



Spring 2015

Investigating Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Through Critical Discourse Analysis

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Kaste, Amanda R., "Investigating Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Through Critical Discourse Analysis" (2015). *Student Publications*. 320.
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Abstract

This paper addresses the large-scale sexual violence that has taken place (and still continues) within the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) using critical discourse analysis. Disturbing statistics have resulted in the identification of the DRC as the "rape capital of the world," and a variety of national, regional, and international actors have employed sexual violence as a weapon of war. Victims frequently receive little assistance, perpetrators act without fear of serious repercussions, and the government of the DRC fails to successfully implement relative legislation. Through an investigation of the discourse surrounding victims, perpetrators, and political institutions respectively, I will develop an understanding of how specific language portrays each of these participants in multiple reports and publications, and how this discourse can shape one's perspective of the complex situation the DRC faces involving sexual violence.

Keywords

critical discourse analysis, sexual violence, rape as a weapon of war, Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC

Disciplines

African Studies | Anthropology | Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | International and Area Studies | Peace and Conflict Studies | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Women's Studies

Comments

This paper was written for Professor Amy Evrard's course, *ANTH 304: Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, Spring 2015.

Amanda Kaste

May 8, 2015

Professor Evrard

ANTH 304: EPA Final Paper

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Introduction

Through the use of critical discourse analysis, this project hopes to address the rampant sexual violence that has taken place within the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In 2010, senior United Nations official Margot Wallström referred to the DRC as the “rape capital of the world,” increasing global awareness of the extreme prevalence of sexual violence and human rights violations, which pass by largely unpunished and unaddressed in most cases (UN News Centre 2010). A variety of armed and militant groups with both internal and external foundations have continued to wreak havoc throughout the country since the late twentieth century. Members of foreign and rebel groups, along with members of Congolese security forces have committed acts of sexual violence with astounding frequency over the past few decades. Although women and girls are the primary targets, many men and boys are also victims of the sexual violence that has pervaded in the DRC. These crimes are met with impunity, as corruption within the DRC’s own government and within the region of east and central Africa as a whole has little to offer victims in terms of any hope of justice or reconciliation (Human Rights Watch 2014b).

Incredibly disturbing rape statistics exist within multiple regions of the DRC, although the most sexual violence is concentrated in areas in the eastern part of the country. Research has suggested that *at least* 1.8 million Congolese women have been victims of rape within the past two decades – surely with the inclusion of cases of children and men, this number would be even

higher (Gettleman, 2011, emphasis added). I feel that there is a need to investigate the local, national, and international perceptions and reactions to the stories of the Congolese people who have come to be known as little more than statistics to much of the world.

This project will investigate the language used within the discourse surrounding victims, perpetrators, and political institutions in the DRC respectively. After developing an understanding of how language portrays each of these participants, especially in consideration of who the intended audiences of selected reports and publications are, I will explore how this shapes the international community's view of the occurrence of sexual violence in the DRC. This will demonstrate how specific themes and terminology that recur within media coverage, humanitarian aid reports, and even personal individual accounts of violence can mold one's perspective on this issue with global implications that so far remains filled with complexities and uncertainties.

Background

Before diving into details regarding elements of the history of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) most relevant to present-day conflict and the large-scale issue of sexual violence, I would like to first provide some brief details that will help to develop an overview of necessary historical context. Located in the central part of the African continent, with several border countries including Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and the Central African Republic (CAR), the DRC is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of natural resources. Due to internal and external conflict, particularly since the 1990s, the DRC has faced insecurity and its people have been the victims of severe atrocities and human rights violations. Conflict, war, and mass violence unfortunately became a periodic occurrence in the area currently known as the

DRC beginning in 1885, the year that King Leopold II of Belgium created what he called the Congo Free State (Turner 2013: 1-14).

The Congo Free State existed from 1885-1908, its name intended to proclaim independent status despite the fact that it was under the Belgian king's control. From 1908-1960, it was known as the Belgian Congo as it officially became a colony of Belgium during this time. From 1960-1964 the name was changed to the Republic of Congo, and once again in 1964-1971 was altered to the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1965, an American-sponsored coup led to the installment of President Mobutu, who transformed the DRC into the Republic of Zaire and his dictatorship lasted almost thirty years through 1997. Mobutu was overthrown and exiled in May 1997 by a rebellion movement, and a rebellion leader named Laurent Kabila proclaimed himself the new president and reinstated the Democratic Republic of Congo title to the country. Murdered by one of his bodyguards in 2001, Laurent Kabila was succeeded by his son, Joseph Kabila, who remains in power today. With upcoming elections in 2016 and a constitutional ban in place on serving a third term in presidential office, even more change might take place once again in the near future (Turner 2013: 1-14; Ross 2015).

