

# THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

Edited by Kumar Rupesinghe and Marcial Rubio C.

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Marcial Rubio C.



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## The culture of violence

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### **Note to the reader from the UNU**

The UN University launched in 1990 a programme of research and training on Governance and Conflict Resolution with a view to producing a coherent framework and building knowledge and competence for resolving internal conflicts caused by ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. The programme has examined the underlying conditions for internal conflicts, particularly where this is manifested through direct violence. It has also focused on the conceptual and theoretical problems related to such conflicts, early warning of potential conflicts, and conflict transformation.

The present volume addresses the question of culture that legitimizes violence and the impact of routinized violence upon culture, through theoretical reflections and empirical case-studies. This volume should contribute to better understanding of the culture–violence interface, which has remained a much-neglected area of study. The papers included here are the revised versions of papers presented at a UNU symposium on the subject in Lima, Peru, in October 1991.

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# Introduction

Kumar Rupesinghe

The works in this volume, the fruit of a conference sponsored by the United Nations University on **The Culture of Violence**, held in Lima, Peru, in October 1991, provide a multifaceted approach to the interface between cultures and violent phenomena, an examination of theories of violence, and selected case studies related to ethnic and human rights, drugs, and urban crime. The emphasis of the collection is on the situation in South America but is not strictly limited to that region either in content or scope. In fact, the Latin American experience of violence and the transformation of violence contains parallels with experiences in many other areas of the globe and lessons for all.

The concepts of violence and culture and the interrelationships between them do not allow neat definition. Hence, the reader will find a variety of approaches and emphases, including a nuanced exploration by Felipe MacGregor and Marcial Rubio C. of the Galtungian triangular relationship between structural, cultural, and direct violence; Bruce Kapferer's exploration of the influence of Buddhism as a cultural system on legitimizing violence in Sri Lanka; Francisco de Roux's argument that a culture of violence is a contradiction in terms because "violence acts against culture." As I point out in my chapter, there are a multitude of definitions of culture. These range from "learned behaviour" to "ideas in the mind," "a logical con-



struct,” “a statistical fiction,” “a psychic defence mechanism,” and so on. As with culture, there are major difficulties in arriving at definitions of violence. While many definitions have been given to interstate war, violence and internal wars within the state are in an early stage of conceptualization. This being the case, it is not surprising that there is no consensus when it comes to framing discussions of “cultures of violence.”

Although the authors in this work bring to their contributions different approaches, common threads in the tapestry of the relationship between culture and violence, both explicit and implicit, are discernible. Whether we are describing the roots of violence in Uganda, the content of mobilizing myths in Sri Lanka, the clash of cultures between indigenous people and those of European ancestry in the South American case studies, the uses of state terrorism in the New World Order, or violence in the culture of the United States, we are constantly confronted with the importance of the interplay of the modern on traditional social, political, and economic organization.

Another major historical development running through these works is the loss of the monopoly of violence by the state, whether in Colombia, Uganda, or Sri Lanka. Several of the authors also delve into what to many is one of the most difficult phenomena to grasp and work with when looking at ways to mitigate or resolve violent conflict – the absence of a discourse of rationality in many violent situations.

While the studies demonstrate the historical and geographical particularities of the cases under discussion, they also indicate that modernization and the global information revolution, while vastly increasing the potential for human understanding and cooperation, have also accelerated the disintegration of traditional cultures, widened the actual and perceived chasms between advanced technological societies and those struggling to provide the basic necessities of life, and, for millions around the globe, raised expectations which will be unattainable for generations to come, if ever.

In my paper, I have tried to outline what I believe is one of the fundamental points of departure for increasing our understanding of present-day violence – coming to grips with the dynamics of this global clash between traditional cultures and the “celebration of the modern.”

Historically, economic, political, and social modernization processes have often met with fierce resistance around the world. The more pervasive and rapid onslaught of modernization and Westernization which has been generated by the global communications revo-

lution has obviously accentuated actual and potential conflicts between “Westernized” élites, those aspiring to gain the material benefits of a modern lifestyle, and those seeking to preserve and even extend traditional values and systems.

