Spectacles of Honor: Barbarism within Civilized Reactions to Public Killings

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Abstract: On April 7th 2007 seventeen year old Du’a Khalil Aswad was brutally murdered before a pack of shouting men and police officers in the public streets of her village in Northern Iraq. Du’a was beaten, kicked and stoned to death. What makes Du’a’s murder extraordinary is that the crime was captured on mobile phone video by onlookers in the crowd and expediently sent to Utube and CNN for international viewing. Over a year later one can still log on and watch Du’a as she dies. Du’a’s murder and dying breath are a public spectacle open to global gaze. The world watches, reacts and evaluates this painful spectacle of femininity, brutality, life and death. This paper examines the ways that the world reacts, the way that people – Kurds, Iraqis and others – analyze, decipher, construct and evaluate this event. The killing of Du’a has become the conduit for national guilt, increased religious divisions and a plethora of dichotomized stereotypes; East/West, male/female; Islam/Christian, Islam/Ezidi, innocence/guilt – and perhaps most paradoxical given the current occupation of Iraq by western forces – civilized/barbaric. It is the barbarism inherent within stoning a young woman to death that is at the forefront of international criticism of this gendered brutality.

Keywords: Honor Killing, Civilization, Barbarism, Kurdistan, Iraq, Women, Ethnic Division, Religious Divisions

THIS PAPER EXPLORES people’s responses to the brutal killing of Du’a Khalil last year in Northern Iraq. Du’a was killed in a public stoning. She was dragged to the market place in her home village Bashiq where hundreds of men including police officers gathered to participate in her killing. Many stood by and watched, others filmed the slaying on their cell phones and some hurled the boulders that would finally crush the life from her young body (Mahmoud 2007). The scene depicts a brutality and disregard for human life that is indeed barbaric. A scene which leaves many viewers with the question; how can this violence happen in today’s world?

My interest here lies in examining the ways in which the world – Kurds, Iraqis and others construct and evaluate this painful display of femininity, brutality, life and death. In my research I examined the texts of online reactions to this murder. I read through the many hundreds of responses posted on sites such as CNN and Utube as well as the many thousands of signatures offered to the International Campaign Against Killing and Stoning of Women in Kurdistan. The on-line campaign is the primary source referred to in this paper. Signatures to this campaign are most often named rather than anonymous and they generally identify their affiliated organizations.

The spectacle of Du’a’s death provides a platform for expressions of not only deep sympathy and horror but also and quite alarmingly her death provides the stage for voicing systemic intolerance and violence in our world. Reactions to her story articulate deep national and ethnic shame, a plethora of dichotomized stereotypes; East/West, male/female, Islam/Christian, Islam/Ezidi, Kurd/Arab innocence/guilt; of disturbing expressions of increasing religious and ethnic intolerance and hatred towards perceived

1 Honor crimes in Iraq are certainly not rare occurrences. Although exact numbers are difficult to determine my estimate is that there are around two to four of these killings every day in the Kurdistan region alone depending on one’s definition of what constitutes an honor crime (see Hosali, Sanchita 2003, Yifat Susskind 2007 for a discussion on such definitions). With such figures one has to conclude that along with a sense of shame there is a concurrent sanction for the slaying of women for honor related reasons – albeit in less barbaric ways. The failure to prosecute in the vast majority of these murders is further testimony to this sanctioned violence.

2 Organizations range from universities, UN institutions, Amnesty International, peace and legal organizations to trade labor movements. It is difficult to establish whether these are representative of general opinion. However, the campaign signatures (with the exception of a few clearly provocative comments) are the comments of signatories that take the issue very seriously and are not random responses posted anonymously in cyberspace. There are more than 16000 signatures to date. The campaign is organized by Houzan Mahmoud with the aim to press the Kurdistan Regional Government to protect and ensure the rights of women. I am greatly indebted to Mahmoud for her efforts and support.

