

SOCIETIES OF TERROR: ABSENCE OF A BODY AND PROBLEMS OF MOURNING

Sasanka Perera

The recent discovery of mass graves—and skeletal remains of unidentified persons in Suriyakanda—received much coverage in the print media. So did the events that followed, which among other things, included the holding of an identification parade for the purpose of identifying the skeletal remains and the actual “identification” of some of the skeletons and other items found in the graves. Since there were no restrictions on speculation, many people expressed their opinions as to whose remains they may have been. The government media tended to suggest that these were remains of the victims of the 1971 JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*) insurrection (even though some of the excavators had to cover their noses to keep out the smell emanating from the partially decomposed bodies) or that they were of the victims of the JVP in the more recent uprising. Many others supported the view that these were the skeletal remains of the 40 students from Embilipitiya, who disappeared after being detained by the military at the height of the JVP insurrection and the government’s counter-insurgency campaign.

With these news items, the conscience of the middle classes in Colombo and other urban centres received a mild anxiety attack while the misery of those who have actually lost loved ones as a result of terror in the South came to the surface once again. This also exposed the realities of a country still in mourning and the shock behind the facades of air-conditioned malls, joyous music on FM stations, the chit chats on cellular telephones, and the illusive existence of suburbia. Meanwhile, the government on its part has promised a “full investigation.”

In a certain sense, the surfacing of the skeletons also marked the surfacing of a certain kind of hope for many of the aggrieved. For them this was not an occasion to celebrate, nor was it a euphoric moment that indicated some possible avenues of justice or any such lofty possibilities in the future. As cases from Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Guatemala have indicated in recent times, the possibility of seeking justice is not always as easy as it may seem. For some people the discovery at Suriyakanda was simply a possible first step in their attempts at coping with an intolerable situation.

However, Suriyakanda is not an isolated case. Sri Lankan countryside is scattered with such unmarked mass graves,

not to mention sites where torture and violent death took place. Many of these locations are known to local people. Such places are spatially marked as they are clearly identified in the local discourses and narratives of terror. Perhaps local people may decide to point out more such places to politicians, human rights activists, lawyers or journalists in times to come. In this article, I would like to place the events that followed the discovery at Suriyakanda against the social problems of narrating unnatural death as well as the consequences of perceived death in the absence of a body.

Experience of unnatural and violent death (particularly those involving an absence of a body), and the narratives of such experiences have to be understood in the context of a language of incompleteness, suddenness, darkness, and **endless unfulfilled continuity**. Veena Das in a recent essay has observed that death is marked by its non-narratability and rupture of language, and that ordinary language becomes transformed in the process of making death narratable. This transformation, according to Das occurs at the level of cultural paradigms for the expression of grief. Nevertheless, she notes that the relationship between these paradigms and the individual expression of grief remains problematic, especially if death resulted in the violation of cultural norms governing **good death** (Das, 1990: 345-346). In such cases, survivors cannot easily resort to conventional means of mourning and expressions of grief.

The remains discovered, or rather rediscovered at Suriyakanda are clearly those of victims of political violence. For those who lost their loved ones, whether they were victims of JVP violence or non-JVP death squads is not the point. The point is that many of them not only lost their loved ones, but also lost a “body,” an essential prerequisite to fulfill the obligations of conventional mourning, and coping with death itself in the long run.

The lack of a body clearly poses a serious problem in terms of subverting the normal expression of grief in many cultures of terror. Thus Das talks of a woman who discovered some human bones in a park and was convinced they were of her husband [who had been murdered and his body removed by a Hindu mob.] (Das 1990: 356). Ariel Dorfman’s powerful novel *The Widows* also deals with this theme where a group of peasant women claim a body that comes floating down the river as that of their missing husbands, sons and brothers (Dorfman 1988). A body would allow people to fulfill the obligations of a funeral.

Dr. Sasanka Perera, an Anthropologist, is a Senior Lecturer at the Dept. of Sociology, University of Colombo.



It is also a legitimation ritual in terms of defining and organizing the future.

Similarly, in the Sri Lankan context too, the lack of a body poses serious social problems other than those of grieving and coping with one's loss. It means that deep emotional wounds are never really allowed to heal. No compensation is paid to the kin of those that have disappeared. Young wives of disappeared men are not legally recognized as widows making it difficult for them to re-marry and reconstruct their lives and frame their futures. In this context, the events that followed the discovery at Suriyakanda not only make sense, but were perhaps predictable.

Let us pay some attention to the discovery itself and what followed. The skeletal remains were dug up by people who were not competent in either forensic anthropology or forensic medicine. In the very least, neither were the diggers amateur archaeologists. The discoveries (skeletal remains and clothes), were simply collected into fertilizer bags and taken to the local Magistrate Courts complex. Soon afterwards an identification parade was organized in an attempt to identify the skeletons. Identification parades are usually held to identify persons, and perhaps corpses but not skeletons or skulls. Moreover, as in the case of the diggers those who allegedly identified the remains also had no training in what they were doing.

In one case a woman "recognized" the sarong that belonged to her husband while two other women "recognized" the batik and "Duro" sarongs of their sons, all of whom had disappeared. Two other persons recognized two skulls as those of their disappeared loved ones based on a false tooth found in one of them and a protruding tooth on the other (*Lankadeepa*; 11 January, 1994).

If we allow the application of cold logic, detached rationale (whatever these may be!), or the operation of scientific inquiry, the result would be that none of these identifications would have been possible. Sarongs are things people buy in stores, and very few of them would have truly individualistic features. Thus many of those who disappeared and those who did not, probably owned and continue to own such garments. Such commonly available garments are hardly the ideal means of identifying the remains of a dead person or establishing the fact that a person is in fact dead. The same rules are applicable to the "identification" of the skulls. Without having expert knowledge, specific training or dental records to corroborate, neither of these two identifications would have been possible. Many people after all have false as well as protruding teeth.

But these are extraordinary circumstances where scientific reasoning is nonoperative, and more importantly, not necessary or even unhelpful. Instead, what governs events such as these are emotional and social compulsions while it is possible that certain political dramas may be shad-

owing the background. Thus, the usual "reality" is replaced by a powerful belief and the necessity to believe in **something** that constructs an alternate reality. In this case that **something** is a symbol that people can identify with their disappeared loved ones—the sarongs, protruding teeth, false teeth, and so on.

Such symbolic indicators would help put an end to that terrible and traumatic experience which only the kin of disappeared persons would truly experience. Such symbols would hopefully indicate that their loved ones are actually "dead." The necessary rituals and funeral rites can commence, merit can be transferred in the hope that the disappeared—now "confirmed" dead—would be less unfortunate in the other world. Even tombstones may be erected. In other words, because now they have come into possession of a body or something that can symbolize a body (the skulls, sarongs, etc.), the process of usual mourning that was thus far denied to these people would finally be available to them. In the long run, this is precisely what is necessary for all survivors of political violence and the kin of the missing—a viable means of coping with one's loss and grief.

Suriyakanda, I believe, has provided some people (merely six families out of over a thousand persons who attended the identification parade), with the long overdue first stage of coping with endless grief, and framing their futures. Many others clearly still await their chance even though many may never get it. For those cynics who may find this kind of argument far-fetched, I would like to offer some lines from Ariel Dorfman's poem *Hope*:

My son has been
missing
since May 8
of last year ...
But now things have changed.
We heard from a comapanero
who just got out
that five months later
they were torturing him
in Villa Grimaldi,
at the end of September...

What I'm asking is
how can it be
that a father's
joy
a mother's
joy
is knowing
that they
that they are still
torturing
their son?
Which means

