Odoo mabor pe neko twol – Acholi proverb

In his 2020 book, *Male Survivors of Wartime Violence: Perspectives from Northern Uganda*, postgraduate researcher Philipp Schulz uses the Acholi proverb “[a] long stick cannot kill a snake” as a guiding principle for his examination of male sexual violence during conflict in Uganda. Accordingly, Schulz, who earned a PhD in social science from Ulster University in Northern Ireland in 2017, adopts a “close” view of the problem of male sexual violence within conflict. By first speaking to male (civilian) Acholi survivors of sexual violence, Schulz claims that he can think of “appropriate” solutions to the enduring issues this victimized group faces (p. 12). However, for me, Schulz’s book fails to adequately show his audience the forest before speaking on behalf of the trees. Schulz’s examination of the situations of male survivors of sexual violence does advance several interesting concepts and covers a much neglected yet important area of study. However, it also fails to fully present foundational information, discusses theoretical models at length that are never adopted into analysis, excludes types of sexual violence and victim subgroups with little explanation, and is organized in such a way that readers need to search for relevant information.

Emphasizing the highly contextualized nature of his study and its purported grounding in feminist thought, Schulz’s examination of sexual violence against men is broken into five major parts: a reflection on the methodology, ethics, and theoretical foundations he relies on; a global perspective of sexual violence against men; a historical narrative of sexual violence against committed Acholi men by the National Resistance Movement (NRM)—now in power in Uganda—during the late 1980s and early 1990s; an examination of gendered impacts and vulnerabilities in Acholi society; and a discussion of Acholi men’s support groups for sexual violence survivors and other potential transitional justice mechanisms to address those gendered impacts.

Following this structure, Schulz notes that sexual violence against men in conflict situations is widespread and not only severely understudied but also inadequately addressed by international, national, and local transitional justice mechanisms. This was also the case in Uganda during the 1980s and 1990s, with male-on-male rape being called *tek-gungu* (to bend by force) by the Acholi generally or *butu tek tek* (sleep strong strong)—terminology usually used by female rape survivors—by some male victims (pp. 56, 60-61). Schulz
then presents two common analytical frameworks commonly used in the study of sexual violence in conflict. The first, “opportunistic,” framework argues that rape in conflict, including against men, takes place because of unfulfilled sexual desires in the military population (p. 42). The second, “strategic,” argues that widespread and systematic rape is a war tactic (p. 43). However, neither of these fully explains the situation in many conflicts, including Uganda, claims Schulz. Furthermore, he argues that the way the limited existing work describes sexual violence against men as “homosexualization” or “feminization” is too narrow and thus problematic (p. 46). Instead, Schulz uses the phrase “displacement from gendered personhood.” Although he does not give a precise definition for this phrase, Schulz states that he invokes this terminology to emphasize that like other forms of—which usually physical—displacement, the impact of sexual violence on an individual can be mitigated or alleviated.

Schulz bases his exploration of this displacement on interviews he conducted with male civilian Acholi rape victims who attended support groups for survivors of sexual violence. Although using this approach necessarily excludes the viewpoints of men not involved in such groups and has pre-exposed his interview subjects to others’ narratives about the past, Schulz highlights that he believes this approach is more ethical as these men already have support. It also allowed him to build trust with individual survivors whom he interacted with in both one-on-one and group settings. With the partnership of different survivors’ groups, Schulz conducted four workshops, during which he posed general open-ended questions about the impact of the conflict on the present survivors. He did not ask any direct questions about sexual violence and allowed the survivors to guide the direction of the discussions.

Based on these interviews, Schulz contends that in the Acholi context, male rape victims do not perceive themselves to have been “homosexualized” or “feminized” by their rapists but to have become women in the eyes of their communities due to rape-related physical and psychical damage, which left them unable to fulfill the traditional masculine roles of protector and provider and, sometimes, to perform sexually. Schulz does not explain how this is different from feminization, and, in fact, after introducing the concepts of “homosexualization” and “feminization,” he rarely refers to them again. This lasting damage exacerbates and extends the damage of the rape(s).

Additionally, due to continuing community stigmatization and potential threat of prosecution under Uganda’s laws against homosexuality, Schulz argues that men are rarely able to speak safely about their experiences. It is no surprise, then, that most of Schulz’s interviewees state that their most desired forms of justice consist of a combination acknowledgment of their victimization and financial or practical compensation so that they can reassert their gendered space within their communities. This acknowledgment is unlikely to come through prosecution or trial, and most of Schulz’s interviewees seemed interested in trials only insofar as they could be used as a mechanism to force government acknowledgment. Other interviewees believe that physical and psychical rehabilitation should be included or prioritized as forms of justice. In contrast, a small minority of survivors believe that receiving monetary compensation would exacerbate or mock their victimization, as it would function almost like a dowry payment for a woman. Thus, Schulz illustrates that the justice needs of male victims of sexual violence are many and varied.