Although Colombian, American, Ugandan, or Sri Lankan society may be seen as extremely violent in comparison with other societies in the world, it should be borne in mind that even the most seemingly intractable violent societal conflicts, like political conflicts between states and within states, are not static processes, but are moving through stages from conflict formation to the transformation to peace. Chile is one example, in the South American context, where a once-terrorized society has embarked on a healing process that holds the promise that the traumas of violent social and political conflict can be successfully treated when injustices are acknowledged, processes are put in place to prevent them recurring, and a culture of reconciliation and peace is actively promoted.

A recurring theme in this work is the need to deepen our understanding of the nature of violence within individual cultures and societies and increase our ability to share the new-found knowledge on how to mitigate or resolve violent conflicts. Felipe E. MacGregor, S.J., and Marcial Rubio C. help expand the debate on the theoretical framework for any discussion of violence in their “Rejoinder to the Theory of Structural Violence,” which examines Johan Galtung’s seminal thinking on the subject. While accepting many of the aspects of Galtung’s general definition of violence as being present “when human beings are influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations,” the authors suggest that the definition is too broad, since other elements of reality, such as natural disasters, unpredictable events, and accidents, can also reduce a person’s effectiveness. They also contend that the quantity and quality of violence is important to any definition, for instance the difference between straightforward physical aggression and torture. The co-authors set forth their own general definition of violence as “a physical, biological or spiritual pressure, directly or indirectly exercised by a person on someone else, which, when exceeding a certain threshold, reduces or annuls that person’s potential for performance, both at an individual and group level, in the society in which this takes place.”

On structural, institutional, and direct violence, MacGregor and Rubio once again seek to expand on Galtung’s constructs by defin-

ing personal or direct violence as that “in which the aggressor can or may be identified,” while structural violence “happens to a person from and within a society’s structures which are shaped, maintained, and eventually transformed with margins of plasticity by the human beings, and in many cases this also includes the victims, all of whom are shaped by the same structures.” Institutional violence, a “sub-species” of structural violence, “is that type of structural violence which is found formally or truly embedded in the institutions and is accepted, or at least tolerated, with the complicity of the people.” On the relationship between culture and violence, MacGregor and Rubio assert that “structural violence is made up of social rules of the game which have an economic, social, political, cultural, or ideological content, according to the case, and which are generally accepted by both the beneficiaries and victims. In other words, it is convenient and correct to distinguish between structural and cultural violence, but we do not consider that this involves phenomena of an excluding taxonomy, because many of the rules of structural violence actually belong to the realm of culture and ideology.”

In their summary of general conclusions, the co-authors note that the concept of pacifying societies by eliminating structural violence presupposes a transformation of structures. However, they stress that it is necessary “to discern with some care those aspects of structure that most generate violence, as well as the efficient consequences of annulling or changing them.” They also underline that structural violence is not limited to poverty and injustice, but also “a whole set of institutions and social rules.” Finally, they make a strong case for the need for interdisciplinary studies of structural violence to broaden our understanding of it, with the aim of bringing peace and improvement to human society.

Bruce Kapferer situates his contribution, “Remythologizations of Power and Identity: Nationalism and Violence in Sri Lanka,” in the context of the 1988 and 1989 violence involved in the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna’s insurrection against the national government, which had already been fighting a Tamil guerrilla movement in the north and east of the country since 1983. The author explores “the content and pattern of the violence as this is ... organized in relation to ideological conceptions of identity.” Kapferer is also interested in the way “violence (here, specifically physical destruction) as an instrument of power and oriented through ideology can become a totalizing force.”

