

THE BONE WOMAN: A FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGIST'S SEARCH FOR TRUTH IN THE MASS GRAVES OF RWANDA, BOSNIA, CROATIA, AND KOSOVO. By Clea Koff. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004. Pp. vii, 278) (ISBN 0-8129-6885-9).

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The first human killings since World War II to be legally defined as *genocide*, were committed in Rwanda in 1994. Similar unlawful incidents were orchestrated in the varied provinces of Yugoslavia as that country was in the process of collapsing and dissolving in the first half of the 1990s: Termed *ethnic cleansing*, these official or quasi-official campaigns targeted Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims in areas controlled by the Bosnian Serb Army. And while murder, rape, torture, unlawful confinement, and inhumane treatment of civilians were commonly reported in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo in the early 1990s; the massacre of civilians which took place at Srebrenica is the only violence technically found to be genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

In 1996, the author of *The Bone Woman*, Clea Koff, was asked at age 23 to join the first scientific forensic team to unearth and determine the cause of the deaths of bodies found in mass graves in the African country of Rwanda. Of the 16 member scientific team, Koff was the youngest. During the next four years, she served on seven missions to unearth the remains of humans whom it was believed had died violently and illegally (in multiple or mass murders) at the hands of human agencies. She served on these international scientific teams under the auspices of Physicians for Human Rights, at the invitation of the first international criminal tribunals since the Nuremberg trials.

Clea Koff shows herself to be absolutely determined, almost obsessed, with her purpose and her quests in forensic anthropology: She takes very seriously her role in studying what is left after a person's death to determine what happened before or during that death. The author states, *In addition to helping authorities determine the identity of deceased people, forensic anthropology has a role in human rights investigations, because a dead body can incriminate perpetrators who believe they have silenced their victims forever* (P., 8). Koff explains her incentive and enthusiasm, combined with her dedication to spend hours of exhaustive digging in graves and sifting through human remains, by the following: *This is the part of forensic anthropology that drives me, this "kicking of bad-guy ass" when it's least expected* (P., 9).

The author views the bodies she excavates and studies with what she terms *double vision*: She sees them both as objects of scientific study and as loved ones of the living and grieving persons they have left behind. As a student anthropologist working for the coroner's (chief medical examiner's) office in Arizona, U.S.A., she found herself physically distant from the families of those persons whose bodies she was sent out to retrieve: While she carried the bodies into the back entrance of the morgue (mortuary); relatives came through the front doors of the coroner's office. Therefore she never met the relatives of the persons whose dead and decayed bodies she studied.

In Rwanda and the former Yugoslavian states however, the forensic teams upon which Koff served were often in close proximity to the relatives and neighbors of the dead whom they were disinterring and scientifically studying. Early on this caused some strain for the author due to the fact that she and her scientific cohort were not expecting to have to interact with the living while handling their dead, and brutally murdered, loved ones. Early in her first forensic mission to Rwanda, Koff and a

colleague set up the body of a supposed priest (according to his dress) for a viewing by his teenaged niece: Since they were scientists who attempted to keep their emotions at bay, they did not expect the reaction of the girl when she fainted immediately upon her first glimpse of her uncle's body in its advanced stage of decomposition.

The forensic team found conditions quite different in their mission to Kosovo a few years later: There, the murdered bodies were found lying about the countryside by family and neighbors, and many of these had been buried in cemeteries by those who knew them. Still, many relatives and friends wished to be present at the disinterment of their loved ones. Thus in Kosovo, the forensic team was assigned a local and international team of doctors, medical students, and psychologists, the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), to collect *antemortem data for presumptive identifications of bodies both in advance of us and as we worked* (P., 207). It was this TPO team which was also tasked with the assessment of what each grieving relative could handle emotionally relative to witnessing the disinterments and to viewing the bodies: Viewings were therefore set up by the forensic team to be handled according to the TPO evaluations and suggestions.

The author also explains that the findings of forensic scientists can alter the memory of the living: For example, the women she termed *the mothers of Vukovar* (in eastern Slavonia, Croatia) opposed the work of the forensic teams in their area; furthermore, they inflexibly argued that their husbands and sons were being held somewhere alive, and insisted that the United Nations should find where they were and return them to Vukovar. Only after the scientific identifications of the bodies of many missing men from Vukovar, did the women acknowledge the deaths of their sons and husbands.

