

COMPARING VIOLENCE: ORGAN THEFT RUMORS IN CHECHNYA AND LATIN AMERICA¹

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In 2001 a rumor started to spread in Chechnya, according to which Russian forces arrested and murdered young Chechen men in order to sell their organs. These rumors of organ trafficking are reminiscent of those that have surfaced in other contexts of extreme violence, particularly in Latin America. A comparison with research on Latin America allows us to show how organ theft rumors gradually spread and crystallize as structured stories and permits us to examine how these stories enter international discourses about the mistreatment and commodification of human bodies under conditions of violence and conflict. This article argues that organ theft rumors are a collective way of expressing fears, putting a traumatic experience into words, and talking about what war has done to Chechen society.

Keywords: War; Violence; Rumors; Organ Theft; Chechnya; Latin America

In the beginning of the 2000s, rumors of organ theft spread among the population of the war-torn Chechen Republic. Young men were reportedly being abducted by Russian federal forces and having their organs forcibly removed to be sold for transplantation. This rumor received external public attention in March 2001, with a case known as the "Argun four." On March 19, 2001, the Russian Emergency Ministry (Emercom) asked inhabitants of Prigorodnyi, near the Chechen capital of Grozny, to bury four unidentified male bodies. The four men were naked and bore the characteristic marks of an autopsy: their torsos had been opened and roughly stitched up from the throat to the lower abdomen.

After the four men were identified,² it became clear that they had been arrested

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² The four men were later identified as Aiub Gairbekov, 23 years old, Muslim Batsiev, 25 years old, Abdul-Malik Tovzarkhanov, 38 years old, and Ismail Khutiev, 19 years old. All of them had been arrested during an operation by Russian forces in Argun on March 11, 2001, and, despite repeated requests by their family, no information on their fate or whereabouts had been given by Russian

during a massive police operation carried out in Argun between March 11 and 14 by Russian forces (Memorial 2001b). Local inhabitants filmed and photographed the bodies prior to burial, so as to enable identification, and disseminated the images to NGOs and journalists. In their opinion, the marks borne by the corpses were not the consequence of postmortem examinations but rather signs that surgery had been performed in order to remove their internal organs for transplantation.³

Similar rumors of organ trafficking have surfaced in other conflict situations, including the war in Lebanon and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴ More recently, the Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci was accused of complicity in the murder of Serbian prisoners and the sale of their internal organs during the 1999 war. The Russian army has also been accused of selling the organs of conscripts who died under mysterious conditions,⁵ while in Azerbaijan in 2008 the government investigated reports of “traffickers who were believed to take children abroad and sell their organs for profit” (BBC News 2004). The Azerbaijan rumors resemble those that have long circulated in Latin America under conditions of social violence and extreme poverty. In the mid-1980s in Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica, people talked of “fattening houses” where kidnapped babies were dismembered and their organs sold to buyers in the United States and Israel. In Brazil, Columbia, Peru, Argentina, and other Latin American countries, stories spread about the abduction and mutilation of children and teenagers, whose organs were then sold to wealthy patients.

“What does it mean when a lot of people around the world tell variants of the same bizarre and unlikely story?” (Scheper-Hughes 1996:4). Rumors as a form of communication have been studied in the social sciences for many years and are classically defined as “unverified account[s] or explanation[s] of events circulating from person to person and pertaining to an object, event, or issue in public concern” (Peterson and Gist 1951:33). Rumors, which spread particularly quickly in situations of crisis and uncertainty (Prasad 1935), have received increasing interest lately from historians (White 2000; Horne and Kramer 2001; Narskii et al. 2011), anthropologists (Bonhomme 2010), and sociologists (Boltanski 2012). Working on the violence of everyday life in the shantytowns of Brazil, anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes has also published several articles on the subject of organ theft rumors in Brazil (Scheper-Hughes 1993, 1996, 2000) as part of a larger project on the global traffic in organs. Folklorist Gillian Bennet (2005) has written about the organ theft legend,⁶ describing

federal forces or Chechen authorities (Memorial 2006).

