Trajectories of violence: An anthropological perspective

by way of introduction

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The present conference and collection of papers

This volume brings together the papers to be presented at the 'One-day conference on the anthropology of violence', to be held at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of Development, Free University, Amsterdam, November 15, 1996.

We draw on two adjacent constituencies: the members of the department, and the members of the 'Ph.D. Workshop'. The latter is a monthly seminar, established in 1994 and catering for the needs of those of our Ph.D. candidates who are not enlisted in any of the Graduate Schools ('onderzoekscholen') in which doctoral research in the Netherlands is now increasingly concentrated.

The conference continues an incipient departmental tradition which was initiated when Frits Selier organised a departmental conference on 'The concept of culture today' in December, 1995. Since we have had two similar conferences: on the anthropology of religion (as a valedictory function marking the occasion of Ineke van Wetering's retirement) in the Spring of 1996; and on globalisation, in the early Summer. This series of frequent and intensive debates in which virtually the entire staff have participated, bears testimony as to the transformation the department is currently undergoing, not only in terms of defining its research objectives for the near future but also in increasingly offering to its members and students, as well as to outsiders, a setting for intellectual exchange and inspiration.

The choice of subject for the present conference was inspired both by the topicality of violence in the world today, and by the considerable extent to which these developments in the wider world have come to be represented in our own ongoing research. We are restructuring our departmental research around globalisation and localisation, and this inevitably implies a focus on identity issues. The erosion of a sense of local belonging as engendered by globalisation, is usually met with an insistence on old or more typically new kinds of the construction of self, home, value and meaning. The present conference may serve as a reminder that violent conflict is often the other side of the identity coin; and at the same time as proof that research in the department is sufficiently grounded in current social reality to look at both sides of this coin.

Whereas in the previous departmental conferences in this series the floor was largely reserved for the most senior members of the department, the more market-like format of the present conference has provided room for all sections of the staff. While thus representativeness has largely been achieved in so far as the full range of seniority is concerned, as a convenor I regret that our women colleagues are underrepresented and that thus important gender dimensions of violence research today — in today's anthropology in general as well as at the department — so far have not found a place in the conference programme and in the present collection.

But this situation can easily be repaired. For despite the attractive, uniform, lightly copy-edited format in which the present papers are offered here, this collection is only intended as provisional, even as ephemeral. Its main purpose is to serve the advance circulation of the papers and thus to enhance the level of our discussions at the conference. The best that could happen to this collection is that it will soon be rendered obsolete by a book that covers a generous selection from the present papers (rewritten in the light of our conference discussion, further reflection and editorial comments), and augmented by new contributions so as to be truly representative of such research on violence as is currently going on in the context of our department.

The seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1962; cf. Bennett Ross 1980) already understood that the implication of violence is at the heart of any society. Given the variety of societies, therefore, violence is an extremely wide and diverse phenomenon, that invites vastly different social-science approaches, from a variety of levels ranging from face-to-face relations in small groups like the family or the village; via classes, genders, ethnic groups, religious denominations; or again, via

violence experienced in the lives of individuals from the part of representatives of the state, from deviant and criminal strangers acting on their own initiative, or from members of their own family and neighbourhood; to the conflict between states and even alliances of states; and all sorts of shades in between. Vastly different discourses exist about all these forms and contexts of violence. The same set of papers could, in other words, be structured in several very different ways.

I felt that by imposing a theoretically informed framework upon the clustering of the papers in the conference programme, I would pre-empt on our conference discussions. Instead I have opted for the simplicity (or rather naïvety) of a geographical approach. Thus we shall treat Europe, Africa and Asia as so many settings for specific forms of violence to occur and to lend themselves to anthropological research. This leaves us with a residue which is not readily subsumed under a geographical heading and which suggests something of the wider global context in which violence has become a far more prominent element of the public (as distinct from private and domestic) experience, debate and research than it was, say, thirty years ago. In this concluding section of the programme we shall look at a number of contexts in which this topicality is particularly marked: world religions, the media, and social research itself.