Kapferer examines the reconstruction and distortion of ancient Buddhist myths through a prism of modernization and rationality acquired during the colonial and post-colonial periods and describes how the cosmic kingship myths were given a meaning unrooted in empirical evidence. They remained, nonetheless, potent as generators and sustainers of violence. While pointing out the perversity of the use of the kingship myths as a mobilizing agent for violence in a Buddhist society in which non-violence is a primary value, the author notes that the rationalizing processes of the modern world have imbued Buddhist nationalism with the “overarching importance of ‘power’.” In the struggle between the state and the Sinhalese JVP, exercise of that power meant enforcing submission to a Sinhalese-dominated hierarchy of power, as well as the demonization of enemies and the use of annihilation – an intertwining of pseudo-historical cultural constructs and a desire to preserve, through the use of violence, the dominance of the power of the modern state. In August 1989, the author notes, placards were placed throughout Colombo and the provinces in which JVP figures were depicted as demons surrounded by the dead. The population was exhorted not just to kill JVP members, but to use the punishment of the ancient kings, impaling with a stake through the anus. Another form of annihilation has been the burning of bodies in petrol-soaked tyres. As for the JVP, it resorted to appeals to “traditional” village values and staged executions of government supporters, as well those it considered to have breached local morality or customs. What is revealed in this discussion of events in Sri Lanka is not a culture of violence, but the re-interpretation of mythological aspects of the culture to meet political ends, in this instance the violent suppression of violent opponents of the state and resistance to that suppression.

Francisco J. de Roux, S.J., looks at the impact of drug trafficking on Colombian culture and concludes that the Colombian drug trade has not created a culture of violence but rather has flourished in an institutional and cultural vacuum with social, economic, and ethical aspects. De Roux hypothesizes that during the past four decades Colombia’s institutions were misaligned with the expectations and needs of Colombians. Moreover, Colombians had to adapt to living in a society in which they lacked political and economic influence and which provided them with little protection from the guerrillas, drug traffickers, and paramilitary forces that took root in this environment.

De Roux provides a number of insights in relation to the institutional, social, and economic vacuums he describes. In the first instance, the historical lack of credible state institutions in vast rural areas of the country spread during the 1970s to urban centres, where populations had increased dramatically, while economic opportunities declined sharply. Rural guerrilla movements sought to fill the institutional vacuum by providing social services and security, but when the financial toll on *campesinos* rose too high, peasants and local landowners formed their own private armies to defend their lives and property. Eventually, drug traffickers, local armies, and the military joined forces to fight the guerrillas and in 1988 mercenaries were brought in by drug traffickers to train local paramilitaries. Meanwhile, in urban centres, the cocaine cartels had enlisted gangs of youths eager to attain economic mobility, a sense of belonging, a means of escape, or power and security. In the latter case, drug trafficking profits bought sophisticated weapons, adding to the level of violence.

As for the moral vacuum, de Roux suggests that while the country was and remains nominally Catholic, beginning in the early 1960s it underwent a rapid process of secularization which removed a source of guidance from Colombian society as a whole and which was not accompanied by a growth in civil ethics that would have been able to guarantee the development of a pluralistic society capable of protecting the rights of its members. The brutality and scope of the drug-related violence, including assassinations of judges, journalists, and politicians, “effectively silenced the moral conscience of Colombian society.”

However, it was the growth in power of the extralegal groups and the astronomical death toll for a country “at peace” – 24,000 dead as of 1991 – which turned public sentiment around and prompted political action against the drug trade, in spite of the recognition that it had contributed enormously to Colombia’s economy – an estimated US\$1–4 billion annually, according to de Roux. A government clampdown on drug traffickers, negotiations with guerrilla groups and paramilitaries, the signing of a new constitution, and the growth of grassroots social movements opposed to the violence had begun to show promise of a more peaceful society in late 1991. Ominously for other fragile states in the region, however, the drug producers had begun to move their operations to other countries.