³ See, for example, the description given by Aleksei Sokolov, member of the Memorial Human Rights Center and a medical doctor, who carried out an analysis of the video (Memorial 2001a).

⁴ In 2009, a crisis between Israel and Sweden was sparked by the publication in the Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* of an article reporting that Israel was killing Palestinians in order to sell their organs (Macdonald 2009).

⁵ See for example Newsland 2010 and a series of articles in *Novaia gazeta* from 2006 to 2011 (e.g., *Novaia gazeta* 2006; Borodianskii 2010, 2011). On the role of rumors in the Russian army in Chechnya see also Regamey (2011).

⁶ I will use “rumor” and “legend” as synonyms in this text. Organ theft rumors can qualify as

it as an example of “contemporary legends” or “FOAF tales,”⁷ whereas Véronique Campion-Vincent (1997) has developed the most complete study of the various manifestations of such rumors.

As most discussions of organ theft rumors focus on Latin America (Samper 2002), I will draw mainly upon the research from the region to analyze organ theft rumors in Chechnya in the early 2000s. In this “Chechen case,” rumors emerge in the context of extreme violence: following the start of the second Chechen War in September 1999, police and military operations were carried out by Russian federal forces on Chechen territory, mass killings were committed (Le Huérou and Regamey 2012), and human rights organizations have described some of the resulting violence as crimes against humanity (FIDH/Memorial 2000). To what extent does existing work on organ theft rumors in Latin America help us to understand and analyze the meaning of these rumors in the Chechen case? To what extent can these different theories, their methodologies, the questions they raise, and the conclusions they draw be applied in Chechnya? I will deploy this comparative perspective in the following ways throughout the paper.

Firstly, I describe organ theft legends as structured stories and as a way of thinking: when analyzing how organ theft rumors gradually spread and build up as structured stories, rumors in Latin America and in Chechnya show significant similarities. A comparative view helps us to understand how such legends are constructed and to grasp the logics of their interpretation and expression.

Secondly, rumors are an articulation and expression of lived experience: legends are also ways of narrating fears and putting traumatic experiences into words. Here, conclusions drawn by anthropologists and historians of Latin America help us to analyze the situation in Chechnya, where access is restricted and fieldwork has been limited, and to understand what these rumors might have meant for those who circulated them.

Finally, a comparative perspective can help us to understand the fates of such legends: in the aftermath of atrocities, what role might they play in the search for justice at the international level? Though in all cases various actors have tried to raise awareness of the issue, Latin American stories have led to the adoption of official declarations in the European Parliament and the United Nations, whereas no international body has formally invoked the Chechen case. The differences between these cases, as well as with the Kosovo affair, help us to identify the actors and conditions of mobilization, verification, and argumentation at the international level.

legends as far as they present similar structures and display the following characteristics: “The tale must sound plausible; it must have at least part of its origins in oral transmission; it must exist in more than two variations; it must accommodate traditional themes; and it must lack any systematic means of authentication” (Baky 1994). The accommodation of traditional themes in Latin America is obvious: for example in the traditional legend of the *pishtaco*, who take the fat from human bodies to make medicines for the rich or to grease machines (Oliver-Smith 1969).

⁷ Urban legends are always presented as true stories that happened to someone not directly connected with the narrator—thus the name “FOAF (Friend Of A Friend) tale” (Brunvand 1993).

ORGAN THEFT LEGEND AS A STRUCTURED STORY AND A WAY OF THINKING

A rumor should be studied both as a text and as an action since it is difficult to distinguish the content of a rumor from the social microinteractions that give it its full significance (Bonhomme 2010:34). The production, circulation, and reception of a rumor happen simultaneously, giving it a changing and permanently evolving significance (De Ípola 2006). However, while I acknowledge the necessity to study rumor “in interaction,” I did not systematically register the organ theft rumor at the time that it was spreading in Chechnya at the beginning of the 2000s. This study is therefore based mainly on “traces” (newspaper and human rights reports, photographs, videos, interviews) that remain, in particular on the Internet.⁸ The repetition of similar patterns and the reoccurrence of the same story in different sites allow us to reconstruct scattered texts into a single rumor. Even a post-factum approach enables us to explore the structure and internal logic of this rumor as well as the dominant patterns of thought that explain how the story is sustained.