Violence and anthropology

If this were a mature, edited collection of papers, I should now have to discharge my editorial responsibility of delineating the domain of violence research as presented here, indicating essential differences and adducing old and new theoretical perspectives. The provisional and ephemeral nature of the present collection put me in the comfortable position that I can legitimately postpone this necessary but difficult task. A handful of remarks, none too original, may suffice at this stage.

The study of violence presents far greater dilemmas for anthropologists today than is suggested by the avid and high-quality participation in this conference. Hobbes defined social life not as essentially violent in itself, but rather as the alternative to violence. The main-stream development of the social sciences since their first articulation (in the course of the nineteenth century) as distinct branches on the tree of science, was towards an emphasis *on order*, *on the conditions for* non-*violence*. Violence was regarded as the exception, as the uninvited guest, relegated to deviant behaviour and political and military crises in our own society, and to the remote periphery of exotic places. Distant groups seemed to uphold alien forms of being human, of which an important indicator was that violence might occupy a conspicuous place in their social life; they were not yet 'pacified' — i.e. effectively brought under the aegis of a state exercising the monopoly of violence.[1] The history of anthropology right up to the 1960s could be written as the history of theories about the societal construction of a generalised condition of non-violence. When from the 1950s onwards Coser (1956) and Gluckman (1955, 1963) sought to reintroduce conflict into the complacently peaceful picture of structural-functional social science, this represented nothing less than a paradigm shift, a prelude to the revitalising of the social sciences by the Marxist approaches of the 1970s and 1980s. When round about the same time violence then began to move from the remote periphery towards the centre of the social experiences of the majority of people in the world, — when violent forms of social life became usual, sometimes even the norm, in new states in Africa and Asia, but also in the cities of the North Atlantic and in the civil wars of Europe, a social science without violence became obviously obsolete. And among many other intellectual responses to this state of affairs, an anthropology of violence began to be developed (cf. Campbell & Gibbs 1986; Feldman 1991; Marsh & Campbell 1982; Riches 1986)

Its main difficulty still is to define a place for violence in a theoretical framework conceived in terms of structure, order, repetitive behaviour, predictability, institutionalisation. Should we reverse the orientation of the social sciences, and raise violence and conflict to the status of norm, defining the conditions under which the exception (notably: the existence of order, structure) can be realised? Or is

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[1] On this point one may profitably reread Ernest Gellner's (1969) political philosophy of the maraboutic anti-state in the mountains of pre-colonial North Africa, where in a segmentary situation, in the absence of an effective state, the only forms of social arbitratio and adjudication are offered by saints who have the monopoly, not of violence, but of non-violence. In general, the vast anthropology of segmentary political systems reflects the classic anthropological dilemma of seeing structure in a social context marked by violence; cf. Black-Michaud 1975; Boehm 1984; Bollig 1990; Ericksen 1992; Favret 1968; Middleton & Tait, 1958; Peters 1967; Sigrist 1967; Simonse 1992.

violence not to be accorded such an exalted and unique status, and it is rather to be seen in the terms that cynical political parlance has used for the special category of military violence, as a ‘continuation of diplomatic communication with different means’ — as a specific but ordinary form of being sociable, not as an instance of opting out of the social. When trying to bring violence back into our conception of society, should we be Manichaean dualists who accord a separate existence to violence as existing in varying tensions with order and structure, or should we be monists who see violence and order as co-varying opposing sides of one and the same thing?

