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Shame and Violence Nexus in the Sierra Leone Civil War

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‘Shame is a soul eating emotion’. This statement by Carl Gustav Jung emphasizes the negative aspect of shame, i.e. the ability to attack the core of human self-awareness. Can this negative impact go beyond the individual psychology and manifest itself in demoralised behaviour toward others? Can shame serve as an explanation why people commit atrocious acts against other human beings? This paper will argue that shame, in combination with other factors, such as emotional repression and social alienation, may manifest itself in the form of extreme violence.

Shame is a complex phenomenon that works through established psycho-sociological processes that produce concrete patterns of human behaviour. Thus, the application of the concept of shame in the analysis of violent conflicts can shed more light on the logic of violence. This paper uses the framework developed by David Keen with regard to the conflict in Sierra Leone (1991-2002), with a particular focus on the main rebel movement known as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Keen’s typology of shame is based on the distinction between 1) shame and grievances pre-dating the war, and 2) shame and violence arising from the war itself. The author of this paper also refers to other studies that confirm the existence of a strong link between shame and violence. Concluding remarks point out the areas in need of further study to fill in the conceptual gaps in the shame-violence theory.

Shame as a Powerful Emotion

In order to understand the concept of shame, it is necessary to refer to the works in the field of psychiatry, psychology, and sociology, which shed more light on the complex and fascinating processes that drive and perpetuate the emotion of shame. Carl Gustav Jung, a prominent Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, believed, for instance, that shame was a ‘soul eating emotion’. This statement accentuates the significant impact of shame on human existence, as well as its centrality in the process of self-image construction.

For psychologists, shame symbolises the attack upon the global self. It includes ‘the appraisal that one suffers a global, unalterable defect of the whole self’ and leads individuals to experience ‘the debilitating feeling of inferiority’ (Gausel & Leach 2011: 469). In the words of Dean Whittington, shame is ‘a kind of a toxin developed through holding back feelings of humiliation that floods the body; it is a “bitterness”, a deep lack of self-worth based on a dread of being unmasked as worthless’ (Whittington 2007: 312). As Whittington observes, there is more to shame than just the painful realisation of global self-defect. It is the fear that others will learn about our internal deficiency and, thus, deem us damaged and inferior, that adds up to our shame. Hence, shame is a complex psycho-social phenomenon which cannot be fully grasped if analysed in separation from the intricacies of social processes that shape our lives.

Many social psychologists agree that shame is one of the most powerful emotions guiding individual behaviour in the realm of social relations. It is one of the basic human emotions, as the ability to feel shame emerges at a relatively early stage of child development, and it is the product of a complex cognitive process. Shame, along with pride, guilt and hubris, is considered a complex self-conscious emotion, as, in order to feel it, a child needs not only to have a ‘cognitive ability to reflect on the self’, but also possess an elaborate cognitive capacities, e.g. understand rules and standards embedded in social and cultural structures (Lewis 2011: 2; Lewis 1992: 75). Moreover, shame is a powerful tool of social control over behaviour of human entities. By transgressing socially accepted norms and

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standards, individuals risk being shamed in the eyes of their peers. Consequently, they might become subjected to condemnation, humiliation, rejection, and, in most extreme cases, alienation and social stigma.

The social nature of one's self-awareness has been recognised by Charles Cooley, who described it as a three-step process:

A self-idea [self-monitoring] seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification [i.e. shame] (Cooley 1922: 184).

According to Jonathan H. Turner, shame is an elaborate combination of primary negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness). Due to its 'devastating' impact upon self-image and social image of an individual, it sustains 'patterns of social organisation and gives negative sanction "teeth"', which act as a motivation for behavioural change (Turner 2007: 9-10). Thomas Scheff, inspired by work of a prominent psychotherapist Helen Lewis (1971), describes shame as a 'master emotion because it has many more social and psychological functions than other emotions'. Apart from being a key component of one's conscience ('moral sense'), shame is a response to the threat to our [social] bonds ('signals trouble in a relationship'). More importantly, it is a master emotion because of its 'central role in regulating the expression and ... the awareness of all our other emotions' (anger, fear, grief, love etc.), that will remain repressed as long as one is ashamed of them (Scheff & Retzinger 2000; Lewis 1971).