A conflict that erupted within the DRC from 1998-2003 became the most deadly conflict in the world since World War II, and it was at this time the country began to earn its reputation for extreme levels of sexual violence that accompanied war and other types of violence. A complex and seemingly endless struggle over the exploitation of resources such as precious minerals (at the hands of both internal and external actors) contributed to the conflict (Turner 2013: 1-4). The multitude of national, regional, and international actors that became involved in the conflict only resulted in increasing the "epidemic of sexual violence" as state, non-state, and foreign militants alike were documented incorporating widespread sexual assault into the mass

violence being carried out (Turner 2013: 2). In 2010, claims were made that the DRC was in a post-war period, and though the majority of external forces were no longer present, rampant internal violence was still prevalent and war crimes and abuses continued to be met with impunity (Turner 2013: 2-3).

Critical Discourse Analysis

The Victims

The first concept I wish to address is the language that surrounds the victims – which in this case I define as the women, men, and children within the DRC that have experienced sexual violence carried out by any of the internal and/or external militants that have been present in the country during conflict. Although men have been affected (and probably with higher statistics than one might think), they are even less likely than women to report that rape or assault has occurred, and so the perceptions represented in most discourse primarily stem from the experiences of female survivors. It should also be noted that typically the victims of sexual violence are from the civilian population; throughout my research I was not able to discover any accounts of sexual violence that had taken place among the population of militants. I realize that a variety of connotations come about when using the word *victim* to describe this affected population, but it seems most appropriate in light of both the language used by international organizations and institutions and by the Congolese themselves who have experienced the brunt of this sexual violence that has interrupted and upset countless lives.

Human rights reports distributed by international humanitarian aid and human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect appear to have common themes running throughout, with language regarding the situations of victims carefully chosen. The frequent occurrences of sexual

violence within the conflict are popularly categorized as *mass atrocity crimes* and *gross violations of human rights*, phrases that introduce the situation in the DRC as particularly violent and dire from the outset. The transformation from civilian to victim is often associated with a status as a displaced person or a refugee, and those who become victims are sometimes labeled as having been vulnerable prior to being attacked and assaulted. Sometimes this is due to a pre-existing health problem or disability, as is the case for a woman who became very ill in the weeks after first being raped and was then attacked again on her way to find a health center for treatment (Amnesty International 2004: 19). Nonetheless, it seems that overall one's vulnerability most commonly lies simply in their existence as a woman who happens to live in an area infiltrated with a variety of armed forces. In fact, in an article about feminist responses to rape in the DRC, Patrick Cannon shares that the DRC was internationally ranked by the Thomas Reuters Foundation as "the second worst place in the world to be a woman" (Cannon 2012: 478). Victims are often described as singled out and indeed *targeted*, with their attackers tending to view the subjects onto which their violence is enacted as dehumanized 'others' (Amnesty International 2004: 10-25, 37-38).

The moment that sexual violence occurs is of course tragic, but for most Congolese victims of rape and assault it is the aftermath that stings even more than the initial incident. In addition to the physiological and psychological trauma that victims may endure, they are forced to undergo the scrutiny of family and community members and live at the mercy of the social and cultural implications of what has happened to them. Traditional views of sexual purity and a woman's strong dependence on marital status for social recognition make rape and other aspects of sexual assault difficult for community members to interpret culturally. Victims return home after experiencing violence only to be met with *social rejection*, *economic exclusion*, and *chronic*

insecurity – a discourse which demonstrates the effects of sexual violence on a multitude of aspects of daily life. Reports describe many as suffering, abandoned (often by friends, family members, and seemingly society at large), excluded, stigmatized, deprived, ashamed, and impoverished. Victims are depicted as having a lack of necessities that could perhaps assist with their healing and recovery. *Incapability, unavailability, and inaccessibility* are all terms used in reference to receiving proper healthcare, finding assistance for dealing with psychological trauma, and trying to make family and community members understand the nature of the violence that has occurred (Amnesty International 2004: 26-42; International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect n.d.).