The present-day attention for violence also implies a shift in level and scale of analysis. Long past is the time that anthropologists were merely interested in behaviour and representations as manifested in face-to-face contexts and as eminently suitable for participant observation; and perhaps we should be less proud of this development than most anthropologists seem to be. Participant observation is probably (from a point of view of the researcher’s availability for the publication of results) the least advisable research technique in situations of violence. As Robert Buijtenhuijs, a major researcher of revolutionary movements in Africa today, uses to say: ‘I am not prepared to sacrifice my life for the sake of research.’ At least two papers in the present collection bring out the dilemma of participation in violence research, and — as I shall briefly indicate below — I have myself shocking experiences of the limits of participant observation in South Central and Southern Africa, where royal cults and traditional healers are conducive to an occult violence which often crosses into actual, actionable murder (also cf. Fisiy & Geschiere 1996; Geschiere & Fisiy 1996).

So it is not only intellectual responsibility in the face of the widening analytical horizons of the modern world, that brings anthropologists to contemplate such large-scale phenomena as civil war and ethnic violence, at a level of abstraction amenable to arm-chair theorising; it is also that violence defines no-go areas for the average researcher, who does not normally have the death-defying courage of a war-time journalist. A further dilemma of theoretical and methodological competence arises here: trained almost exclusively for a research context of participant observation, and lacking the specific training of, e.g., the documentary or political historian, or of the political scientist, one sometimes wonders if the macro-analyses as propounded by anthropologists at the level of states, continents, the world at large, are sufficiently grounded as far as data and method are concerned.

If violence was scarcely (unless as a peripheral or borderline case) written into the canon of classic anthropology during its formative years which coincided with European colonial domination over much of the rest of the world, this was not only because of a peculiar insistence on structure and middle-class tranquillity on the part of its authors, and not even merely because of their myopia vis-à-vis ‘the violence of empire’ (cf. Martin 1983). It was also largely an acknowledgement of the fact that anthropology as a form of intellectual production took place in, and implicitly reflected, a North Atlantic society that had declared violence anti-social, even non-existent; and that successfully offered most of its local citizens most of the time (with the exception of World War II) a rather impervious shelter from violence in their personal lives.

The embarrassed silence, in classic anthropology, vis-à-vis violence, also has an internal reason springing from the systematics of the social sciences themselves. If in Hobbesian fashion the effect and even purpose of the social fabric is to keep out violence, this largely implies the impossibility of an explanation of violence in terms of the enduring, repetitive structure of society — terms which nonetheless became the absolute norm in anthropology from the 1930s onwards, as exemplified in the seminal works by Evans-Pritchard (1967) and Fortes (1945, 1949; cf. Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1969). The problem is not simply resolved by exchanging the structural-functional paradigm for one that claims to be more dynamic and historical; certainly Marxist approaches, although much more conflict-minded than their predecessors, have had the same propensity towards systematics and structure, and therefore (despite their claims of being historical and dialectical) can hardly account for the absence of violence in the face of unmistakable conflicts, or for the precise moment when pre-existing conflicts break into open violence. Hence the attractiveness not only of historical but also of decidedly non-sociological, individual-centred approaches to the study of violence: psychological, psycho-analytical, even biological (cf. Ross 1986a, 1986b).

Meanwhile violence has come to represent a profound dilemma, not only of social science today, but of late twentieth century society as a whole. On the one hand the canon of the integrity of human life and the human person has never been more vocal and more explicitly enshrined in national laws and international human rights treaties. Life is sacred, the human body is sacred, and strict adherence to these tenets is the hallmark of civilisation (cf. Elias 1939); if this canon were strictly implemented in social life, open violence would not occur (although one would need an unprecedented amount of *structural* violence in order to ensure such implementation). On the other hand there has been in recent decades a marked increase in the occurrence, awareness, experience, and social

acceptability, of violence. Large sections of the media and entertainment industry today concentrate on the production and diffusion of images of violence, and often these images do nothing but depict true life situations. One of the most conspicuous aspects of the globalisation process (cf. Kloos & de Silva 1995; Appadurai 1996; de Silva 1996) in which the entire world has been increasingly involved in the course of the twentieth century CE, has been the enhanced presence of violence in places and situations where previously it was securely kept out. The forms which this expansion has taken is only too familiar: civil war, arms trade, terrorism, urban violence, state violence inflicted on citizens, repeated genocide in Europe, Asia and Africa, two world wars... There is a remarkable parallel between our present age and the age of Hellenism in the circum-Mediterranean region, which was likewise characterised by high levels of personal violence, fragmentation of political and economic power, and an increased circulation of people, ideas and goods in what could conveniently be termed proto-globalisation.