THE CONSTRUCTION, STRUCTURE, AND CIRCULATION OF THE ORGAN THEFT RUMOR

John Shonder, an American who worked in Guatemala in 1993, recalls how rumors of organ theft spread at that time:

I first heard the story from my secretary in December of 1993 in Guatemala City. She assured me that the body of a small child had been found at the side of a road with its chest cut open and its heart and other organs missing. A note which said “Thanks for the organs” (in English, of course) had been left in the chest cavity. In the next few weeks, the bodies seemed to multiply. Some people claimed that five had been found, some said seven. Other versions of the story replaced the note with US currency, in amounts ranging from a few dollars up to one hundred. Both the note and the money were sometimes said to have been found in the children’s pants pockets instead of the chest. (Shonder 1994:1)

Similarly, in Chechnya after the discovery of the “Argun four” in March 2001, the rumor developed gradually, with an increase in the number of corpses and the addition

⁸ To complete the information I collected during several field trips in Ingushetia for human rights or humanitarian organizations since 2000, I have used key words (“organ theft,” “торговля органами,” etc.) to search information websites (<http://www.novayagazeta.ru>, <http://rferl.org>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian>), Chechen independent websites (<http://kavkaz.org>, <http://chechenpress.org>), as well as those of human rights organizations (<http://memo.ru>, <http://www.watchdog.cz>) and of organizations for solidarity with Chechnya (<http://tchetchenieparis.free.fr>). I have also screened the archives of several mailing lists on Chechnya (google group “tchetchenie” and yahoo group “chechnya-sl”). Finally, while writing this article I talked about the subject with several Chechen acquaintances and interviewed Aleksandr Cherkasov from the Memorial Human Rights Center (June 2012) and French documentarian Mylène Sauloy (April 2012), who both worked on the subject.

of further details. In June 2001, French documentary maker Mylène Sauloy, one of the few independent journalists able to visit Chechnya, reported on the extent to which the rumor had spread:

Many eyewitness accounts attest to repeated arrests of young, athletic, healthy men, taken at the base of Khankala where they would undergo a medical examination. And several bodies of young and healthy men were found sewn-up after removal of their organs.⁹

The rumor did not start with the discovery of the “Argun four” bodies, and it is most probable that the state of the corpses was interpreted as proof of organ theft precisely because the rumor was already in circulation. Indeed, as the father of one of the deceased told Mylène Sauloy:

During the last war, there were already bodies, and during this war we found 60 or 70. But it’s the first time we’ve seen bodies with these characteristics. With some rubbish inside instead of internal organs. We invited a doctor and he told us that yes, there are serious reasons to believe that they were killed for organ trafficking. . . . Even before, we assumed that such things were happening in the hospital in Khankala: that they had a system for removing people’s organs. During cleanup operations, they arrest people, they choose the strongest and most healthy, they select them to take their organs at the hospital. Apparently their system is well organized.¹⁰

Gradually, the organ theft legend built up and specific details were added as the story circulated. The bodies were reported to have been “filled up” with bandages or waste. The number of corpses mentioned rose from four to “several bodies” found after “repeated arrests” to “60 or 70.” Eventually, organ stealing began to be perceived as an authentic business, a well-organized system operating under the auspices of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), in which Chechen prisoners were specifically selected and sent to Khankala military base, to Daghestan, or to Moscow, where a wide a range of clinics and medical facilities were said to engage in organ trafficking.¹¹ More horror was added to the story when it was suggested that organs were taken for transplant while the prisoners were still alive (Chechenews 2010).

