

Colombia Impaled

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The brutal murder, torture and rape of Rosa Elvira Cely, in the middle of Bogota's National Park, has led to a justifiable wave of indignation across the whole country. To the cry of 'Not one more Rosa!' thousands of Bogotans met on 3 June at the site of the macabre crime to pay tribute to this victim and to vehemently protest violence against women.

In this article I don't want to go too in depth into this particular crime, which unfortunately is only one more in a string of thousands of abuses and feminicides that occur on a daily basis in Colombia. Nor do I want to refer to the multiple negligences that contributed, by some degree to the fatal ending of this story (the inadequate response of the police to calls for help, negligence in medical treatment with the stab wounds that ultimately led to death not being treated etc). What I want to draw attention to is the hypocrisy of the Colombian media and elites who today are horrified before the corpse of Rosa Elvira Cely, but who systematically turn a blind eye to crimes of right wing paramilitaries¹ which are a carbon copy of the impaling of Rosa Elvira Cely.

The practice of impaling, that is, forced penetration of the anus or vagina of the victim with a stick that perforates the internal organs, and at times exits through the mouth, is not a new act of sadism. In fact, it's a practice which has been used in Colombia since the start of violence by conservatives in the mid 1940s in numerous villages and rural areas, where the gangs of Chulavitas, Pajaros or paramilitaries (as the private armies who serve landowners and political chiefs have been called at different stages or in different areas) have displaced and terrorised the population using sexual violence as a means of terror and control. Impaling, just like other sadistic forms of aggression against women (cutting breasts and pulling out the foetus from the womb, for example), clearly show a continuation between the "chulavita" violence of the 40s and the "paraca"² violence from the 90s to now. Aggression towards women and children is seen in the paramilitary logic as a means of humiliating and projecting complete, patriarchal, machista and violent, control over communities they deem to be hostile to their "State project" or to be allied with "subversion". In the words of the researcher Donny Meertens, sexual violence

¹ In Colombia, the term "paramilitaries" refers exclusively to right wing private armies linked to the army and the elites. Left wing armed groups are referred to only as guerrillas.

² "Paraca" is slang for paramilitaries.

*“was not tolerated as a perverse individual act, but it was allowed as a systematic practice of war, applicable only to a specific population.”*³

Going back to impaling, there are plenty cases of women who, for having been identified as lovers of guerrillas, were raped, murdered and in many cases impaled. Impaling, to give one example, was used in the El Salado massacre, in Los Montes de María in 2000: at least one victim, Neivis Arrieta, aged 18, was impaled because she was accused of being the lover of a FARC-EP guerrilla⁴. According to Olga Amparo Sánchez, from the Casa de la Mujer (Women’s Refuge), in Tumaco, at the moment, impaling is being used as a systematic practice by paramilitaries and the same thing is happening in a lot of other regions in the country⁵. Paramilitaries have also tortured homosexuals in the areas they control and in their “social cleansing” campaigns⁶.

The Colombian media, who are now tearing their hair out in horror at the impaling of Cely, never got too outraged before when these practices were being carried out by paramilitaries in “red zones”⁷, often at the hands of public forces. The media who were well informed while this was happening in rural areas of Colombia since the start of the paramilitary offensive in the ‘80s, never informed in such juicy detail, like they did in the case of Cely, atrocities committed by the paramilitary-army partnership⁸. Curiously, to understand the real extent of such barbarity we’ve had to look to reports by Human Rights groups or special publications specialised on the conflict such as “Verdad Abierta”, or to the work of foreign journalists, like the now celebrated Romeo Langlois. Colombian journalists, save for some honourable exceptions – Hollman Morris chief amongst them – have chosen not to research these topics; it could be because of mediocrity, laziness, fear, self-censorship, fawning servility or complicity. I say complicity, because the economic groups that maintain Colombian media are directly linked with the economic sectors that have financed, armed and stimulated the paramilitaries (mining interests, mafia bosses, cattle-breeders, landowners, multinationals etc). In the end they are all the same clique. At most, big media outlets lamented the “excesses” of paramilitarism, always excusing it by saying it was an exaggerated response to the “guerrilla threat” – in doing so they are inverting Colombian history

³ “Victims and Survivors of War in Colombia –Three Views of Gender Relations” en “Violence in Colombia 1990–2000”, Ed. Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, Gonzalo Sánchez, SR Books, 2001, p.154. The author refers to the context of “Violence” in the 1940s and 50s, but we can consider the conclusion equally valid for the paramilitary campaign from the 1980s to present day.

⁴ www.eltiempo.com

⁵ www.bbc.co.uk

⁶ www.semana.com

⁷ Areas of conflict.