If what we are witnessing today is indeed not just increased information on a constant rate of violence, but a demonstrable increase in the rate of violence, then this suggests that violence constitutes one of the unexpected main products of the project of modernity. It makes u wonder if modern civilisation is on a collision course. Our attempts at understanding it should then not be limited to a social-scientific classification and analysis of its forms, appearances, conditions and trajectories, but should mobilise the entire edifice of specialist academic knowledge production, modern science which is another outcome of the same project of modernity.

From socio-biology and ethology to psycho-analysis, media studies, irenology and philosophy, the question of violence is at the heart of much current debate. From anthropology in the narrower sense the world may expect two main contributions in the study of violence:

- insight in extremely specific, small-scale situations of the infliction, experience and justification of violence (in families, villages, neighbourhoods, gangs, combat groups, committees, presidential advisory groups); and
- insight in the extremely general questions concerning mankind as a whole: what is it, in the make-up of man or of modern man, that makes us violent animals given to intra-species aggression?

Reflection on the latter point should not be left to philosophers or to palaeontologists, precisely because the available evidence on man's earlier forms of violence, on the uniqueness of our intra-species violence, and hence on the possibly innate nature of human aggression, is patchy and contradictory. Was *homo pekinensis*, 300,000 years ago, truly a cannibal, or (as the prominent palaeontologist Binford (1981) has convincingly argued) is this a myth based on a misreading of the traces left on human bones by animal predators? Is intra-species killing among mammals such as lions and deer always the result of pre-mating contests accidentally gone out of hand (cf. Casti 1989: ch 3)? Is culture our life insurance against an innate violence inherited from nature? Or is culture, on the contrary, the very source of violence? Is our official respect for life a universal human value and as such a likely ingredient for inclusion in the global culture whose construction we see all around us? Or is such respect, far from universal and culture-free, a specific (post-)Neolithic response based on deferred reciprocity between generations, whereas in earlier, Palaeolithic contexts the presence of an extra, unproductive mouth to feed was usually an invitation to infanticide and senicide (cf. Darlington 1969). If the latter is the case then the absolute nature of the sacredness of human life reveals more about the dramatically increased capacity of (post-)Neolithic man to create absolutes (as part of a package to which also belong: writing, science, the state, agriculture, cities, religion; cf. van Binsbergen 1996 and references cited there), than that it reveals a universal and possibly innate propensity towards respect for human life. Or did violence yet originate as the most obvious solution of a truly primordial condition of conflict, which we might try to conceptualise (of course, at some a-historical, archetypal and hypothetical plane) as a standard form of rebellion against the male elder (Freud 1918), or as a standard form of annihilation of the focus of mimesis (Girard 1977; Hamerton-Kelly 1987)? Does man possess, in the *thanatos* drive, a propensity to violence and destruction which is not primarily determined by economic frustration and therefore will not be eradicated by socio-economic reform or even revolution along socialist lines (Freud 1972)? Does the preparedness for violence and hence the temporary shedding of internalised social inhibitions depend on individual regression in the face of the contagion by group behaviour and of the construction of the patriarchal image of a Great Leader (cf. Fromm 1973)? Does the occurrence of violence in general largely depend on the lowering of thresholds and inhibitions, under conditions of group contagion, ecstasy, use of drugs including alcohol, and other psychological and physiological crises?

Violence and being an anthropologist: a personal account

Violence constitutes much more than a timely topic for anthropological research; it rents the fabric of sociability and as such addresses fundamental anxieties, values and aspirations, also on the part of the researcher herself. Allow me to briefly illustrate this from my own case as a researcher.