3 Du’a was a member of the Ezidi faith, one of the oldest religions in the Middle East. Since Zoroastrian times Ezidi have suffered determined religious attacks against them. It is a closed religion of around 700,000 (Haji 2007).
others. Perhaps most paradoxical given the current aggressive occupation in Iraq by US allied forces and security companies which have proliferated so much needless violence and fear, reactions to this tragedy are underpinned by a belief in cultural divisions between the civilized and the barbaric. It is the barbarism inherent within the public and fatal stoning of Du’a that occupies the forefront of international criticism regarding this sexualized brutality. It is barbarism that saturates every angle of this tragedy. And it is barbarism that evokes the uncanny repetition of barbaric violence within specific versions of civilized humanity.

While these reactions give voice to various seemingly conflicting perspectives, in some ways the polarized responses of horror, sadness and sympathy on the one hand and anger and hatred on the other meet in the vociferous condemnation of Du’as killers. Moreover, many of these polarized identifications unite in the presumption of the right not simply to judge but also to execute the sentence upon those who committed this heinous crime. The Internet has become the stage for the mass performance of ruling that extends its verdict further than the village of Bashiqa to all of Iraq and the Middle East. As a spectator, the trauma of violence inherent in the witnessing of Du’aas death does not stop at the moment of her final breath but continues in the narratives of reaction. The violence itself extends beyond the geography of Bashiqa to all those geographies that connect. The violence emerges from the disparate voices across the world.

What makes Du’aas murder central to this research is that the crime was captured on mobile phone video, expediently posted on the Internet and internationally covered on major television broadcasts and Internet sites. This was not planned coverage by established news teams, but rather, the crime was spontaneously captured by the very perpetrators at the scene. Furthermore, this is not the same as the every day sectarian violence occurring in Iraq and depicted on regular news broadcasts. This is a violence directed not towards the enemy – not Sunni against Shiite or Ezidi again Muslim – but towards the self, the family. “Honor Killing is a tragedy in which fathers and brothers kill their most beloved, their daughters and sisters…” (Mojab 2002). It is an erstwhile secret violence that now through the conduit of Du’aas death has burst into every corner of the globe to disturb all of our civilized sensibilities. The dissemination of this spectacle is a chance contingent upon the historical, technological and regional circumstances that permit this.

Over a year later, one can still log on and watch Du’a as she dies. In witnessing that moment one can almost feel her final breath. Du’aas murder and dying moments are a public spectacle open to the whole world. In some ways it is possible for us to own, to possess, her death. This theatre of horror, this pornographic spectacle of brutality is ours. Whether we like it or not this violence belongs to us all and as witnesses to this slaying we too are implicated in the consequences.

In his most recent book Violence Slavoj Zizek (2008) addresses the question of whether the spectator could continue to go on as usual after being witness to such a scene of brutality. He answers;

Yes but only if he or she were able somehow to forget – in an act which suspended symbolic efficiency – what had been witnessed. This forgetting entails a gesture of what is called fetishist disavowal: ‘I know but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know.’ I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don’t know (45-6).

Reading the postings from those who have watched Du’aas death gives support to Zizek’s observation. There is an overwhelming disavowal inherent within the comments of the witnesses and a general disbelief that this kind of killing can continue in the 21st century. There is open dismissal of the immediate and overwhelming Kurdish reproach of such an act7 and there is a subsequent disavowal of the humanity of

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4 I am not suggesting that all responses to this scene are reactions of violence, but rather that this reaction is evident in a significant large number of the responses and that violence surfaces within the viewer in the encounter with this brutal killing.

5 While punishment provides a clear and necessary message that the killing of women like this is unacceptable it may also mean that the killing of women is obfuscated, reinvented and takes on new forms. For instance we are now witnessing a disturbing rise in female suicides, generally by means of self immolation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Many suspect that these suicides are in fact also honor murders (Mohammad, S. 2008).

6 Honor killing can not be reduced to geography, to religion, to patriarchy or to tradition. These are all key dimensions that may support this system of violence but they do not individually stand alone. They make up a system of violence that perpetuates violence throughout our world. For further discussion on honor related crimes (see Al-Khayyat, Sana, 1990, Ahmed, Leilah, 1992, Mojab 2002, King 2008 ).