Humanitarian organizations portray victims as survivors: survivors of trauma, survivors of torture, survivors who are being deprived of any sort of justice. However, their communities traditionally are often more likely to label women as outcasts and adulteresses than victims or survivors, which makes women's development of an understanding of themselves as survivors vitally important. Victims are all too commonly forced to *bear the responsibility* of the situation that results from the violence they have experienced, and it is historically not easy for them to find or receive support. They are even described in some instances as living in *perpetual fear* because the occurrence of sexual violence is so normalized that people often acknowledge their chances of being attacked again can be quite high. Family members and communities have been known to *accuse* the victims themselves, being concerned with the *shame* and *dishonor* that will penetrate the family because of the person's experience (Amnesty International 2004; Dossa et al 2014: 247-250).

Many notions surrounding sexuality are quite taboo culturally, with unequal power relations between men and women often designating females as the temptress/adulteress in

sexual relations outside marriage, and so the defilement of sexual purity that accompanies this type of unwanted sexual violence becomes particularly troubling and misunderstood. “Please tell them that rape is not adultery” is the simple plea of one Congolese rape victim whose family and community has refused to accept them since they are now contaminated by the sexual violence they experienced (Amnesty International 2004: 37). Confusion and myth surround the occurrence of sexual violence, and victims are sometimes viewed as having somehow *consented* or *cooperated* and can thus be blamed for allowing the assault to take place. Men and women victims alike are further victimized when their home community learns of their experience, and the stigmatization that they face can become extreme (one report included several women’s stories, which indicated that not only other adults, but even children may shout or curse at a woman in the community that they know has been raped) (Amnesty International 2004: 37-42).

Examining a few personal, firsthand accounts from Congolese women affected by sexual violence can give further insights as to the truth and reality behind the circulating discourse of media and reports. One woman states: “I feel that I no longer have my whole personality. When I walk by, girls in the neighborhood point their finger at me and say, ‘that one has been raped,’ and it makes me suffer even more” (Dossa et al 2014: 247). Another woman, who has been raped three times since her teenage years, claims, “I understood that I’m unlucky...I ended up convinced that I was really unlucky because I’m the only one who is always raped” (Dossa 2014: 247). Direct statements such as these from victims show that it can be very easy for survivors to lose hope, because although the world has heard about the plight of the Congolese, there is still little help for the people in terms of security and financial and emotional support as they recover. The social and cultural narratives are so strongly intertwined with daily life and understanding that it can be next to impossible for victims of sexual violence to make family and friends

understand the reality of what they were subjected to and that they experienced sexual assault with no choice in the matter.

Much of the language seems to suggest that victims are utterly helpless as they try to deal with their violent and traumatic experiences. While this in part is true due to the challenging reality of the social and political context in which the sexual violence is happening, I feel that it is in part dangerous and unfair for reports to drown the accounts of these victims with little but messages of hopelessness and helplessness. Inequalities that are detrimental to women already permeate the DRC, both culturally and legally (I will later speak to the rule of the law within the situation of sexual violence), and sexual violence can make victims *feel worthless* and *left with little choice* as they try to reconstruct their lives, especially if they have children or other dependents to care for. Similar to some other societies in the region, women in the DRC are traditionally responsible for farming and harvesting (and increasingly other income generating activities as well), and running the household, but they tend to have little sociopolitical power though they are seen as responsible for raising up the next generation. Though being a woman in the DRC on a daily basis in and of itself is far from easy, women report feeling that after they are raped or assaulted they experience a *total absence of protection* – especially if they are married and even more-so if they were impregnated by their attacker – at a time when humanitarian organizations suggest they should be instead receiving safety and support. In these types of situations, victims faced with few options may *resort to prostitution* or other means of income that allows them to remove themselves from the social sphere and possibly reside with other people who are similarly marginalized by society (Amnesty International 2004: 40-45).

Lastly, it is important to address the issue of the underrepresented men and boys who have become victims of sexual violence but rarely dare to tell anyone of their circumstances. On

various occasions, male civilians have even been subjected to rape by male soldiers in front of their wives and families, the ultimate humiliation. Although most studies and reports focus on women, the discourse on male victims should also be taken into consideration. A middle-aged man who was raped and stabbed still suffers from his injuries and in sharing his story says, “My wife looks after everything now, and I’m beginning to lose hope. I feel I have no future” (Amnesty International 2004: 20). Another man recalls his family’s experience when soldiers entered their home during the night, raping both him and his then-pregnant wife in the presence of their older children and taunting him saying that he would no longer be a man (Amnesty International 2004: 21). In a country like the DRC where the opposition between masculinity and femininity is so great, it is little wonder that the men who experience sexual violence are subject to mental and emotional trauma just as women are, although they are often even more frightened than the women to open up and share their stories because of the potential social repercussions. In the same way that female victims begin to feel worthless and are looked down upon as helpless and marginalized, it is clear from the discourse provided by male victims themselves that they are also plagued by these feelings but it is much less socially acceptable for them to speak out.

