The Cyclical Exchange of Violence in Congolese Kinship Relations

Sylvie Ayimpam

Introduction

This chapter will not follow the dominant view on violence exclusively centred on the dichotomy victim/aggressor; more accurately it will highlight the reciprocal and cyclical nature of family ordinary violence that prevails in the urban milieu of Kinshasa (D.R.C.). Grounded in two life histories collected through several periods of fieldwork, I have chosen to investigate the violence a specific kin relationship, namely the wife/family-in-law relationship. In Central Africa, a married woman has, most of the time, an equivocal relation with her in-laws. First of all because she is considered as a ‘foreigner’ having been ‘purchased’ through the payment of a dowry and therefore subjected to her husbands and his kin. Such a situation of ordinary ‘violence against women’ could easily make wives appear as the dedicated victims of the structural violence associated with their marital status. But, although this is undoubtedly true, in the long run of kinship relations the wives unequal social status may become at odds with their economic status. And, as I shall show here, when a wife happens to be empowered by wealth superiority, she may become the aggressor and violence will be on her side. In the long run of wife/family-in-law ties the interactions follow a diachronic cycle of revenge and retaliations where each side may be in turn victim and aggressor. As already shown by Pierre Janin and Alain Marie (2003) the urban African family milieu can be a microcosm of reciprocal violence. However, I try here to dig in deeper into the process of reciprocal violence in family relationships. This was possible because the daily interactions in the family circle offer to the anthropologist a good point of view to observe ordinary violence. Nevertheless, the African family continues to think of itself as an extended kin community built upon family members' solidarity, made of unequal relationships between consanguinity and affinity ties

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1 Regarding violence against women a number of important studies have been conducted recently in European countries. Among them a recent book by Maryse Jaspard (2005) gives a synthesis of works about violence against women in general and against women in a subordinate position vis-à-vis their husband's family in particular.
and where authority lies in the patriarch’s hierarchical rank of seniority. Of course, such a conception of hierarchy and authority generates tensions and conflicts that may lead to violence.

However, my aim is to show that despite this strong hierarchical structure of authority and the ideology of kinship solidarity, violence in the family rises because of strong discrepancies between kinship status and economic positions. Indeed, whatever a family members initial status, one’s dominant position will be related to one’s economic situation. Therefore dominating situations are reversible allowing for revenge and retaliation leading to a kind of violence typically reciprocal and cyclical. A violent act is a visible event that anyone may comment, but the anthropologist knows that it is only a particular stage in a complex cycle\(^2\) of violent exchange. The description of the most important stages of a family violence cycle requires a diachronic approach, for which a long period of fieldwork is required.\(^3\) Proximity and trust have been slowly woven through recurring visits that were necessary to gather the personal testimonies of individuals. With time, these persons have agreed to share with me their personal experience, their perceptions and even to reveal some family secrets that constitute the data of these life histories. Therefore, I present here two life histories that I have selected because they gather enough information to reveal the sequence of a cycle of family violence.

**Revenge and Retaliation between a Widow and Her Family In-Law**

**Mama Mapasa’s Case**

In March 2001,\(^4\) the funerals of Papa Mapasa an old retired civil servant, took place in Kinshasa. The wake was held in the family courtyard located in a popular neighbourhood East of Kinshasa town. The wake had lasted nearly sixteen

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\(^2\) By cycle, I mean the ‘fluctuations of a phenomenon that consists of expansion phases followed by recession phases, of contraction and recovery, generated by a negative retrospective effect’ (Boudon et al. 1993: 54).

\(^3\) The life histories presented here were first collected in Kinshasa in 2000 and 2001, during a field research study on ‘neo-Pentecostal churches and the issue of family solidarity’. They have been completed during further field researches (from 2003 to 2006) supported by the French Ministry of research (Action Concertée Incitative, the French Center for National Research (CNRS) and the Institut d’Études Africaines (now CEMAF) in Aix-en-Provence.

\(^4\) In Kinshasa, it is common that parents of twins are called respectively, Papa (or Tata) and Mama Mapasa. The word Mapasa (Lipasa in singular) means twin in Lingala language. I have chosen this pseudonym in order to maintain the confidentiality of the informants. The same applies to all other names of persons in this paper.