Comparison between organ theft rumors in Chechnya and Latin America also reveals structural similarities. They are all constructed around a three-stage sequence: abduction, medical intervention, and discovery of the body (dead or alive, but lacking some organs). Scheper-Hughes reports on the rumor she heard in the shantytowns of northeast Brazil in the 1980s:

⁹ From the transcript of a French 12-minute documentary based on information collected in Chechnya, *Commerce d’hommes—Tortures d’enfants*. June 2001. Retrieved June 29, 2012 (<http://tchetchenieparis.free.fr/text/MS-commerce-6-01.htm>).

¹⁰ Testimony translated from French.

¹¹ Interview with Mylène Sauloy, April 2012.

It warned of child kidnapping and body stealing by “medical agents” from the United States and Japan, who were said to be seeking a fresh supply of human organs for transplant surgeries in the First World. Shantytown residents reported multiple sightings of large blue-and-yellow combi-vans scouring poor neighbourhoods in search of stray youngsters. The children would be nabbed and shoved into the trunk of the van, and their discarded and eviscerated bodies—minus heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, and eyes—would turn up later by the roadside, between rows of sugarcane, or in hospital dumpsters. (2000:201)

In this story, as in all other reports, the first phase (abduction) and the third one (discovery of the body) are precisely described, whereas the second one (medical intervention) remains undetermined, leaving space for interpretation about where and how the organ extraction happened.

In the Brazilian rumor reported by Scheper-Hughes, the existence of large blue-and-yellow “combi-vans” points to the intervention of external actors and raises suspicion about humanitarian or international agencies working in these poor areas.¹² Although in Chechnya, to my knowledge, no mention has been made of the role of humanitarian or United Nations organizations at the beginning of the 2000s, the legends are similar in the sense that external forces are said to be implicated in and to profit from organ trafficking. In Latin America, the main beneficiaries are said to be the United States and Israel, and the “first world” more generally. In Chechnya, Russian forces, military elites, and special services are considered responsible. This designation of external forces and interests makes the legend a convenient means of propaganda and resistance.

During the 1980s, the United States repeatedly accused the Soviet Union and the KGB of fomenting these rumors in an attempt to wage an information war against them.¹³ In Chechnya, the organ theft rumor has been abundantly reported and developed on Movladi Udugov’s Kavkaz-Tsentr website. In April 2001, the website published information about the bodies found in Argun with headlines such as “The Kremlin Trades in Human Organs” (Kavkaz-Tsentr 2001b) or “Baranov¹⁴ Trades in Chechen Internal Organs” (Kavkaz-Tsentr 2001a). “Scandalous revelations” about

¹² Parallels could also be drawn with the African stories, studied by White, of “firemen” and rangers who abduct Africans to take their blood and use it in some medicines. In these stories too there are reports of vehicles (ambulances, red fire engines) that patrol the streets and abduct innocent passersby to “draw all blood with a rubber pump, leaving his body in the gutter” (Kenya) or sequester children “who are fattened on special foods while the European employers of *banyama* drank their blood” (Northern Rhodesia) (White 2000:129). Though no mention of this type of story was recorded in Chechnya in the beginning of the 2000s, such rumors are developing now. In Kadyrov’s Chechnya “big vans” of “a Chinese humanitarian organization” were said to abduct children, who are found dead afterwards (interview with a young Chechen woman living in Moscow, March 2012).

¹³ The official United States Information Agency even commissioned a report that was meant to demonstrate that these were “only rumors” (Leventhal 1994).