In “Ethnic Violence: The Case of Bolivia,” Xavier Albó provides a detailed description of the various strata of Bolivian society and ar-

gues that ethnic relations inherited from the colonial structure continue to be a source of structural violence. At the heart of the problem, asserts Albó, is the unequal status of the various ethnic groups and the “subjective prejudices attached to this stratification.” For the author, ethnic violence in Bolivia “is not of the apartheid type, but acts in a less formal and sometimes paternalistic way, permeating most situations and domains of society.” Because of its insidiousness, ethnic prejudice makes rational settlement of social and economic differences more difficult.

Albó describes ethnicity as referring to two factors – race and culture; and culture as referring to “behaviour – such as language or religion – that is transmitted to the members of a given social group through the process of socialization or enculturation.” If the focus is put on race, then the problem becomes one of racism, whereas if the focus is on ethnicity, the problem is one of ethnocentrism. However, the author notes, ethnic violence can stem from either one and “it is quite common that cultural differences are reinterpreted as racial.”

In Bolivia, indigenous groups made up at least 68 per cent of the total population of 7 million in 1976, when the last national census was taken. Albó provides a listing of the categories Bolivians use to describe their own and other groups within society – *gente decente* or “decent people,” used by whites of themselves; *mestizos* and *cholos*, the first implying persons of mixed blood who have accepted the white lifestyle and the second, more derogatory, term for those indigenous people who have abandoned some, but not all, of their traditional way of life; *indios* or *campesinos*, who have been regarded as Indians since the birth of the colony but have been renamed “peasants”; and *collas* and *cambas* – Andean highlanders and lowlanders, respectively. Another “ethnically loaded” word is the Andean peoples’ pejorative descriptor for whites as *q’ara*, or “people without blood in their faces.”

In effect, the stratification evident in how Bolivians describe each other can be seen as a symptom of social and economic stratification in which the lower ranks of society are at best neglected and at worst repressed. Although Albó notes that ethnicity has become a banner for grass-roots political mobilization, the intertwining of negative ethnicity, class, and gender perceptions presents formidable obstacles to social change.

Edward Khiddu-Makubuya examines the violence and conflict in Uganda from a historical perspective, and then delves into responses

and possible approaches to “creative management of these trends.” His article analyses the initiatives of the National Resistance Movement since it took power in January 1986 and began waging what Khiddu-Makubuya terms an “active armed-cum-political struggle in an essentially rural setting among peasants.” This effort has been backed and buttressed by political “conscientization and enlightenment” with the stated aims of institutionalizing democracy, security, the consolidation of national unity and the elimination of all forms of sectarianism, the building of an independent, integrated, and self-sustaining economy, the elimination of corruption, the restoration of social services and the rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of the country, redressing the dislocation of segments of the population, and so forth. The author also reviews the emergence of new institutions, including a code of conduct for the army, the establishment of grass-roots Resistance Councils and Committees, a Human Rights Commission, an Inspector General of Government, control of the intelligence community, the establishment of a Ministry of Constitutional Affairs and the Uganda Constitutional Commission, pressing forward with policies to bring development to Karamoja in the north-east of the country, removing the barriers to Ugandan women’s participation in public life, and aiding Asians expelled by Idi Amin to return.

In spite of these positive developments, he notes that conflict and violence have persisted, particularly in the north of the country; freedom of the press, while affirmed by the government, has not been absolute; education has been put on the back burner under the International Monetary Fund’s structural adjustment programme; Uganda’s Muslim community has been riven by doctrinal and leadership disputes; and “the outstanding example of silent violence, which has currently reached epidemic proportions” in Uganda, is AIDS, with an estimated 1.5 million victims out of a total population of 16.6 million. “The deterioration in health services and other infrastructure over the years and the moral collapse which has occurred as a consequence of violent conflict have almost certainly aggravated the spread and incidence of AIDS in Uganda.”