Schulz clearly tries very hard to approach this delicate topic from an ethical and feminist perspective, with an eye to his own positionality. For example, in his first chapter, Schulz rejects the notion that a study can be conducted from a position of neutrality and discusses at length how he attempted to remove or explicitly acknowledge his privileged position as an educated, Europe-based
white researcher conducting studies in and about Africans. In fact, to me, it seems that much of this book is taken up by theoretical discussions and ethical pontification that never settle on firm conclusions and are rarely applied. Some points raised by Schulz in these discussions are later excluded with little explanation of why. Meanwhile, ethical questions and methodological considerations that should have been addressed in my view are noticeably absent.

Take, for instance, Schulz's description in chapter 3 of the three main types of sexual violence against civilian men that include rape, being forced to rape or commit sexual violence against others, and the connected harms of committing sexual violence against women to humiliate men. First, Schulz at no point in this book tells the audience why his research only extends to sexual violence committed against civilian men during a conflict, rather than against military men or both. While Schulz notes that there is already much literature on sexual and gender violence conducted against women in conflict, he does not mention why military men are excluded from his study on sexual violence against men. Second, Schulz does not engage in any discussion of how the second and third categories should be treated or conceptualized, since women are also victimized during these acts, and at least in the third category are the primary targets of the physical aspect of the violence. Indeed, it is necessary to at least mention, in my view, that because women are victimized in the third case through not only their rape but also through their instrumentalization—essentially, they are not considered people but merely a medium to communicate a humiliating message to other men—recognizing this as a type of victimization for men is implicitly reenforcing that instrumentalization and thus re-victimizing the women. Third, despite introducing all three of these concepts and later other types of gender and sexual violence, Schulz almost immediately limits his study to rape, and even then, only anal rape. Next, he writes that although he is “primarily concerned with acts of male rape, the analysis also of course takes into account other sexual violations and harms experienced by the male survivors who participated in this study” (p. 61). However, he never tells us how those harms are considered in his analysis or in any of the transitional justice programs he discusses in the book’s final three chapters.

This fits a larger frustrating trend in Schulz’s book of leaving out important information to dedicate large swaths of text to theory discussions that are never applied or referenced again. For instance, Schulz provides no insight at all on the cultural understandings of gender of the perpetrator group. This is particularly problematic given that Schulz argues that sexual violence is often a communication of hierarchical masculinity. Under this theory, a male rapist would communicate his dominance or higher place in the masculine hierarchy over his victim by raping him. However, because Schulz fails to explain whether the perpetrator group and victim group both view masculinity in the same way, he fails to fully establish mass rape in Uganda as a form of violent gendered communication.

Additionally, despite Schulz’s efforts to approach this topic in a sensitive manner, his text is at times unintentionally offensive. For example, on page 56, Schulz writes: “Crimes of sexual violence against men within this context were also accompanied by other human rights violations ... or degrading and heinous crimes—which included acts of defecating in cooking pots and granaries, and acts of urinating in the mouths of goats and cattle, perceived to be intended to humiliate the Acholi population—as well as sexual violence against women.” While likely unintentional, by structuring this sentence this way, it almost seems like Schulz is equating the ruin of stored food through defecation with the rape of women. Or take the fact that both chapter 1 and chapter 5 discuss Schulz’s positionality as a Western researcher and the history of Western individuals and institu-
tions “speaking on behalf of victims” and thus “resilencing [them], negating their potential for agency and reproducing a sense of powerlessness” (p. 123). However, although this research was based on interviews, Schulz rarely excerpts statements from his Acholi interviewees.

Despite these harsh criticisms, Schulz’s book does provide some interesting insights and raises important questions for those who already have a background knowledge about the perpetration of sexual and gendered violence in conflict. This book would be a good addition to higher-level education classes on international development or relations, transitional justice, gender and sexuality, conflict studies, international law, or political science so long as there are other readings on gender and sexual violence assigned as well. Schulz’s book would work best as a foil to other research or to round out an area of study but should not be assigned on its own, as it fails to provide enough context and critical theory to serve as a stand-alone educational piece. Indeed, I believe that this book would be detrimental to those without enough of a background to recognize where Schulz leaves out vital information or introduces a concept without fully considering its context and implications. As a result, it is likely not a book for the pre-collegiate or those not already acquainted with theories on sexual violence in conflicts.

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