¹⁴ Valerii Baranov was Commander of the North Caucasus Military District from July 2004 to May 2008.

organ trafficking in Russia and Chechnya continued until 2011. These themes appear within a broader denunciation of what Zionists and *kafirs* (infidels) do to Muslims (the website also publishes articles on the forcible removal of organs by Israelis from Palestinian prisoners) and the criminal nature of the Russian state and society.¹⁵

Yet to characterize these rumors as mere propaganda would be highly reductive. Firstly, in both cases the rumors testify to the importance of hearsay as a means of getting information, especially when information from official sources is rejected. In Chechnya, as in Latin America, “denials do not convince a local public opinion accustomed to give little credit to official statements, or to interpret the denials as irrefutable proof that there is something to hide” (Campion-Vincent 1997:21). The majority of the population in Chechnya has experienced the extent to which official information can be distorted.¹⁶ Thus the official explanation about the “Argun four” was generally dismissed: according to the *Prokuratura* (the Prosecutor’s Office), a military patrol had discovered the four bodies and had taken them to the morgue to have them autopsied.¹⁷

In Chechnya at the beginning of 2001, rumor and hearsay became crucial means of transmitting information. In January 2001, rumors started to spread about Russian forces arresting men and dumping their bodies near the military base of Khankala—and indeed, 50 bodies were discovered in March.¹⁸ A lack of reliable sources may convince people not only that official information is a lie but also that any alternative information must be true. This phenomenon has also fed numerous rumors about the use of illegal weapons (chemical and biological) and of explosive toys to target children.¹⁹

INTERPRETING PHYSICAL EVIDENCE—LOOKING FOR HIDDEN REASONS

While the child organ theft rumors in Guatemala and Brazil have never been corroborated by any physical evidence, there has been some photographic and

¹⁵ The Chechenews website reported, for example, seven mysterious deaths in garrisons in the Khabarovsk region that led some to suspect that the internal organs of the conscripts were sold to China (Chechenews 2010).

¹⁶ On the “information war” during the Chechen conflict, see for example chapter 5, “Comment Moscou organise le huis-clos et la désinformation,” in Comité Tchétchénie (2003).

¹⁷ According to Memorial, this is indeed what happened: the four bodies had been discovered on the Khankala military base. A young prosecutor serving there followed the existing procedures and requested an autopsy. When the autopsy was done, the corpses were given to Emercom to be buried, and instead of burying them themselves they asked some villagers of the neighboring Prigorodnyi to do it (Memorial 2006).

¹⁸ Later rumors about bodies of “disappeared” being buried in a cellar of the building where the Khanty-Mansiisk OMON (special police) were based, in the Oktiabr’skii district of Grozny, also proved to be true (Memorial 2001d).

¹⁹ Since the first war, people in Chechnya did talk about the use of forbidden chemical weapons (Baiev 2003), and the rumor gained force after the mysterious poisoning of Starye Atagi inhabitants in 2000 (Torgashev 2000). As for the rumor of “explosive toys,” I heard it several times during different field trips to the North Caucasus between 2000 and 2005, from different Chechen contacts.

documentary evidence of “eye theft rumors.” The best known is the case of Jenson in Columbia.

Jenson (or Jeison) is the “hero” of a documentary called *Organ Snatchers (Voleurs d'Organe, 1993)* by Marie-Monique Robin. When he was 10 month old, Jenson’s mother took him to a hospital in the small town of Villetta with acute diarrhea. The following day when she picked the baby up, his eyes were hidden under a bloody patch and the doctors told her that the boy was dying. She took the baby to a hospital in Bogotá, where she learned that he could be cured but that he would never see again. The parents, along with several journalists, were convinced that his eyes had been removed at the first hospital. The fact that the hospital had lost his medical dossier just added to their suspicions (Campion-Vincent 1997:170–175).

When compared with the Chechen case, in which the discovery of four dead bodies gave new strength to existing organ theft rumors, this case helps us to see how a legend is constructed by way of particular interpretation of physical evidence through the specific use of causal explanations.