Shame and Violence: Conceptualisation

Having acknowledged the centrality of shame in psycho-social life of individuals, many scholars took the next step in the analysis of shame. Their main objective was to explain the intricate interplay between shame and other emotions and how it is translated into certain patterns of human behaviour (Gilligan 1996; Gilligan 2003; Lewis 1971; Miller 2004; Poulson 2000; Poulson 2001; Ray 2011; Retzinger 1991; Scheff 2009; Scheff & Retzinger 1991; Scheff & Retzinger 2000; Tracy, Robins & Tangney 2007; Turner 2007; Turner & Stets: 2005). What has been discovered is that, when combined with other combustible emotions, especially anger, shame might have a highly destructive impact on social relations that, under certain circumstances, can degenerate into violence. As the psychiatrist James Gilligan notes, 'Violence "speaks" of an intolerable condition of human shame and rage, blinding rage that speaks through the body' (Gilligan 1996: 55).

If violence is seen as a contagious disease, shame is the pathogen that causes it. Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger conclude that, 'A particular sequence of emotions underlies all destructive aggression: shame is first evoked, which leads to rage and then violence'. At the same time they state that shame leads to violence only when 'it is hidden to the point that it is not acknowledged or resolved' (Scheff & Retzinger 1991: 3). Also Jonathan Turner asserts that, if repressed from conscious awareness, shame might be transformed into anger that can erupt as a high intensity violence that obliterates social bonds (Turner 2007). Thus, shame, even though primarily developed as a mechanism that ensures social control with a view to preserving interpersonal bonds, can also have profoundly antisocial propensities.

Thomas Scheff, inspired by the studies conducted by Helen B. Lewis, further explores the links between unacknowledged shame and shame/anger sequence (Scheff 2009; Lewis 1971). He points out that violence might be caused by shame/anger spiral, which constantly loops back upon itself. In intergroup processes, the outer group might become a focal point for the outwardly-oriented anger, which in turn may spark violence. This view coincides with opinion of June Price Tangney, Jeffrey Stuewig and Debra Mashek, who affirm that, 'In an effort to escape painful feeling of shame, shamed individuals are apt to defensively "turn the tables", externalising blame and anger outward onto a convenient scapegoat' (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek 2007: 27).

Though the importance of shame-anger-violence nexus has been fully recognised, both psychologists and sociologists have failed to fully explain the causal mechanisms that trigger violence in the first place. One reason for that is the presence of other complex factors that might feed into violence. Thus, when studying interpersonal or intergroup conflict, one has to consider the specific context in which violence takes place. Consequently, the analysis

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turns to the case study of conflict in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) to uncover links between shame and violence.

Shame and Violence in the Sierra Leone Civil War

Among many scholars who endeavoured to explain the intensity of violence and horror of atrocities targeting predominantly civilian populations in the civil war in Sierra Leone, David Keen merits a special recognition. Through the adoption of psychological framework, with a particular focus on the role of shame in feeding violence, Keen's work represents a fairly novel approach towards studying conflict in Sierra Leone. In his typology of shame and violence, Keen makes an important distinction between pre-war shame and grievances, and shame arising from the conflict itself (Keen 2005). This analysis will henceforward follow the typology proposed by Keen.

Shame and Grievances Pre-dating War

The scope of this paper restricts us from providing a detailed analysis of historical, political, and socio-economic situation in Sierra Leone before the outbreak of civil war. Factors such as patrimonial state, extreme corruption, socio-economic inequalities, marginalisation of vast sections of society, as well as alienation of youth, constituted the sources of unappeased grievances that sparked the civil war in the first place (Bangura 2004; Keen 2005; Richards 1996).

In Sierra Leone, disenfranchised youths, deprived of land, access to education, and opportunities for social advancement, had been exposed to constant shame and humiliation originating from their low status and powerlessness. Restricted access to land and education rendered young people, especially males, dependant on their relatives, hindering their launch into adulthood. This generated shame, because 'powerlessness experienced anew during adulthood reactivates that earlier governing scene of initial primary helplessness' (Kaufman 1989: 47), reminding people of their vulnerability. Furthermore, the stigmatisation of youths as 'criminal elements' created 'a psychological gap between the youths and the rest of society' (Keen 2005: 65), leading to their alienation. This combination of repressed shame and alienation sparked violence. As Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger note, 'Violence occurs when the path toward negotiation is blocked by inadequate bonds [alienation] and hidden cross-currents of emotion [shame, humiliation] – that is, by unacknowledged alienation/shame' (Scheff & Retzinger 1991: XIX).

