

LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Holly Porter. *After Rape: Violence, Justice, and Social Harmony in Uganda*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xii + 255 pp. Photographs. Figures. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$99.99. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1107180048.

Holly Porter begins her ethnographic examination of rape and its aftermath among the Acholi with a poignant story of two rapes. The first occurred when a young woman and her friend left home to visit an aunt in a neighboring village. Along the way, they passed by a government soldier who threatened them at gunpoint, tied them up, and then raped them both. The friend managed to escape and reach the house of the aunt, who then alerted the authorities at a nearby military outpost. The soldiers quickly responded, shooting and killing the rapist on the spot. The young woman was grateful to be alive and felt the outcome was just. The second incident involved a young woman who had been raped by her cousin. After she told her family of the assault, clan elders decided that the cousin should buy a sacrificial goat for a cleansing ritual. The elders then smeared both parties with goat excrement and lectured them on the dangers of incest. The young woman in this case also felt that this was “a fitting punishment” (2). Given that these were two different incidents, we should not be surprised to hear about two different outcomes—one rapist killed, another one cleansed. What is surprising, however, is that both rapes were experienced by the same woman, who also thought that both punishments were just. The reason, as Porter explains, has everything to do with the maintenance of “social harmony,” a concept she carefully analyzes throughout the book.

After Rape deftly unpacks the complicated relationship between sexual wrongdoing and justice in northern Uganda. In the introduction, Porter introduces readers to the Acholi—a people who want to be known for their culture and traditions, not for the twenty years of war and suffering they endured. She acknowledges that although her focus on rape reveals an “uglier side” of their society, she wants readers to understand the meanings attached to such violence, and how such harms can be repaired. The second chapter situates the author within the larger study. We learn that Porter has been living in northern Uganda for well over a decade, and that she still considers Gulu her home. We also learn about her research methods, which included 187 in-depth interviews with Acholi women from two different villages, 40 percent of whom had experienced rape at some point during their lives. She also interviewed NGO, police, probation, and social welfare workers, analyzed magistrate court transcripts, attended district gender-based violence working group meetings, and observed several court cases involving rape. The chapter includes a theoretical discussion of social harmony and its maintenance within a patriarchal society.

Chapter 3 is perhaps the most analytically interesting. Here Porter examines concepts of justice and wrongdoing in relation to rape and makes two significant claims that complicate scholarly understandings of the act:

(1) that it needs to be theorized both as violence *and* as sex (i.e., that sex should be brought back into rape discourse), and (2) that rape is not necessarily a weapon of war, even within contexts of war. She also argues that in many instances the legal definition of rape does not represent the conceptions of the local community. For example, Acholi do not always view nonconsensual sex as a transgression (such as when customary payments have been or will be paid), and they do not believe that some types of consensual sex (e.g., cases legally considered “statutory rape”) should be criminalized. Porter paid attention, therefore, to women’s own definitions of rape, and to the various scenarios involving force or coercion that they considered criminal.

Chapter 4 examines Acholi conceptions of sex and love more generally. Porter suggests that sex is crucial to the maintenance of social harmony since it leads to the production of families and shapes notions of masculinity and femininity. A woman’s identity, for instance, is intricately linked to her role as a wife and mother. This is why a young woman might be encouraged to marry her rapist, especially if she becomes pregnant, in an effort to restore social harmony. In chapter 5 Porter looks more closely at the issue of consent and the ways in which other factors, such as customary payments or the age of the victim, may be most important in determining whether a sexual act is or is not transgressive. Chapters 6 and 7 consider local responses to sexual wrongdoing and the ways in which the need for social harmony may be more important than the pursuit of justice. For this reason, communities trust and accept solutions proposed by those with local moral authority. In chapter 8 Porter examines the differences between the experience and interpretation of rape in the contexts of war and peace, as well as the varying conceptions of rape according to the identity of the perpetrator (i.e., a combatant as opposed to a civilian). She found that depending on the larger moral context—where the rape took place, the relationship of the perpetrator to the social/moral community, and whether the victim became pregnant—a rape could be seen as a lesser violation, even if it involved great violence. The conclusion revisits the book’s main theoretical contributions, reminding readers that there is no singular theory of rape, and no uniform approach to justice. The solutions always lie within the local context.

After Rape is an extremely important book. Rich in ethnographic data, as well as theoretical insights, it will interest a broad variety of scholars. Feminist scholars of violence and war will certainly want to engage with Porter’s call for the re-sexualization of rape discourse, just as legal scholars and political scientists will want to consider her criticisms of transitional justice and the International Criminal Court. It is not an easy book to read because of its subject matter and (at times) dense prose, but it has broad theoretical implications that reach far beyond the African continent.

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