> My own feeling has always been that violence, more than death, more even than sexuality, constitutes the true secret of social life; and let me simply add, a secret so terrifying that hitherto I have usually gone out of my way to avoid being confronted with it in my academic work — while those confrontations that were unavoidable have proved very productive if rather explosive.
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> My rather conspicuous avoidance of the topic (all the more remarkable in someone who holds a chair in ethnic studies) has been largely a non-rational form of self-protection.
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> Born immediately after World War II, the violent war-time experiences of close relatives and their business associates (prominent among whom were Jews who has survived) as shared in household conversations, are among my earliest and most vivid recollections; they continue to hold sway over me and often move me to tears when confronted with images of World War II, the holocaust, and more recent instances of ethnic conflict and genocide. Their effect on me, frankly, is paralysis, not a kindling of the holy fire of inquisitiveness; I have never felt tempted to write on ethnic violence, and probably never will — I cannot handle it academically. More important even, and strangely merging with these vicarious war-time reminiscences, has been the unspeakable domestic violence that was endemic in the family in which I grew up; I was never the physical victim, but for many years the witness — trembling and sobbing with powerless rage and protest as my mother and sister were being abused. And this is perhaps the key to my life also as an anthropologist: the outside onlooker who pays with self-destructing empathy and vicarious guilt for the fact that he — physically at least — escapes unscathed.
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> In retrospect I am beginning to discern how much of my intellectual work, both as a literary writer, as an anthropologist, and since 1990 also as an African traditional healer, has hinged on the relations (cf. Bloch 1986, 1992) between violence and symbolic production: the latter as concealment, as alternative, as escape, as compensation, as exposure, as therapy, as prevention, as redemption, of the former. This, I suppose, made me into an anthropologist primarily of religion.
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> A sense of the secret of violence persuaded me to re-cast the results of my first field-work, in the highlands of northwestern Tunisia, around a murder that had occurred in the research area in the early twentieth century CE, and I came to read the subsequent massive restructuring of the landscape, its territorial shrines and the attending cults, as the dramatic aftermath of this one event (van Binsbergen 1988); my Tunisian fieldwork, and the unfolding research skills it brought me, largely revolved on my struggle to bring the local people to speak about this secret.
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> Later, in Zambia in the early 1970s, I clung desperately to the theme of the Lumpa rising (whose analysis in neo-Marxist terms was to made my name as an analyst of African religious change), for no other reason than that I absolutely needed to understand, for more than academic reasons, how a religious movement could bring people to such an embracing of violence that they were prepared to confront the heavily-armed British colonial army with their bare hands, women in the front-line, their babies as shields, and carrying in their pockets hand-written passports to heaven issued by the movement's prophetess, Alice Lenshina (van Binsbergen 1981, 1982).
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> With relish (and with more than unconscious references to a violent childhood), and frequently, I have honoured my research hosts' expectations that I should make bloody animal sacrifices, not only in Tunisia, but subsequently also in Guinea Bissau and in Botswana, — and this is what I still do at my home in Haarlem. These sacrifices have told me a great deal about the vicarious experience that unites the god, the slayer, and the slain (cf. Collomb 1978; de Heusch 1985; Hoskins 1989).
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> Against all stereotypes and warnings from the local lay public, which is rightly convinced of the sheer violence that lies at the heart of royal cults in Zambia (van Binsbergen 1992) and of the *nganga*'s art both there and more to the South, in Zimbabwe and Botswana, I courted these domains for many years, crossing boundaries which not only few outsiders, but also few locals had transgressed (van Binsbergen 1991). And while not myself engaging in acts of interhuman violence — occult or overt — but on the contrary greatly enhancing my expertise in the symbolic production that heals the effects of violence and keeps it at bay — inevitably the point had to come, in both African contexts, that I hit the rock-bottom of unmistakable, unconcealed and intolerable violence among my hosts.
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> Thus having reached the end of my quest, I was finally free to tear myself loose and to make two significant steps to which I was hitherto unable. I embarked on an immensely ambitious armchair project that has brought me to compare divination systems, their apparatus and interpretative catalogues in five continents and across five or six millennia, in other words as far away as possible, in space, time and method, from the murderous context of face-to-face interaction in which I have become a diviner and an adoptive member of the royal family myself — but taking to that comparative project the full inspiration and knowledge which prolonged participant observation under downright dangerous circumstances has afforded me. And secondly, I feel now finally free to drop the Tarnkappe (largely a veil of emotional anti-rationality) that for so many years has protected me from the secret of violence in my life. I am now beginning to see the practical, personal and liberating value of analytic thought in the domain of violence — although more so from the part of philosophers than from anthropologists, and with this further qualification that rationality not only illuminates violence but — as we shall see below — could also be argued to breed it.