Keen, in his attempt to explain violence in Sierra Leone, writes about 'table turning', facilitating shame reversal. If powerlessness is associated with being shamed and humiliated, humiliating and shaming others can be seen as the assertion of power. As Eric Hobsbawm points out, 'Killing and torture is the most primitive and personal assertion of ultimate power, and the weaker the rebel feels himself to be at bottom, the greater, we may suppose, the temptation to assert it' (Hobsbawm 1969: 65). Furthermore, the studies conducted by Gilligan among some of the most violent inmates in the USA convinced him that desire to physically eliminate the source of shame and regain self-worth (pride) can be a stronger motivation than self-preservation. In his own words:

People resort to violence when they feel that they can wipe out shame only by shaming those who they feel shamed them. The most powerful way to shame anyone is by means of violence, just as the most powerful way to provoke anyone into committing violence is by shaming him (Gilligan 2003: 1163).

Not surprisingly, the offenders often concentrate their attack on those parts of the human body—eyes, tongues, genitals, hands—that can be associated with acts of shaming, e.g. by passing judgement (eyes, tongues, fingers) or exposing vulnerability (genitals). Such was also the case of Sierra Leone, where many victims were maimed by having their hands and other parts of the body cut off.

Shame and Shamelessness Arising from the War

Apart from feeding into grievances pre-dating the war, shame was intrinsically linked to the internal dynamics of the conflict. There was 'an ever-present threat of shame' emanating from 'the humiliation/violence to which rebel recruits were subjected' and from violence rebels had carried out themselves. In that respect, Keen points to existence of

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specific mechanisms facilitating violence and atrocities.

Firstly, we witnessed an extreme brutalisation of violence facilitated by dehumanisation of victims. According to Keen, 'Shame could sometimes be avoided or reduced by devaluing the lives and humanity of those who were being abused' (Keen 2005: 77). Albert Bandura, Bill Underwood, and Michael E. Fromson have proved the role of dehumanisation in fuelling violence. Their experiments confirmed the hypothesis that dehumanisation of victims can lead to escalation of violence (brutalisation):

Inflicting harm upon individuals who are regarded as subhuman or debased is less apt to arouse self-reproof than if they are seen as human beings with dignifying qualities. The reason for this is that people who are reduced to base creatures are likely to be viewed as insensitive to maltreatment and influenceable only through the more primitive methods. Dehumanising the victim is therefore a further means of reducing self-punishment for cruel actions (Bandura, Underwood & Fromson 1975: 255).

The second idea presented by Keen refers to the social cohesion and maintenance (or disruption) of in-group bonds. The threat of shame and stigma associated with being a rebel discouraged desertions and guaranteed group's survival. In order to deepen group commitment, rebels were often forced into atrocities targeting members of their family or community. Hence, they were being uprooted from their familial environments, with the threat of shame effectively preventing them from abandoning rebel movement.

Shame was also turned into a weapon of war targeting out-groups. Especially with regard to sexual violence, shame stemming from being sexually victimised can have a disruptive impact upon social bonds and thus lead to disintegration of communities. For instance, 'Mass rape is said to cast blight on the very roots of the afflicted culture, affecting its capacity to remain coherent and to reproduce itself' (Gottshall 2004:131). However, further exploration of this phenomenon lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Two other mechanisms described by Keen correspond to functions of shame that refer to the pre-war grievances. Firstly, for some people the infliction of shame and humiliation upon others was a way of easing off their pain emanating from their own shame. 'Turning tables' became a viable tactic for escaping victim status. Through assertion of power and dominance, those committing violent acts could evoke lost feelings of self-worth and self-respect. Secondly, the extreme violence against civilians can be explained as a method of dealing with the threat of shame embodied by the civilians themselves. In that respect, Keen writes about 'the fear of civilian' as a potential source of shame (dissemination of information, collaboration with the enemy, outright betrayal etc.). The extreme violence towards civilians is the product of external attribution of blame for one's own shame/humiliation. As Turner points out:

Extreme violence is a joint outcome of the anger component of repressed shame and, to a lesser extent, repressed guilt and alienation, moving outward as external attributions.... External attributions will target one or several ... objects, blaming them in essence for the failure to meet expectations ... (Turner 2007: 520).