The Perpetrators

The second concept that I would like to bring forth is the language that surrounds the perpetrators of this mass sexual violence. For this purpose, I will define perpetrator as anyone who has committed sexual crimes against civilians during the conflict, which most typically includes male members of rebel and foreign militant forces (even select UN Peacekeepers have been among those identified as perpetrators) and also the DRC’s own military units and police forces. These perpetrators have carried out innumerable human rights violations, specifically

with their use of rape and other sexual violence as a weapon of war, and it is crucial for this discourse analysis to explore how they are represented in media and reports.

In the sources I have investigated, the perpetrators of sexual violence are usually categorized as *rebels* and *soldiers* – indicative of the fact that internal and external forces alike have been responsible for committing widespread rape and other horrific atrocities. A report from Amnesty International chooses to characterize the DRC scenario as an unfortunate example of “the indiscriminate use of rape by armed forces,” which sends the message that there is no discipline involved, no rhyme or reason for who becomes the subject of the violent actions of the perpetrators (Amnesty International 2004: 18). Almost all material reviewed specifically mentioned some version of the phrase *rape as a weapon of war* when trying to explain the nature of the violence and the instability that is caused by the sporadic attacks and rapes. Sara Meger suggests that “the use of sexual violence in conflict is an effective war strategy because of preexisting sociocultural dynamics” that attach specific concepts and emotions to ideas of sexual purity and the bodies of women (Meger 2010: 121). Perpetrators are drawn as acting with utmost *brutality* and *cruelty*, with main a goal to *secure control* of an area or village and its people. This suggests that, although it must be noted that sexual violence is sometimes carried out with the encouragement or instruction of a commanding officer, the crimes of the attacks additionally seem to be individually and personally motivated. Due to the variety of backgrounds that the multiple fighting forces come from, there is at times an issue of soldiers targeting victims from certain ethnic groups. This is manifested as soldiers citing past inter-ethnic conflicts and claiming that their actions are in some way *avenging perceived abuses* against their community or society (Meger 2010; Amnesty International 2004).

There is no sympathy for perpetrators present within reports, and the harshness of the language used seems to recognize that it mirrors the scale of the violent crimes committed. Routinely referred to as *attackers*, perpetrators are portrayed as monstrous and inhuman in some regards, which I feel emphasizes the ferocity with which much of the sexual violence is carried out but at the same time can discourage one from trying to seek out the underlying motives of violence. Since rape is being portrayed as a weapon, those who rape are identified with military-type terminology: sexual violence is implemented *deliberately* and *strategically*, avoiding ideas that the violence could be executed impulsively in some instances in order to uphold its classification as being a part of the war. Perpetrators are said to be striving to *terrorize and humiliate* not only the individual victims, but also their entire families and communities since they are surely aware of the shame and confusion that their actions will bring into the victims' lives. It is interesting that reports stress the significance of the setting in which perpetrators often choose to begin an assault, which lines up with the notion that perpetrators are working off of a strategy. The actions of the perpetrators are most always met with *almost absolute impunity* with repercussions being slim to none (even for members of the DRC's own military and police force), which is the biggest obstacle in trying to address the issue of sexual violence in the past and present and to increase prevention in the future (Amnesty International 2004: 18-25; Human Rights Watch 2014a: 3-5).

The film *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo* focused on victims within a few communities in the DRC, but it additionally introduced the stories of some of the perpetrators. The soldiers that agreed to speak and answer a few questions often hid their faces, but others acted indifferent. A few explained that even though they had families and children at home, it was allowable (perhaps even expected) for them as men to have someone fulfill their sexual

needs during a stressful time like war, though they avoided explicitly saying that consensual relations were not a priority. Some informed the filmmaker that they felt *justified* in raping, but at the same time acknowledged that they personally would feel *angry* if someone raped their mother, wife, daughter, etc. The men were asked to recount the number of women that they had raped, and although some hesitated, some were adamant in announcing that the number was few while at least one man estimated over a couple dozen. In listening to their accounts, I find an interesting perspective on double standards that have been created in the DRC revolving around endless war and violence and the sense of male entitlement that is so deeply engrained in culture and society (Jackson 2007).

