Introduction

Ordinary Violence in Africa

Jacky Bouju and Mirjam de Bruijn

Introduction

Violence in Africa has been the focus of many books in recent years but few have specifically addressed the issue of ordinary social violence. Interest in the study of ordinary violence only began in the 1990s, mainly at the instigation of NGOs and militant writers as prior to this the social sciences had hardly shown any interest in the phenomenon. Consequently, little is known today about ordinary social violence that structures social relationships.\(^1\) The reasons for this past neglect of the subject appear to be twofold. Firstly, aggression between people who are closely related is never easy to document and analyse, and this may have led social scientists to focus on less controversial and sometimes more exotic or striking forms of African violence. Secondly, discussions on this topic were mostly held in NGO circles and among activists’ groups, which contributed to the conceptualization of Africans as victims. This tendency was strengthened by reports more interested in picturing either the extraordinary savage violence of ethnic wars or the daily harassment of citizens by men in uniform and, only to a lesser extent, by the ‘ordinary violence of ordinary people in ordinary situations’ (Janin & Marie 2003). It should be clear that ordinary violence – i.e. recurrent mental or physical aggression occurring between closely related people – occurs everywhere in the world and is by no means specific to Africa. Nevertheless, ordinary violence in Africa, as any other social phenomenon, has its distinctive forms and these are embedded in specific histories and cultures. An anthropological approach is especially relevant when studying differences that are loaded with social and cultural meaning. The authors of the contributions in this volume are all social anthropologists.

\(^1\) French anthropology’s interest in ordinary violence in Africa is quite recent. A special issue of *Cahiers de l’UCAC* (No. 3) was dedicated to it in 1998 and a special issue of *Politique Africaine* was devoted to the ‘ordinary violence of ordinary people in ordinary situations’ in 2003 (Janin & Marie 2003, No. 91). And there were also two issues of *Bulletin de l’APAD*: no. 25 ‘La violence endémique en Afrique’ (Abéga [ed.] 2003) and no. 27–28 ‘Violence sociale et exclusion. Le développement social de l’Afrique en questions’ (Bouju & de Bruijn [eds] 2007) on the topic. Some of these studies provided the first descriptions of situations of ordinary violence that are now being analysed in more detail in this volume.
who have a great deal of fieldwork experience in Africa and have witnessed and studied situations of ordinary violence.

**A Specific Global Context: Anomie and Normative Pluralism**

A quick look at the historical context of the study of violence will corroborate the fact that qualifying violence is also a political issue. To begin with, it is important to remember that all the countries concerned here have suffered long histories of political oppression that have been characterized by violent changes caused first by colonialism and later by the instability of post-colonial regimes, economic poverty and political uncertainty. The current process of globalization is resulting in serious levels of unemployment and a widening gap between the (exorbitantly) rich and the poor, and this is disrupting processes of social redistribution. It is leading to a gradual disintegration of the socio-cultural institutions that once structured individual behaviour and gave meaning to collective action. This international economic crisis has severely affected kinship solidarity and permanently weakened family ties. The increased social exclusion of the poorest ceaselessly feeds the fires of social tension and conflict. Today the structural violence thus created has become pivotal. The case studies presented in this volume describe ordinary violence related to the eroding of basic social relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, kin and in-laws, and neighbours. Daily insults, recurrent acts of defiance and offence, brutal coercion, insidious threats and the repeated overstepping of socially acceptable boundaries are the most common expressions of this violence. Some of these are no doubt a result of eroding social norms, while others are a result of the lack of functioning of socio-economic institutions due to long-term underinvestment and a lack of development. Another main source of violence relates to spiritual insecurity, which is being expressed in showy funeral rituals, conspicuous displays of religious faith and/or the public lynching of suspected sorcerers (Bruno & Bouju 2012).

Yet, what would appear to be specific to the post-colonial African context is a situation of normative pluralism where reinvented traditional customs are competing on equal terms with modern legal principles. A kind of anomie characterizes the social order: there is a general ineffectiveness of (official) law that does not protect people simply because they do not know of

---

2 Anomie characterises a situation in which the Law has lost all or most of its legitimacy, its eminence and its ability to regulate violence.