Turner also notes that violence resulting from transmutation of repressed shame into anger frequently targets structures that are not responsible for generation of negative emotional arousal in the first place. The reason for that is because 'repression breaks the connection between the original source of negative emotional arousal ... thereby giving individuals a diffused anger often focused on targets not directly related to the repressed negative feelings' (Turner 2007: 522). Hence, we are able to explain why the war atrocities were regularly inflicted upon innocent civilians ('convenient scapegoat') and not those directly responsible for initial shaming and humiliating of perpetrators (political and economic elites, chiefs, state officials etc.).

Furthermore, violence reflects the pursuit of respect and recognition by rebels. It can be seen as a bizarre 'statement of their humanhood', in which one wants to emphasize that he/she is not negligible, 'a mere animal to be abused at will, but a human being who must be respected, even if this "respect" is compelled through violence (Keen 2002: 11). This creates a certain paradox: from the civilian perspective, the heinous acts of the rebels symbolised their cruelty and bestiality. In the eyes of regular people, rebels deserved condemnation, not recognition. This essential lack of

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mutual understanding further fed into vicious cycle of violence.

Another significant violence-feeding factor arising from the war itself is shamelessness of the perpetrators, facilitated by the removal of normal moral constraints and creation of the artificial world ('shame-free zone'). The war created a climate of impunity: the failure of judicial system to hold the perpetrators accountable for their crimes seems to have lowered the threshold for violence. Nonetheless, in the attempt to fully explain the extremity of violence, it would be useful to broaden Keen's assumptions to include empirically tested findings. Here, it is necessary to revisit the studies of Bandura and his colleagues. Apart from already mentioned dehumanisation, undoubtedly facilitated by the widespread use of drugs, Bandura points our attention towards additional elements that might have encouraged shameless behaviour. One of them is displaced responsibility that exempts the perpetrator from self-censure:

People will behave in ways they typically repudiate if a legitimate authority accepts responsibility for the effects of their conduct. Under displaced responsibility, they view their actions as stemming from the dictates of authorities; they do not feel personally responsible for the actions. Because they are not the actual agent of their actions, they are spared self-condemning reactions (Bandura 1999: 196).

Additionally, one of the mechanisms of shame displacement, mentioned by Keen, involved attribution of violence to forces beyond the control of an individual—the dangerous and wild spirits residing in the forest. This attribution enabled exoneration of perpetrators from shame and guilt over committed acts.

Furthermore, shamelessness can be strengthened through diffusion of responsibility within a group. In words of Bandura, 'Any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behaviour of others.... People act more cruelly under group responsibility than when they hold themselves personally accountable for their actions' (Bandura 1999:198; Underwood & Fromson 1975; Martens *et. al.* 2007; Martens & Kosloff 2012). This finding points to the importance of group and collective processes in sparking violence, an important bit which is sadly missing from Keen's analysis.

It is also noteworthy that shamelessness has been encouraged through construction of the artificial world ruled by norms reflecting distorted morality: the illegal became legal and the immoral became justifiable, or even heroic. In that respect, Paul Richards compares RUF to a 'sectarian enclave' besieged by hostile forces of the external world—beyond the artificially created 'walls' of the sect lies 'a wilderness with many hidden dangers' (Richards 1999: pp. 440). The rebels live in a 'sacred reality' in which responsibility for committed crimes is being dissolved through attribution of initial guilt to a group leader:

The one who initiates the act takes upon himself both the risk and the guilt. The result is truly magic: each member of the group can repeat the act without guilt. They are not responsible, only the leader is.... If one murders without guilt, and in imitation of the hero who runs the risk ... then it is no longer murder: it is a "holy aggression..." (Becker 1997: 135).

This passage suggests the importance of group dynamics, e.g. social bonding, role of leadership, group thinking and identity formation, in understanding mechanisms triggering extreme violence.

