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A Cultural Analysis of Conflict Zones from PBS Videos Viewed Out of Class

Culture can be defined broadly as the series of characteristics unique to a certain group of people, whether that group be set apart by ethnic origins, upbringing, or collective intellect. This is manifested through a variety of mediums including, but not limited to, the fine arts, language, behavioral norms, ideologies, religious affiliation, communication strategies, fighting tactics, etc. This paper will analyze the cultures expressed through a number of short videos assigned to the Introduction to International Relations class (POSC 1020) this spring, including “Lord’s Children”, “The Battle for Ukraine”, “On Our Watch”, “Arming the Rebels”, and “Hunting Boko Haram”. Each of these films is a brief but informative glimpse into the internal conflicts within the nations of Uganda, Ukraine, The Sudan, Syria, and Nigeria. Each film expresses a similar struggle for power within a corrupt government structure, convoluted by radical ideologies, war tactics, and the vulnerability that frequently accompanies developing nations.

“Lord’s Children” encompasses the broad scope of a twenty-plus year civil war in Northern Uganda through the stories of women and girls impacted by enslavement, torture, rape, and the abuses of war. Although obviously guilty of kidnapping and blatant human rights abuses, the Lord’s Resistance Army led by Joseph Kony faced virtually no government intervention aside from a civil war worsened by war crimes on both sides and a president, Yoweri Museveni, whose primary concern is quieting rebels as opposed to seeking justice for their crimes against humanity. Motivated by his ‘calling’ as a prophet of God, Kony went largely under the radar on an international level, as is common of civil conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa. His ideology grew exponentially more powerful initially but as war ravaged the country, children were taken from homes in order to fight a relatively
reason-less war. Due to multiple decades of destruction, many citizens of Pader, Gulu, and the surrounding areas of Uganda were forced to vacate their land and become internally displaced people or refugees in southern Uganda and the Sudan.

Kony’s God-fearing ideologies as well as his secuestration of children for the use of furthering war efforts (which often implies raping and murdering their own families and loved ones), can mirror nearly directly the Islamic militancy associated with Boko Haram, the more recently publicized Nigerian rebel group assessed through the brief PBS film “Hunting Boko Haram”. This miliant group, officially called a terrorist organization in the film, wreaked havoc throughout northern Nigeria by kidnapping and obliterating entire towns and as stated by Mohammed, a past Boko Haram interviewed by PBS for the film, “they kill anybody who refuses to work with them”. Similarly, Nigeria’s Goodluck Jonathan, had also been widely criticized in the global community, in part for his lack of attention and prevention to protecting the afflicted towns in the Islamic Northern regions of Nigeria. Although Kony and Shekau (Boko Haram’s leader), hold vastly separate religious ideologies, their tactics of enstilling fear in already vulnerable areas by stripping babies from mothers’ arms to make into child soldiers, forcing families to kill each other, and leaving towns in total chaos. However, unlike the Lord’s Resistance Army that has now dissipated into various other rebel groups throughout the Sudan, (what is now) South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo and unable to maintain momentum in Northern Uganda after over twenty years of pillaging it, five-year-strong Boko Haram remains a destructive force in Nigeria and its bellicose presence implies that true peace for Northern Nigeria is hardly in the horizon.

Similar to the rebel efforts of Boko Haram and the Lord’s Resistance Army, the Janjaweed of the Sudan reigned all but supreme during an also initially overlooked internal conflict turned genocide. Similar to the refugee crisis in Uganda, many Sudanese crossed borders to Chad in order to escape the insurgency within their home region of Darfur, where innocent civilians were being slaughtered in
troves. Similar to the Ugandan People’s Defense Force and Nigerian Military that stood in hesitant opposition to the crisis affecting millions of citizens, the Sudanese government forces in Khartoum led by President Omar al Bashir, initially attempted to escape the spotlight. Similar to Boko Haram, the Janjaweed, or “devils on horseback” began with an Islamic militancy in the Northern region. Like many conflicts in the Global South, this “war” was extremely one-sided and carried out primarily by domestic terrorists wielding machetes in place of bombs and thought to be extremism by the United Nations. The conflict in Darfur elicited the “Never Again” sentiments of the Rwandan genocide as UN officials stepped in and declared the conflict to be a series of crimes against humanity early, however, was largely ignored by the international community until it became all too apparent and a threat to oil exports from the Sudan.

Rebel forces utilizing human rights abuses as tactics of war are not uncommon in any conflict, however the case of Ukraine is slightly different from the aforementioned conflicts as it began as an issue of nationalism, as opposed to religious zeal, and closing ties with Russia. This aspect of the Ukranian culture, a divide between nationalists, Right Sector, who wished to secede from the tight relationship and those who wished to remain interwoven with Russia, corresponds with Sudanese nationalists who wished to remain in control of South Sudan prior to secession and those who wished to escape the reign of Islamic militant forces in the north that were all but assisted by the government. Although the physical encounters in the squares were in a more developed place and utilized more advanced technology, the “clashes in the square” described by James Jones in “The Battle for Ukraine” are not that different than the bloody encounters with the Janjaweed in Sudan circa the early 2000s. Similarly, the intolerance for non-Ukrainians he speaks of is an issue of sovereignty that clearly mirrors the opinions of the leadership of many Sub-Saharan African nations as they work to fend off their own aggressors. Theses cities in turmoil, although on a separate continent, do not resemble a political climate much different than that described in “Hunting Boko Haram”.
This climate of uncertain sovereignty and political tension to the point of armed conflict is also reflected in “Syria: Arming the Rebels”. As the conflict within Syria was in part inspired by the rebellions of nations throughout the MENA region called the Arab Spring. A divide between a deep rooted disdain for leader Bashar Al Assad merged with Islamic militancy formed by past Al Qaeda personnel, the Syrian conflict has been ravaging the country since 2011. Like the aforementioned conflicts, citizens are becoming refugees and fleeing to Turkey and other surrounding nations due to their upheaval in their homelands. Syria’s conflict is another level of complicated, however, as it began as a domestic issue between a rebel force attempting to overthrow an incredibly corrupt dictatorship and has morphed into a full blown international crisis, made increasingly severe by the presence of ISIS, an international terror organization. Compounded by United States interference, the Syrian conflict presents another issue of sovereignty as the magnitude of the threat to civilian safety grows due to an increase of weaponry and heightened presence of ISIS forces. Like Nigeria and the Sudan, Islamic extremist forces are the most powerful in the region and a hyper-conservative culture keeps individuals from acting against the norm, specifically in regards to gender roles. Women are regularly made victims of rape and abuses, similar to nearly all wars but specifically those spurred by the aforementioned conflicts.

Each of these videos is a micro-expression of a culture and as they all encompass the most atrocious current event of the nation at the time of filming, it is difficult to say that they adequately shed light on the cultures as a whole. Each film showed the devastation created by internal conflicts and a glimpse at the citizens’ turned refugees’ lifestyles altered by said conflicts. From the African continent and it’s diverse array of religious beliefs, power and governmental structures, languages, art, and overall cultures, to the Middle East and Eastern European regions with their own individual cultural divisions, these films help to display the conflicts waging within them and the cultural implications they cause and are caused by.