Legal Institutions Allowing for Sexual Violence

As the final concept, I will address the language that surrounds the role of political and governmental action (or lack thereof) related to the extreme amount of sexual violence that the DRC has been dealing with for the past few decades. Although I was able to eventually come across some government documents, such as the military penal code, all such documents were in French, which is the official language of the DRC, and I was not able to obtain a suitable English translation. Therefore, many references to political discourse, apart from news stories and United Nations (UN) announcements published in English, have been gathered from other articles and sources which have evaluated the successes and failures of the government of the DRC and President Joseph Kabila in acknowledging the abundance of issues that rape and sexual violence have caused for the general population of the country.

The United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sexual Violence in Conflict published a press release on November 11, 2013 in order to “welcome the announcement by His Excellency President Joseph Kabila of unprecedented

measures to combat sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)” (United Nations 2013). At this time, President Joseph Kabila had announced that a position would be created for a Presidential Representative on Sexual Violence and Child Recruitment (as in the abduction of children by military groups). He had also made an announcement a few weeks prior which stated that perpetrators of sexual violence would be excluded from the Collective Pardon traditionally available to people imprisoned (United Nations 2013). In July 2014, Madame Jeannine Mabunda Lioko Mudiayi was appointed to fulfill the presidential adviser role, but although she has tried to implement new programming it is unclear whether the Congolese people will really see the effects at a local level within their communities (Enough Project 2014). However, my research into the government’s discourse has shown that, historically speaking, there is often a vast divide between what the president and government specifically *pledge* to do in public eye to obtain international approval and what truly takes place involving such measures.

Reports often include the idea of *honor* when speaking of President Kabila and his introduction of new legislation or political ideas, but there is the question of whether commitments are ever fully honored. Yet even if they are, how far into society can implementation of new laws or regulations effectively penetrate? Releases will mention that President Kabila will *ensure* that certain things take place, but in a country full of corruption, exploitation, and conflict, that responsibility is certainly not one that is easily accomplished or enforced. As the United Nations press release spoken of above asserted as a gentle reminder toward its conclusion, “commitments must be turned to concrete action – *action that can and must turn the tide* on this unacceptable crime” in order for any change to actually take place in how sexual violence is dealt with legally in the DRC (United Nations 2013, emphasis added).

The government of the DRC is viewed as being responsible for *egregious human rights violations*, but a bothersome factor in dealing with this issue is the frequent citation of the country's *long history of conflict*. The president and government often factor into reports as having made an effort, but that despite the attempt the effort was just not enough. Sometimes the notion of the current *transitional government* receives the blame, but with an entirely *incapacitated* judicial system and *deliberate obstruction* of political progress by government leaders, it is difficult to know where blame can and should be accurately projected (Amnesty International 2004; Human Rights Watch 2014a). Ryan Lincoln explains that “strengthening the rule of law will be effective against sexual violence only if specifically tailored” to address the other inequalities that exist so richly within Congolese society (Lincoln 2011: 139). It is my belief after reviewing various accounts of the DRC's government actions that, even with legislative change, the cultural and social institutions that create so much stigma around sexual violence will continue to be difficult to repress.

Conclusions

Through careful examination of all three parties within the prevailing sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, I feel that I have illuminated the realities of the various discourses that have circulated about the conflict throughout the world over the course of the past few decades. The Democratic Republic of Congo without a doubt has a multiplicity of other issues that have remained unaddressed in addition to this issue of rampant sexual violence, but it is fascinating to me that although a decent amount of research and reports have been created on the topic, there seems to be little improvement taking place within the lives of Congolese victims. The victims themselves are portrayed as hopeless and helpless in reports, which at first seems unsettling, but upon reading personal accounts from the points of view of survivors, it

becomes clear that the situation on the ground is likely as dire as media and humanitarian organizations would have the world believe. The perpetrators, caught in a web of undisciplined militant forces, unruly commanders, and extremely strict patriarchal societies with clearly defined roles for men and their masculinity, are of course to blame for their individual actions, but they are not the only actor. The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo claims that rape is illegal and has instituted new programming in certain political realms, but the reality of this political discourse is that nothing can be accomplished without involving large-scale participation of the Congolese population in order to change cultural and social attitudes. This discourse analysis has brought to light the pleas of the victims, and also the stories of the perpetrators, and with all its complexities serves to improve the development of an international understanding of the rampant sexual violence that has and will continue to take place in the DRC if appropriate action is not applied.

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Honor Code Pledge

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code. ~Amanda R. Kaste, 5/8/2015