the Liberian war and links it with West African history. Then the author analyses why such symbolic acts were a central part of this world. In conclusion, the author proposes a new model of war analysis.

The sixth essay details the presence of the violence in the unconscious mind in conflict ridden societies. Particularly, it explains the effects of a concrete acts of violence – an assassination of two policemen – in the Basque Country, Spain, and how that was perceived by the people. Basically, the essay argues that the violence is more prone to happen in places of conflict, where it has become part of the unconsciousness.

The seventh essay explains the patterns of violence in the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The essay mainly deals with the discourse that surrounds the genocide and the attempts to create an image of the enemy to justify his destruction. The eighth essay concentrates on the presence of patterns of violence in the discourse of the Sri Lankan people, describing jokes used to justify violent practice.

The ninth essay interestingly deals with patterns of violence that appear in particular TV programmes which the author calls 'true crime', and describes as the public representation of violence. The essay describes how those programmes are conceived and what the issues lie behind them.

The final two essays deal with the presence of violence patterns in the conflicts in Mozambique and South Africa. The first explains the effects of the violence in Mozambique and how it shaped society. The other analyses the acceptance of violence in the truth commissions in South Africa.

This book is a stimulating attempt to understand violence in different places, contexts and times. The breadth of explanations on offer is striking, and it deserves reading. It also provides researchers with a useful source of information they cannot afford to ignore.