At first glance, the artifacts found with the bodies in the mass or multiple graves seem relatively unimpressive: Such items as house keys, cards, jewelry, photos, or bullets -- none appears to be significant. However, Clea Koff states that early in her work in Rwanda, she came to the realization that the artifacts were signs of life in the grave: These spoke to the individual person's identity and individuality, *if only the right person can listen* (P., 62). As an example of the significance of artifacts in helping the dead speak, Koff explains that in a particular trench in Kosovo she unearthed the body of a juvenile male with a trouser pocket bulging with its contents: The boy had a pocket full of marbles, which testified to his age and argued in behalf of his total involvement in the youth culture of that community.

Since her youth, the author has felt challenged to strike out to seek exciting and fulfilling tasks wherever in the world she might sense the need: When she was a child, her parents took her travelling around the world as they made documentary films about human pathos and human rights issues. The author was challenged to prepare herself for the practice of forensic anthropology through her reading of *Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell*. The book tells about the career of Clyde Snow who developed the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team which discovered and identified the remains of many Argentines who were murdered during the military junta of the 1970s and 80s. Snow thus became Koff's scientific hero, and her inspiration to pursue a profession in forensic anthropology.

The author's experiences and observations on her seven United Nations forensic team missions to Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo, left great impressions upon the her: At first she could little understand why noncombatants and civilians were murdered in such great numbers. It was in

Kosovo that she first seriously became aware of the systematic destruction of entire neighborhoods, including their people, the houses, and the businesses. In each of the four countries of her missions, Koff found that governments had consistently lied about the contents of graves, of their complicity in the killing of noncombatants, of their active planning in the destruction of neighborhoods, and the relocation of populations whom they considered unwelcome. It was government bullets which killed the civilians and noncombatants whose bodies the forensic teams studied. And government arguments about the causes of the genocide and ethnic cleansing were shown to be clearly untrue: It was not a history of ethnic competition or differences in race or religion which drove the conflict and murders; it was the value of neighborhood property, the value of oil, minerals, and other natural resources present, or the agricultural value of the land which caused the greedy to kill the innocent.

In the process of working with the United Nations International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and the Former Yugoslavia Clea Koff changes and matures. Always believing that she had a duty to help the dead speak, she now feels she has a duty to share her knowledge with everyone: More recently, sharing her knowledge and understanding has become her *mitzvah*, her commandment or divine directive. The author states that she helped the victims speak, *Through working with Physicians for Human Rights and the UN tribunals, I've helped their voices be heard in the courtroom and the history books, and it has been an honor to do so. That was my primary duty, one that required detachment and discipline. But my mitzvah requires me to get personal, so I can really link other people to those events* (P., 266).

When Koff began her career, she believed *forensic anthropology and its related sciences, when applied to the investigation of international human rights violations, would lead to the eradication of state-sponsored murder of civilians* (P., 200); later she realized that her early belief was optimistic and naive, for when General Laurent-Desire Kabila held power in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 1997 to 2001, he mercilessly violated the human rights of Rwandan refugees and Congolese people: He repeatedly imprisoned, tortured, and murdered *en mass* any whom he thought were threats to his leadership or were simply undesirable as citizens. When the UN sent the Argentine Forensic Team to the Congo to investigate, General Kabila stalled them in western Congo while his troops in eastern Congo disinterred the bodies of those he had had killed from their many mass graves and destroyed all evidence by burning on carefully-tended pyres.

The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo, is a meticulously researched, rationally developed, and remarkably well written volume. This book is a critical addition to the literature of mass murder and genocide: It is especially valuable due to the insight, training, and youth of the author; who with a wholesome freshness shares as she learns and becomes aware. Clea Koff has created a volume which is essential reading for the science of forensic anthropology; and in doing so, she has created a volume which is by every measure as valuable to the discipline as is the volume *Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell*, which chronicles the early career of Clyde Snow. Future research and practice will continue to rely upon this seminal work. This text is indispensable, a *must read*, for the undergraduate and graduate student of forensic anthropology.