7 Apparent in this analysis is the immediate reaction from Iraqi Kurds. Three central themes emerge in this regard. The first is a deep sense of urgency to stop honor related crimes and to respect Kurdish women’s right to live without this kind of fear in their lives. The second related theme is anger towards politicians and people in positions of power for failing to prevent such crimes. Finally, and perhaps the most ambiguous theme regarding Kurdish responses, reveals a deep sense of shame for being Kurdish. In the words of Kurdish people; “These are the days I am feeling shame to be a man and moreover a Kurdish man. Damn this barbaric act! Damn this genocide committed against my sisters, mothers and fellow humans.”

“My God I just don’t have any words to describe this… But the only thing that I can say is that for the first time in my whole life I hate myself being Kurdish!” (International Campaign Against Killing and Stoning of Women in Kurdistan)
Du’aas killers and by extension all Kurdish men, sometimes women too, all Ezidi, Arab, Muslim, indeed all Middle Eastern people.

In a violent process of racialised othering there are several calls for the extermination of all Ezidis, Muslims and Arabs, charges of devil worshiping and Kurds are constructed as primitive, prehistoric, monkeys, dogs, rats, animals; the very humanity of the villagers is bought into question. This disavowal of the humanity of the Other functions to put a distance between the civilized viewer and the barbaric Other that allows the viewer to refuse to fully assume the consequences of the knowledge that this type of brutality is indeed human. The distance placed between the viewer and the scene is more than merely geographical. The distance created is epistemological, moral and religious; the distance is human. I know but don’t want to know. I saw these humans killing this young woman with stones but I don’t want to believe that they are humans. They are humans but they are not a part of civilized humanity. This action is not of the civilized world, it belongs to the barbaric other; it is inhumane – not human. There is a consequent disavowal of the violence within the self in these expressions; the civilized subject must disavow all memory of internally repressed barbarism in order to maintain a civil self image diametrically opposed to the barbaric. Du’a thus becomes the threshold between the civilized and barbaric worlds and her feminine body functions as the buffer zone that constitutes the divisions between them.

In his analysis of today’s liberal tolerance towards Others Zizek makes the observation that this tolerance comes hand in hand with the demand that the Other keeps his distance. “My duty to be tolerant towards the Other effectively means that I should not get too close to him, intrude on his space. In other words, I should respect his intolerance of my over-proximity” (35). According to this point of view we can tolerate the other only when a safe distance between the self and the Other is maintained. A distance, that permits the tolerance of difference on the one hand and avoidance of an encounter on the other. The public broadcasting of Du’aas killing transgressed this safety zone between the civilized self and the barbaric Other. Her murder and the brutal Other emerged as too close, at a dangerous proximity to the self. In the civilized encounter with such a barbaric act of cruelty the viewing subject meets face to face with such violence and from the words of many viewers it is apparent that this encounter itself evokes a traumatic and pathological response.

“They should be burned aliveeee”
“all those who have stoned her, their heads should be cut off.”
“These men that kill young girls should be hung from lamp posts, Animals.”
“cruel and satanic people did this work. Down with them.”
“shoot the men and send the women here.’
“Personally I believe no man should be left to leave the outbounds of that country, for life, in order not to carry away the evil that binds them for centuries.”
“not only should the women be killed but the men as well they are just parasites to humanity.”
“The fact that similar events occurred all the time gives justification for the Western invasion of Iraq. Modern Western Values are better for Iraq than the cold and dark, unfree and jealous, values they have”
“They should castrate every single male that believes in this barbaric honor killing so that he won’t have an opportunity to father children so he can murder them”
“we must kill all those killers”
The murderers of the young woman are Sick and should be put down like you would a rabid dog”
“beat them all to death – slowly. I pray for that.”
(Quotations from individual signatures to the on-line International Campaign Against Killing and Stoning of Women in Kurdistan 2007-2008).

“Maybe the civilized world needs to ban together and just rid the planet of these scumbags”
“i think this is a good reason for killing many of those Iraqi fucks”
“Fucking animals. Someone should drop a bomb over those countries down there. Thoose people makes me SICK!”
“i wished that saddam killed all with that chemical weapon but they lived just like rats.”
“bomb whole iraq and iran and afghanistan so we finally can live without these monkey shit’s”
(quotations from individual on-line responses to CNN Internet video coverage of Du’aas murder).9

How can sense be made of these statements? What right or reason is there to respond to the barbaric with violence, to murderers with execution? How many people should be killed, how many killers should be killed? How is it possible to reconcile absolute disgust and repulsion at such an act of violence.

