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Forensic Anthropology in Rwanda: A Professional Identity Crisis

The Rwandan genocide violently ended the life of close to a million Rwandans in the 1990s. Only recently, several mass graves were discovered outside the capital, a discovery which has initiated a long and grueling identification process (Cornish, paras 1-4). Leading the way in the identification process are forensic anthropologists who specialize in scientific techniques for identifying and evaluating post-mortem remains. While no one can fault the pursuit of closure on the part of the Rwandan genocide’s survivors, the use of forensic anthropology in a scenario with few to no biological records highlights a serious theoretical difficulty that forensic anthropologist scholars have been growing acutely aware of.

As a science, forensic anthropology has struggled to legitimize itself. Unlike other sciences or medicines which can lay claim to an enduring global-professional community, forensic anthropology is a distinguishably *American* science, and at that, a very *recent* science, being discretely traceable to the work of several key American figures in the early twentieth century in cooperation with FBI investigations (Dirkmaat, et al.). Forensic anthropology eventually made its proverbial bones in World War II when it served in identification efforts of the allied dead, but it wasn’t until the 1970s that professional organizations began to form in an attempt to organize and further legitimize it as a discrete and respectable science. While popular images of forensic anthropologists are no doubt colored by the “CSI effect,” glamorizing the practice with impressions of sleek scientists saving the world one biochemical test at a time, the actual background and history to forensic anthropology is quite a bit grittier as the profession struggled to find its voice and application.

But find its voice and application it most certainly did. Certain methods, practices, and techniques unique to anthropological forensics were vetted and developed over time to the point where skilled forensic anthropologists have no shortage of ways to determine the gender, age, race, height, and cause of death of even the most obscured and obliterated skeletal remains (Lundy). Resultantly, forensic anthropologists are now not only used by major crimes units, militaries, and archaeologists, but they’ve become such a staple of modern culture that popular culture itself has turned the profession into something of a totem for admiration.

But among the professional community itself, growing concerns over the accuracy and reliability of methods are uncomfortably shaking the science’s internal reputation and confidence. Some authors are concerned that the community was more focused on proving its worth than perfecting its methods, and as a result, common techniques are maintained more out of a sense of tradition than out of their technical and empirical reliability (Konigsberg, et al.). These concerns about technique verification have grown into concerns about the profession’s standards, and fears that rigorous professional controls and theoretical frameworks are underdeveloped for a discipline which, by its very nature, intersects with so many other disciplines (Christensen and Crowder). While other authors have complained that forensic anthropologists, especially the more skilled ones, are prone to confirmation bias because they put far too much trust in their abilities to identify remains just by looking at them (Nakhaeizadeh, et al.).

While no one would begrudge the Rwandan survivors for seeking closure, the use of forensic anthropology to do so only exacerbates the professional tensions we’ve just chronicled. The lead anthropologist in Rwanda, Melissa Connor, explained that

Generally, what we consider confirmatory identification consists of DNA, dental records, or fingerprints. We start, though, with presumptive identification, which can include visual identification, clothing or identification cards. In cases like Rwanda, where there aren’t pre-mortem samples of DNA, dental or fingerprints, you may end up having to work only with what we would consider a presumptive ID (Cornish, para 6).

In other words, forensic anthropology can’t actually identify the Rwandan victims. Connor herself admits as much: “Often relatives know the clothing that their other relatives had. In places like Rwanda, often mothers or wives sewed those clothes [so they] will recognize their own handiwork” (Cornish, para 7). There’s nothing uniquely scientific about this process at all. The survivors are more qualified to identify the decedents than the forensic anthropologists are.

So what is the role of forensic anthropologists in such a situation? Some would argue that there’s no role for them at all; there’s nothing unique that forensic anthropology can offer, since the data simply doesn’t exist to apply forensic anthropological techniques. Others, like Connor, would say that “It’s bringing closure to the family; it’s letting them know exactly what happened to their relatives” (para 8). But it isn’t, really, since there’s no way to actually verify identifications beyond memory and clothing, neither of which the forensic anthropologist has any expertise in. Connor is playing psychologist—which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, since it’s virtuous to comfort the suffering. But with the extant crisis of identity and method present in the forensic anthropological community, such is just another reminder that forensic anthropology’s limits and scope are poorly understood—not just by the public, but by the professionals themselves.

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