

Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung On Scars and Scarifications

The concept of the *Ogbanje*—children that die shortly after birth, but then enter their mothers' wombs again and are born again, i.e. »children who come and go« in Igbo—was made particularly popular to the rest of the world by Chinua Achebe in his seminal novel *Things Fall Apart*. Children, especially those believed to be *Ogbanje*, were scarified to the effect that if they were born again after death, they were born with scars from the previous life. This phenomenon of reincarnation that seems like a myth is a phenomenon that has baffled scientists, and the fact that kids are born with such scars hasn't made the perplexity any less.

For this short essay, I am less interested in the veracity of this phenomenon, but rather interested in the scarification process and reoccurrence of scars.

As the saying goes, »no scar, no memory«. This saying was frequently used by school teachers who believed in corporal punishment to justify their brutality on students. That meant your wounds will remind you in the future of your crime.

In Abrahamic religions, legend holds that after his resurrection, Jesus/Issa met his disciples on the way. In disbelief about a resurrection possibility by their master, they asked him to show his hands. To show his scars from the nails on the cross. Jesus/Issa did.

No scar, no memory.

In Mario Rizzi's photographic series *August 3rd*, one is confronted with that proverbial heterotopic space par excellence. Refugee camps are other spaces. They are non-spaces. They are spaces in which otherness is produced. Spaces in which mental and physical

states are challenged. Spaces in which political, economic and social power gradients are compressedly manifested as hyperbole.

Rizzi presents to us a zoom in, a snapshot of such a space. Rows of tents with their predominantly beige-gray colour and occasional blue patches face us. There is a strange adroitness that betrays the unconventionality of such spaces that are becoming more and more normalized. Little reveals life in this snapshot. Human existence is at best peripheral, as we see a man escaping the frame of the photograph and two kids fulfilling their roles as extras. Maybe the clearest traces of life are the blanket hung to dry on the metal fence of demarcation and the car enveloped in the green-red-yellow cover. Objects once upon a time used by humans still betray some human condition.

But the crux of the image is definitely the writing »3/8/2014« on the wall of a container, accentuating the USAID sticker just. A date. Maybe a date like any other date for all, but in this particular case, this date cicatrized on the wall marks the date that is the scar which remained after the massacre of the Yazidis by their neighbouring militant Arab groups, after being abandoned by the Kurdish Peshmerga and ignored by many international political bodies. The story, as narrated by Vicken Cheterian, goes that in the early hours of that unholy day, heavily armed »ISIS fighters who had conquered Mosul two months earlier, attacked the Yazidi villages of Girzarek and Siba Sheikh Khidir. Until then, the Yazidis had been protected by Kurdish Peshmerga forces, but these withdrew on receiving orders from above. They did not evacuate the Yazidi civilian population, leaving them defenseless and at ISIS' mercy. Local Yazidi resistance armed with light weapons collapsed after four hours; they did not have enough ammunition, nor heavy arms to resist the Jihadis in their armoured vehicles. ISIS forces quickly entered the town. (...) ISIS captured the unfortunate ones: men were forced to convert to Islam and those who refused were killed on the spot. More than 35 mass graves have been found so far. But the horror didn't stop there and perhaps the dead were luckier than those who survived. ISIS revived open sex slave markets, a tradition that had disappeared from the region with the collapse of the

Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century. Thus, after the fall of Girzarek and Siba Sheikh Khidir, some 5240 women and girls were captured, eventually sold as slaves.«

»3/8/2014« is that scar of death, that calls on the memory of death, as in the case of the Ogbanje. Human beings tend to make word or image scars on their bodies by scratching, burning or etching in the act of scarification to mark particular events, to imprint their cultures, to inscribe messages, and eventually function as a negotiator between individual and the society. According to Ludvico and Kurland, besides aesthetic, religious and social generalizations for scarification, the fore rationales underlying scarification are firstly as a rite of passage, secondly to deal with a trauma process, thirdly a commemoration of a character or sexuality. In that sense, one can see the tents in Rizzi's photograph as an extended body or skin. The shelter of the refugee camp as a projection surface or a slate negotiating between the individual and the society. This cicatrix marks an involuntary, unexpected and brutal rite of passage, it inscribes this trauma to be seen by the rest of the world and marks the biggest abuse of personal space through forced sex.

No scar, no memory.

The perversity of this comment gets a new meaning in the context of »3/8/2014«. It is a day that begs for a dawn of amnesia on all those who survived the massacre for them to be able to live on. But the Yazidis have marked this date for it to be known to the rest of the world. A date in an open archive. It is said that the Yazidis have been victims of 72 attempts of genocide, mostly related to a misunderstanding in their confession, which Avi Asher-Schapiro describes as follows:

Most Yazidis are Kurdish speakers, and while the majority consider themselves ethnically Kurdish, Yazidis are religiously distinct from Iraq's predominantly Sunni Kurdish population. Yazidism is an ancient faith, with a rich oral tradition that

integrates some Islamic beliefs with elements of Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion, and Mithraism, a mystery religion originating in the Eastern Mediterranean.

While this fact is a matter for historians of religion, as thinking bodies we need to ask ourselves how the violence enacted in / by history and by religions are embodied and passed on not only cognitively, but also phenomenologically.

We definitely do not need scars to remember, but scars do activate memories. Rizzi's work captures in and with an extreme subtlety how scars and scarification become respectively the testament and the witness.

References

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