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8 The above responses are from people who signed the petition against the killing and stoning of women in Kurdistan. They all identify their organizations and give authorship to their comments.

9 The above five responses are posted on CNN web sites and are anonymous.
with the desire to find a humane solution? Will the pathologization of an entire culture, be that ethnic, religious, gendered or geographical, provide a solution to the humanitarian quest to bring about justice and equality for women; to ensure the basic human right to live without fear?

When reading through the many comments such as those above it is evident that we must rethink our responses to violence evoked through moral outrage. As Zizek advises, if we are to think critically about violence “we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lures of this directly visible ‘subjective’ violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent” (1). Responses of moral outrage at subjective, clearly visible violence are not only unsuccessful in addressing violence in its less visible forms or in recognizing the conditions through which this may emerge, but moral outrage also serves to obfuscate the violence within our response; within our civilized selves. From the responses it is evident that these reactions of outrage do not function outside the discourse of violent barbarism to which they seek to separate. Indeed these responses reveal an inherent participation within this same system of violence.10

The spectacle of Du’aas murder provides an opportunity to think about violence in a serious way that demands we look beneath the surface of what Zizek calls subjective violence. The violent racism voiced within so many of the on-line narratives of outrage reveals a pathological condition brought to light through the encounter with Du’a. Within this encounter the civilized subject is presented with the opportunity of analysis and analysis reveals that the outrage to the barbaric act itself rests upon a repressed barbarism that exists deep within the civilized self. Violence within the civilized subject resurfaces in the struggle to respond to the traumatic event and this struggle brings to the surface a range of persistent racist and deadly attitudes towards the Middle East.

The underlying barbarism within these condemning responses to the barbaric may well be viewed as mere emotive reactions to such horror, to the trauma of being a spectator at such an unthinkable act. However, it is possible that there are more insidious problems than this. For one, reading these texts reveals that indeed there is a flip side to civility, there is an underbelly to our claims of progressive humanity. Perhaps this is a stage in human progress that Norbert Elias (1994) discusses in his theorizing of de-civilization in his explanation of the evidence of regress, such as war, in our civilizing process (106).

However, it is more useful to think of this encounter with the barbaric in terms of Freud’s (1919) uncanny return of the repressed. It is the repressed barbarism, this underbelly of brutality that confronts us when we come face to face with images such as this. The barbarism repressed by the demands to represent civilized humanity is not something that the subject has overcome through progressive cultural values that produce repulsion to such acts. Neither is this a stage in a civilizing process wherein the civilized subject is suffering a temporary reversion in the long civilising process. Rather, it is more accurate to view these violent responses to barbarism as something hidden in the struggle to represent an image of civil subjectivity. The barbarism is that which is repressed within the civilized subject but simultaneously that which constantly threaten to reappear and incite trauma in the subject.

Freud stipulates that when confronted with the appearance of the uncanny, the subject is thrown into hysterical illness wherein the subject recites the same incoherent language connected to previous uncanny encounters. In the online signatures to the International Campaign Against Killing and Stoning of Women in Kurdistan there is an undeniable repetition of certain words used to describe the feelings of anger, disgust, sadness and shame of the viewer.

savage, vicious, brutal, heinous, monsters, cowards, uneducated, barbaric, inhumane, pathetic, prehistoric, medieval, madness, primitive, demonic, abhorrent, cold blooded, obscene, stone aged, premeditated, slaughter, horrendous, deranged, sadistic, grotesque, unlawful, unfathomable, unpardonable unspeakable, unforgivable, unthinkable, shame.

The most common repetitions of language used to respond to Du’a are the words barbaric and civilized.11 These opposing terms are couched within assumptions of an obvious ethnic and geographical distinction between the East and the West where the
West is aligned with civility and the East with barbarism. These voices of condemnation are alarming. Not because they condemn Du’aas murder, but rather, because so many of these civilized testimonies of condemnation behold an inherent barbarism that is alarming; a barbarism that one feels when looking into the faces of the frenzied crowd participating at the scene of Du’aas death. Expressions of barbarism are both foreign and familiar to the civilized subject. The barbarism within the so called civilized response demands that we give critical analysis to the imagined and arbitrary divisions between civil/barbaric and East/West. This violent response to brutality brings into question the innocence of the judge in this situation.