In the case of Jenson, the physical evidence (his blood-soaked eye bandage and subsequent blindness) could be explained by a severe eye infection—and this was indeed the explanation given by ophthalmologists who later examined the young boy in France. But the rumor dismisses medical explanation and builds upon elements deemed suspicious (the fact that no eye problem was noticed by the parents before, the unfriendly attitude of the medical staff, the loss of his medical records).²⁰ According to the logic of rumor, elements that remain unclear are given the same force as proof that “something happened” and are used as evidence of hidden causes and forces. Even if physical evidence could be explained without any reference to organ trafficking, alternative explanations are dismissed in favor of a plot-oriented interpretation of the facts.²¹

While recent works have pointed to the importance of conspiracy theory in political thought and political life in the Caucasus,²² the tendency to see a plot behind

²⁰ Figures of speech are taken literally: the expression “le robaron la vista,” used by Colombians interviewed in the documentary by Robin, was interpreted as “his eyes have been stolen” when it actually means that “he has been deprived of his eyes” (interview with Mylène Sauloy, April 2012).

²¹ The same logic can be seen in organ theft rumors in the Russian army. These rumors were born after the deaths of young conscripts in the Khabarovsk region, when families saw that the state of the bodies of the young men did not correspond to the official cause of death. Although the men were said to have hanged themselves, their bodies bore several wounds and injuries that could not be explained by hanging. Incisions had been made on their throats, and torsos also bore the marks of having been opened and closed with stitches. The first logical explanation would be that these young men were killed during a particularly violent *dedovshchina* (military hazing ritual) (especially since they had reported harassment before their deaths), and that autopsies were conducted in the garrison; the fact that their internal organs were removed could be interpreted as a process of embalment necessary before sending the bodies back to their families in caskets. But parents and some journalists used the existence of these “unexplained physical signs” to argue that the young men had had their organs removed and used for transplantation.

²² See panel on “Iazyk teorii zagovora i etnopoliticheskie protsessy na Kavkaze.” Nineteenth Annual International Symposium “Puti Rossii,” March 23, 2012, Moscow, Russia.

unexplained phenomena is a universal one. Everybody is prone to accept, on some occasions, these “small conspiracy theories” that “surface in the case of violent or unexpected events” and “highlight the ‘lies’, the ‘deficiencies’, the ‘impossibilities’, ‘black holes’, etc. of the official version of an event and suggest, explicitly or implicitly, the validity of another truth” (Chueca 2012:3).

In the Argun case in Chechnya, legends also build upon the “suspicious” behavior of officials—in this case the staff of the Emercom ministry and the military. Indeed, just after an Emercom truck had asked some inhabitants of Prigorodnyi to bury the four corpses they were carrying and had taken the corpses to the cemetery, a military patrol with an armored personnel carrier and several trucks blocked the way to the cemetery, refusing to answer any questions. This seemingly unmotivated action was sufficient to raise doubts.

Once the organ theft interpretation has been raised, details or facts that do not fit the overall explanation or disturbing questions (such as why criminals would allow the corpses to be discovered instead of just burying or burning them) are ignored or set aside. Every detail is used to support a global interpretation that can account for all the unexplained signs. Two holes in one of the bodies (in the shoulder and lower abdomen) that could have been bullet holes are seen as the indisputable marks of a perfusion catheter and, therefore, as evidence that the man had undergone an operation in Khankala to remove his organs.

The details used to support the assumption that the men had undergone surgery to remove their organs seem at first glance to be insignificant. On the video made by those who prepared the corpses for burial, the commentary insists that “the direction of the incision on the corpses does not correspond to postmortem examination, as they are in the opposite direction to those usually made, and the facial expressions are too calm” (which would mean that operations were conducted while they were under strong narcotics and that they died during or after this medical intervention).

These arguments do not stand up to medical examination. A forensic expert for the Memorial Human Rights Center explains that the direction of an incision depends on the practice of the person conducting the autopsy, and that a calm facial expression is a well-known reaction after death. He concludes that “there is no evidence in this video to support the version that the organs were removed for transplantation” (Memorial 2001a). Moreover, the father of one of the deceased, a medical doctor himself, felt the body and established that all internal organs were in place (Memorial 2006).

The refusal to take facts into account might be considered highly irrational. Indeed, the logic of causality and rational demonstration appear to be turned upside down by those who perpetuate organ theft rumors: “If it’s not to remove organs for transplantation, why are internal organs so carefully cut: kidneys, liver, spleen, pancreas, heart, and lungs?” (Chechenews 2010).