⁸ The paramilitary-army partnership is, according to Medicina Legal reports, responsible for 78% of sexual crimes committed within the context of the armed conflict – of which, the army is directly responsible for 63%. This high number tells us this is a systematic and recurrent practice. See memories from the forum “Why do we need a criminal policy on sexual violence in Colombia?” (Noviembre 2011), p.6. www.sismamujer.org Even at that, it’s important to take account of the fact that these official figures are, in all certainty, an underestimation of the real figure, because of a tendency to downplay the abuses of public forces and exaggerate the those of the insurgency (something common to most official statistics), because of the low rates of people reporting the crimes: according to a report by Defence of the People in 2008, 81.7% of displaced people who are sexually abused never report these crimes. These figures are consistent with an independent study, carried out in 2012 by Oxfam and the Women’s House in a representative sample of women, in which 82% of those who admitted they were victims of sexual violence didn’t make any official complaint (Ibid). According to another report, about sexual violence in the district of Magdalena and in Montes de María, they arrive at the conclusion that “Soldiers are by far the main culprits, who commit these acts in ‘the “strategic context” of territorial conquest and also in an “opportunistic” manner to get “sexual satisfaction”, this “scorn towards women” inculcated among the ranks(...) underlines this conduct.” www.elespectador.com

and distorting the events⁹. In exceptional cases of honesty, they have even applauded paramilitarism openly¹⁰. Paramilitary crimes have been silenced, trivialised, mystified, hidden, ignored and excused when not lauded in the media, in this way they have helped to make darker this “night and fog” under which paramilitarism operates¹¹.

Of Javier Velasco, the only person arrested so far for the murder, little more than him being a “common delinquent” has been said¹². But the practice of impaling is not just any form of sadism, but one that is strictly associated with the spectre of paramilitarism in Colombia. It’s a ritualised and learned torture with established rules. I’m not in any doubt that the murderer of Rosa Elvira Cely has been linked to paramilitarism, “social cleansing” gangs and the private armies the right has at its disposal to erode the social fabric, to impose its total control and its backward and conservative worldview¹³ and to do the dirty work the army can’t always do in the open. I’m under no illusions either that this possible link will be neither investigated nor studied because the Colombian media and the interest groups behind it have never been interested in generating a real rejection of paramilitarism in the public opinion¹⁴. It’s enough for them to take a lukewarm public stance, condemn the “excesses” and the death of the “innocent people” (collateral damage) while they reinforce the discourse of “necessary evil”.

The base nature of this crime deserves the justified indignation of anyone who has a bit of a heart. We are all Rosa, we should all energetically denounce this crime. But the media and the elites who control it are crying out in despair not at the crime itself but at the fact that the impaling happened in a space outside of where it was ‘natural’ for it to happen: the setting of the armed conflict. They’re horrified because the victim wasn’t a “faggot” or a “bleeding slut” who slept with a guerilla. They’re crying out in horror because the impaling took place in the National Park and not in a “red zone”, in a hamlet in the middle of nowhere or in a pauperised neighbourhood. They’re horrified because this barbarity happened, in Meerten’s words, outside of the “specific population” in which people are normally victimised in this way with the silent complicity of the media and the indifferent view or even approval of the elites who continue to get rich from the war and the logic of the appropriation of wealth through the violent plunder and control of communities and territories. They were so horrified at this, yet these same elites are those who will continue to create “Javier Velascos” who impale, rape and dismember, those

⁹ In reality, these guerrilla groups formed towards the end of the 40s in response (as self-defence groups) to the abuses and crimes of conservative factions (antecedents of modern paramilitaries) in the Colombian countryside.

¹⁰ See editorial from *El Tiempo* 30 July 1987.

¹¹ As proof of this, this week there was a paramilitary massacre of 5 people in the municipality of Remedios (Antioquia), which barely got “coverage” with a feeble account of a miserable 120 words (3 June). This wasn’t a massacre, but an “attack”, perpetrated not by terrorists but by “unidentified people”. The media source reports that paramilitaries and terrorists operate in the zone, leaving a doubt hanging in the air about who carried out the massacre, even though everyone knows it was an attack by paramilitaries: the massacre, in fact, took place in a local community centre, social centres are often targets for paramilitary activity which specialises in attacking any form of popular organisation. *El Espectador* doesn’t dare denounce paramilitarism, instead paramilitary actions are always perpetrated by “unidentified people” – this is nothing but a means strengthening the mantle of “night and fog” under which these mercenary armies of the right operate. This contrasts sharply with the coverage of action by insurgents in this same media outlet. www.elespectador.com

¹² www.semana.com

¹³ Hired assassins often carry rosary beads and have a prayer on the tip of their tongues.

¹⁴ Proof of this is the distance and ambiguity in the form calls of protest against paramilitaries in the daily national papers has taken (as on the one who took place on March 6, 2008), which contrasts with the enthusiasm shown every time there is a pronouncement against the insurgency.

who continue to support and form mercenary armies, and those who continue to make “murder” the most prosperous industry in the lacerated Colombian land. We shouldn’t forget about this side of the story for one minute.

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