

The headlines hint at the truth. “Revenge fuels cycle of religious violence” heads Lindsay Murdoch’s analysis of the War in Maluku, Indonesia. The sub-head tells us “Maluku fighting is rooted in ethnic, economic and political rivalries.”

It is only wrong because the metaphor is wrong. The fighting is not “rooted” in “ethnic, economic and political rivalries.” It is most certainly *produced* by these rivalries, but the deeper question remains. What causes the ethnic, economic and political rivalries in the first place? Only there will we find the “root” of violence in modern societies.

The root of violence lies in the nature of human beings, and how we create societies. It is built on two great talents of humans. The talent for imitation; and the talent for creating myths.

Our talent for imitation (called *mimesis* by the academics) is the most powerful force within us, contrary to Freud’s conclusions about sex. It is the imitative drive that shapes and creates individuals and society. The clearest evidence of the imitative drive will be seen if you have a child playing alone in a room full of toys. If you introduce a second child into the room, which toy does it want to play with? Everyone knows the second child will want to play with the toy the first child is playing with.

Humans imitate one another. We are copycats. And not merely dedicated followers of fashion, but we imitate one another’s desires. That is why the desire for violence, once released in a society, spreads like an epidemic.

The second unique creative talent of the human species, is the talent to create myths. One of the roles of myth in society is to explain away the unacceptable. To cover up what we choose not to see. To hide the taboos.

Australians are familiar with the myth of *terra nullius*. The British settlers took the view that Australia was empty when they arrived. A related myth of the British Empire was the myth of civilisation. The British believed the myth that their society was superior to all others and that it was in everyone’s best interests to rule the world. This myth justified the removal of the Elgin Marbles from Greece, since the Greeks were (from a British point of view) incapable of protecting them for posterity.

Most of us these days can see these myths to be false. But, at the time, they were truth. Just as today, the myth (I suggest) of ethnic violence is accepted as truth. Whereas it is a myth. Intended to cover up a deeper, less acceptable truth about the nature of the human character. Namely, that violence is contagious (technically speaking, it is *mimetic*). That we get sucked into the “cycle of ... violence”—see Murdoch’s headline. And that most of us lack the self-awareness, or the courage, to break out of the cycle.

As we read Christina Sagat’s story in *The Age* (27/1) we can see the signs of a regular pattern. A pattern that is common to all situations of so-called ethnic violence. This pattern reveals what is behind ethnic violence. And what is, for the most part, hidden.

“*Catholics, Protestants and Muslims used to live peacefully...*”

Why is it that people who have lived together in peace for centuries suddenly rise up against one another? If it were ethnic or religious difference, would not violence be the dominant pattern of these multi-ethnic or multi-religious societies? The facts are that most people in multi-ethnic societies live in peace most of the time. Of course,

there are the occasional exceptions, but they are exceptions. Peace is the norm. And for centuries, usually.

Time and again, as I met people in the Middle East and Eastern Europe during my time with World Vision, they would tell me how “we used to live together in peace and harmony.” Nearly always they would shake their heads in bemusement and add, “I don’t understand what happened.”

*“At first, ...we heard rumours that the Muslims would attack Christian villages...”*

The myth making begins. Stories are heard. Often, these days, they are heard on the mass media. Since Hitler’s Germany, myth makers have exploited the reach of mass media.

The stories and rumours always precede events. The killings do not arise spontaneously. The society is prepared by rumour.

At first people do not believe the rumours, because the truth of centuries of peace and cooperation is self-evident. But then there is a trigger event which tips the truth upside down. Rumour becomes truth. The myth is believed.

The trigger event is almost invariably a scapegoating action of a mob against a single individual. So it was in Christina’s village.

*“My uncle, as usual, went to buy cigarette paper in that village. But on his way out of the village the mob surrounded him and attacked him.”*

Only in the *mob* do we have the conditions for violence to be contagious. The participants, prepared by myth-making, see the scapegoat as the necessary victim—the cause of their discontent (however vaguely they may articulate that discontent).

Someone in the mob accuses the victim. In an instant, the accusation spreads through the mob and violence is unleashed.

Now the myths are validated. People start to move to the bush for safety. This reinforces the *truth* of the myths and soon a new reality emerges. The new truth *“about the possible war between Muslims and Christians”*.

This is the true nature of violence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is based on mimesis and myth, not on ethnic, religious or any other kind of “difference.” These so-called differences are the myths that obscure the underlying causes. And worse, they ensure the violence will continue as the elimination of difference is justified by them. Thus *ethnic cleansing* became a rational and, for many in the Balkans, a reasonable and appropriate response to the violence.

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