Beyond Shame: Additional Considerations in Explaining Extreme Violence

So far we have seen how the concept of shame can be satisfactorily applied to further our understanding of violence and atrocities in one of the most brutal African civil wars. However, one needs to be aware that, although the shame framework makes for a compelling explanation of heinous acts, there are also certain ambiguous areas in need of further exploration.

First of all, this paper has argued that shame, turned into anger, can manifest itself outwardly, and transmute into extreme violence towards the objects of external attribution. Nonetheless, many scholars assert that shame is an emotion that has a potential for generating highly positive, or at least neutral, outcomes. On the one hand, shame is a self-defensive mechanism that might lead to physical and psychological withdrawal. On the other hand, shame is

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also a 'self-critical feeling aimed at reforming the moral self' that can manifest 'through acknowledgment of the moral failure and effort at restitution to those adversely affected' (Gausel & Leach 2012: 953). Donald L. Nathanson distinguishes between four different responses to shame: avoidance, withdrawal, attack-self, and attack-other (Nathanson 1992). Out of these four responses, only attack-other corresponds to the idea of externalised aggression.

Another problem with the concept of shame is that it works differently for individuals and groups. Therefore, the findings of Gilligan and others, concerning the role of shame in violent behaviour of individuals, cannot be applied directly to the analysis of collective violence which took place in Sierra Leone. For instance, Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek acknowledge that, 'group-based shame may have a "kinder, gentler" side than personal shame. For example, group shame 'can motivate a desire to change the image of the group in a proactive fashion' (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek 2007: 28).

Furthermore, the universal application of the concept of shame ignores the important structural variables such as gender, age etc. Helen B. Lewis's study reveals how men learn to suppress their feelings in childhood. The effective way of hiding one's feeling is through display of hostility. Hence, men are more prone to outbursts of anger and violence (Lewis 1971; Scheff 2009). For women, shame often results in withdrawal and depression. However, in Sierra Leone women bear a large share of responsibility for atrocities. Thus, further research is needed to explain mechanisms that pushed women into violence.

The same holds true for the role of children in perpetrating violence, especially since presence of child soldiers was an important factor in the Sierra Leone war. Here, again, we need a more detailed insight into child psychology, especially the role of shame in creation of child's identities. If the processes of shame repression and transmutation work differently for children, then they do for adults, it is clear that the concept of shame and its links to violence need to be modified to accommodate these additional dynamics.

What is more, due to the fact that the majority of atrocities were committed by members of an organised group, and not deranged individuals, it is absolutely essential to explore how shame and other processes feed into violence at a collective level. By putting pressure on uniformity, groups can exact conformity of its members. Those members who do not adjust their behaviour to group standards risk being excluded from the collective, and thus are exposed to the overt shame (Scheff 1990: 90). Other group process is deindividuation, in which an individual's self-awareness is being replaced with 'group self'. Deindividuation is facilitated in the presence of a charismatic leader, who 'takes on the mantle of the primal father', 'the group-ideal' (Hogg & Abrams 1998: 121; Freud 1919; Freud 1922). A group's leadership creates the illusionary world (reference to 'shame-free zone'), in which 'each men seems an omnipotent hero who can give full vent to his appetites under the approving eye of the father'. Thus, we are able to explain the 'terrifying sadism of group activity' (Becker 1997:133).

Concluding Remarks

This paper dealt with the concept of shame and its application in the analysis of extreme violence in the Sierra Leone civil war. Based predominantly on the work of Keen, it argued that psychological approach towards studying conflicts, with a particular focus on the role of shame, can shed more light on the causal mechanisms leading to the outbreak of violence and atrocities. It proved that shame is a powerful emotion which, if repressed and followed by alienation, can push people to commit the most atrocious acts. In case of Sierra Leone, we witnessed two types of shame: one linked to pre-war circumstances, as well as shame deriving directly from the war circumstances. Both types led to perpetuation and intensification of vicious cycle of violence. Furthermore, the creation of a 'shame-free zone' relieved people of their moral responsibilities and feelings of shame. However, to fully appreciate the role of shame in sparking violence, further research is needed. This research should focus on uncovering particular dynamics of shame with regard to certain social groups (women, children etc.), as well as include the analysis of complex processes taking place at a collective level. A more profound understanding of the psycho-sociological causes of violence would undoubtedly help to design appropriate responses aimed at curtailment of extreme violence.

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