Referring to the pervasiveness of violence in Ugandan society, the author notes that “conflicts have been accompanied by practically all forms of violence – regime, anti-systemic, tribal, political, economic, religious, and others. Nearly every class of Ugandan society has been touched by this process, and there is hardly a single part of the country which has not reverberated with some form of conflict or vio-

lence.” Khiddu-Makubuya sees a need for further research on the causes of violence within Uganda, in particular on Ugandan society and cultures; élites; the government; the causes and processes of violence; gender issues in violence; and the design of a working peace system. Perhaps more importantly, he sets out a number of ideas for “management of the process of power on the basis of nationalism and democracy,” with the primary goal of the development of an orderly process of governmental succession which eliminates “conquest as a mode of accession to power.” Strengthening the constitution as a tool for the mediation of conflict is crucial for a long-term political settlement, he argues. “A democratic, nationalist, and development-oriented constitution must be put in place, with an emphasis on realistic separation of executive, judicial, and legislative powers; on popular participation at all levels; and on general application of the principles of justice to all major political issues.” The constitution should incorporate a comprehensive Bill of Rights guaranteeing human rights, but should also enshrine economic, social, and cultural rights, including regional economic equalization, minority rights, and women’s rights. Other issues which need to be addressed are how to safeguard the constitution against *coup d’état*, the size and function of the military and police, the encouragement of cultural tolerance and pluralism, the restructuring of education, the development of a coherent national language policy based on a spirit of cultural pluralism, and increased accessibility of the courts. Ultimately, what needs to be generated and nurtured is a national ethos of dialogue, compromise, and tolerance. “Despite the ready availability of arms in Uganda, all politically relevant strata of society must begin to learn to talk before shooting.”

Luis Pedro España N. describes a nation which has slipped from relative prosperity and social and political stability to one riven by crisis, in “Violence and the Welfare State: The Case of Venezuela as an Oil Country.” The main focus of his examination is the decline of the Venezuelan economy, marked by the refusal of the international banking community to provide any more credit in 1983, followed by the rapid decline in oil prices, the mainstay of the Venezuelan economy and social welfare system.

While at the time of writing political violence had not reappeared with the “relative change from bonanza to depression,” social violence had done so, in the form of what España terms “indirect” or “implicit” violence, as well as “direct social violence,” which has



taken the form of “delinquency, self-defence, taking advantage of the defenceless, the invasion of others’ property and rights, a system of complicity, lack of justice, and generalized fear.” He notes that the lack of credible political alternatives should sustain the current political system, while individual economic actors are likely to maximize their efforts to innovate “on the margins of formal legality,” thus increasing social violence.

The ongoing crisis, España asserts, assumes increased poverty, decay of institutions of government, and a loss of credibility in the system’s methods of resolving conflicts and disputes. Among the alternatives for eradicating violence, the author suggests, are a restructuring of society aimed at eradicating poverty, or else police repression. The latter would imply a militarization of society and an increase in the violence while not addressing the underlying problems. The new *pacificación* or peace-building process in Venezuela should, at the micro level, involve the state’s guaranteeing public security and exercising its legitimate control of violence. But it should act at the same time on reforms at the macro level. “The state should convert itself into an instrument of compulsion that does not go beyond the principle of the democratic state.”

Miles D. Wolpin, in his article “State Terrorism and Death Squads in the New World Order,” stresses that the dominance of the United States in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union should not be confused with the “success” of the capitalist system in providing basic needs or equitable development in the third world. Growing public-sector austerity, increases in unemployment, declines in real wages, excessive indebtedness, and a global decline of economic pluralism, Wolpin suggests, will increase structural violence.

Thus the present era is characterized by demoralization of egalitarian alternative development movements, national self-determination aspirations, and an intensification of mass relative deprivation. This is exacerbated by growing economic insecurity contrasted with the opulent lifestyles that are conveyed by ... (the) media ... and exposure to comprador elements within their own societies. As relative deprivation escalates, we may expect a rise in ethnic and other ascriptive conflicts.

Wolpin notes, however, that as long as such conflicts pose no threat to a given state stratified system, the forces capable of being used in direct institutional violence – regime terrorism and death squads – should remain latent. Where state terrorism and death squads are most likely to emerge, according to the author, are within the new