The repetitive hysterical babble within this uncanny encounter is evident in the incoherent narratives that extend verdict for the crime of Du’aas murder throughout the Middle East. The hysteria is further evident in the calls to rid the planet of these scum bags, the calls that refuse to acknowledge that people in Iraq may abhor such brutality or that people in Iraq may also be civilized subjects. Moreover, within the hysteric’s response the brutality of her murder serves to justify the presence of US allied forces in Iraq and the Anfal campaigns under the Saddam regime. At one extreme of this violence the hysteria extends to calls for nuclear eradication of whole populations of humans and at the other to hang the murderers and rescue the women. The Ezidi of Bashiqa provide the civilized hysterical with the evidence for religious condemnation and racist disavowal. Time after time the on-line respondent evokes similar incoherent language of the civil goodness of the Western geography that women of Iraq can find haven and the good intentions of the civilized world while simultaneously repressing any memory or testimony to the contrary. Repeatedly the goodness of the civil subject is elevated through further pathologization of Iraq.

This performance of outrage – of locating the imaginary civilized world on the high ground of morality – rests upon the condemning subject’s desire to legitimate and maintain its civilized self image. Freud makes the point that the uncanny return of that which ought to remain hidden is connected to the recurrence of the repressed memories of that part of the subject. The uncanny ‘is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression’ (1919: 394). The uncanny return of that which has been estranged thus evokes fear and neurosis in the subject. In the civilized encounter with the barbaric the subject is thrown into a fear that we too may disintegrate into barbarism. If the barbarism repressed within the civilized self re-appears in the encounter that transgresses safe distance then does this uncanny reappearance not call into question the civilized subject itself? This uncanny encounter with violence reconstitutes civil/barbaric divisions and reveals a barbaric and racist pathology at the heart of many of those that claim the civilized moral space. The screening of Du’aas brutal killing exposed civilizations weakness, the repression of barbarism and the underlying and persistent fear that ‘we’ the civilized world too could fall into the chaos barbarism. Violent responses to Du’aas murder may indeed bespeak this pathology of fear at the heart of the viewer. While elevating the goodness of civility, barbaric responses surface as confronting these narratives. The uncanny return of the barbaric within the self disrupts the fetishist disavowal of the repressed and reveals that a pathological condition motivates the moral response.

It is inconclusive to suggest that these online comments represent social opinion in its totality. Certainly, in regard to language of expression, there is a notable difference between the comments posted on CNN and Youtube websites and those signatures in support of the International Campaign Against Killing and Stoning of Women in Kurdistan. However, given that the signatures to the campaign are mostly authored, alongside the ontology of foreign occupation within Iraq at present and the persistent campaigns purporting to alter the political and social structure of some Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq, it is evident that little value is held toward existing forms of civil governance or civil society. These voices parallel an inherent disavowal in general for the civility that has long been a part of countries such as Iraq. Often accredited as the birthplace of civilisation perceptions of Iraqi society are at present not positive. The brutal slaying of Du’a and many young women like her in the name of honor further perpetuate such negative impressions and unhelpful stereotypes. These killing must stop if we are to have a world that respects the human rights of all people and all governments of the world as well as corporations and individuals must recognize the interconnectedness of the humanity of all people. Unthinkable and barbaric violations against women such as that suffered by Du’a continue everyday throughout our world. Although it seems reasonable to argue that there is indeed no honor in honor killings, that this is indeed a barbaric act, it is more difficult to reason our civilised responses to this brutality.

How then is it possible to respond to such a violation of humanity in a way that does not participate in this system of violence? What does it mean to respond from the position of civility? If this barbarism is a part of our humanity then given the same accident of birth, given the same life would we not also participate in this killing? Is it possible for us to re-
cognize that while there is an obvious barbaric underbelly to civility that the opposite, might also be the case? That underneath the barbaric there may lay civility and that this civility might present opportunities to encourage equal respect for women and their rights to live without fear of being killed for being women.

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