Rationality and violence

My only aim in presenting this very personal perspective is to stress that violence is not a routine subject of inquiry, but a total social phenomenon that we can only hope to approach with integrity if we do so at the existential level. Having long been an anti-rationalist (the frame of mind in which one becomes a poet and a diviner), I have often suspected that when all is said and done, violence is not primarily an act, but a frame of thought on the part of the actor; and it must have been that frame of thought that my anti-rationalism has sought to avoid.

Is it not a prerequisite of violence that the actor denies the application, to his victim, of categories of humanity and integrity he normally applies to himself and his loved ones; in other words, does

physical violence not always imply the mental violence of defining the victim as other than human? Is such denial not a drastic form of the objectification of the other, which (as we have known since Sartre (1943)) is at the root of all prejudice, perhaps of all social life, but then also at the root of the social sciences? Is violence in other words eminently human because it implies the magical act of the controlling and dehumanising word which seeks and promises existence and power outside the body and its tenderness? Is it then nothing but the magic of modernity?

Such ideas (even if rather disquieting for the well-intending anthropologist, whose own attempts at understanding violence suddenly risk to be construed as just another form of violence) have profound resonances in the philosophical debates of today (cf. McKenna 1992). Let me end by merely quoting one, very recent and eminently inspiring example, Brian Schroeder's *Altared ground*, whose title puns on a combination of blood sacrifice, of alleged Hegelian totalitarianism (Hegel is set up as Schroeder's main straw man) and the alterity which is the central concept in the book's main inspiration, the work of Levinas:

> 'One of the most pressing concerns for contemporary society is the issue of violence and the factors that promote it. This book stages an engagement between Emmanuel Levinas, one of the leading figures in twentieth century European and Continental philosophy, and Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Adorno, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Derrida, and others (...) in the history of ideas. (...) The aim is to contribute to current discussions of reconceiving subjectivity as intersubjectivity in a postmodern context by taking up such diverse themes as alterity, ground, transcendence, responsibility, language, community, politics, divinity, and futurity in relation to interpersonal violence. (...) The book (...) contests, along with Levinas, the claim that peace and totality go hand in hand, that the overcoming of violence necessitates the totalization of subject and object, of self and other, into a metaphysical one or whole expressible as *ground*, [italics original] despite contentions that such a unity does not preclude the integrity of difference and multiplicity. (...) [I]t explores the forceful, surprising, and potentially dangerous claim that *it is precisely conceptuality itself that is the origin of violence.'* [italics added] (Schroeder 1996: 1)

Anthropologists are not very well equipped to appreciate or refute a claim so frightening, but the question of violence is too important to ignore the possibility that Schroeder is right.

Personally I am reading this collection with a view of ascertaining just that. If Schroeder were totally right, there would be neither hope nor future for an anthropology or philosophy of violence. But he cannot be totally right, not only because he abhors totalities, but also because his own illuminating text hinges on conceptuality which therefore is implied to have redeeming qualities even if violent.

Is there anything more violent than truth?

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