In this kind of thought process, belief seems to take precedence over rational arguments, as can be seen in the reaction of a Chechen surgeon:

I must admit that as a doctor, knowing about the technology and process of organ transplantation, I looked to this kind of information with disbelief.... I thought that the technical difficulties involved in harvesting and transplanting organs made it impossible to realize in Chechnya. But irrefutable evidence—bodies with their organs removed—showed that young people, who were taken hostage by the Russian occupiers, were, without any doubt, while they were still alive, subjected to medical removal of their organs possibly for sale and transplantation. (Chechenews 2010)

The argumentation here follows a specific path: “I know that it is impossible... but still...”—a pattern that strongly recalls Jeanne Favret-Saada’s writing on seemingly irrational witchcraft beliefs in France (1977:95). This does not mean that people resort to the supernatural to explain all unusual phenomena—on the contrary, organ theft legends refer to a highly technical world—but some similarity can be detected in the logic of the thought process.

According to Favret-Saada, belief in witchcraft must not be interpreted as superstition; it is firstly an “explanation” that enables a distinction to be made between the direct cause of an event and its origin. People do not deny the validity of medical, rational, or mechanical explanations; but repeated accidents have to be explained, and “their origin is always the viciousness of one or several sorcerers” (Favret-Saada 1977:21). Rational argumentation can explain how something happened, but not why. When horror, grief, and violence are involved, rational causes are insufficient to provide an explanation.

Similarly, organ theft rumors underline the fact that most of the men arrested during the war were young and athletic; they were thought to have been picked up because their organs were healthy and fit for transplantation. In reality, the fact that young, healthy men were arrested is easily explained by the logic of police operations: Russian forces were looking for Chechen militants hidden among the civilian population and these young men fit their representation of *boeviki* (insurgents). People in Chechnya undoubtedly knew about this police logic. But the consequences and the grief caused by the war seemed too enormous to grasp, and the organ theft theory provided an explanation and hidden reason for these events.

RUMORS AS ARTICULATIONS AND EXPRESSIONS OF EXPERIENCE

In *Speaking with Vampires*, Luise White argues that in East and Central Africa rumors of white firemen capturing Africans to extract their blood “perhaps articulate and contextualize experience with greater accuracy than eyewitness accounts. They explain what was fearsome and why” (2000:5). Indeed, “people do not speak with truth, with a concept of the accurate description of what they saw, to say what they mean, but they construct and repeat stories that carry the values and meanings that most forcibly get their point across” (30). The issue thus is not to prove that these stories are true or false but to understand what kind of experience is expressed through rumor.

AN EXPERIENCE OF EXTREME VIOLENCE

Organ stealing rumors appeared at a specific moment in the “second Chechen war.”²³ In March 2001, human rights organizations had gathered numerous testimonies about torture and inhumane treatment in so-called filtration camps and denounced the lack of effective investigations into violence committed since 2000 (FIDH/Memorial 2000; Human Rights Watch 2001). More and more people had disappeared after having been detained at checkpoints or during police operations. Some of them were discovered among the bodies found near the Russian military base of Khankala in March 2001 (just before the discovery of the “Argun four,” who were also killed in Khankala). A majority had been victims of summary executions: their hands were tied, they bore firearm or knife wounds, and some had a bullet in the head; on two of the bodies, the ears had been cut (Memorial 2001e).

Rumors of organ theft thus emerged in a context of violent political repression, disappearances, and murder. Similarly, “the body parts rumor arose in Brazil, Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador and South Africa within political contexts in which military regimes, police states, civil wars and ‘dirty wars’ used abductions, ‘disappearances’, mutilations and death squad attacks against ordinary civilians” (Scheper-Hughes 1996:7).

The child- and organ-stealing rumors coincided in Guatemala with sustained military attacks on Mayan Indians that were nothing less than genocidal during the past decade. Similarly, in Brazil many vestiges of the military state remained even in the 1980s during the gradual transition to democracy. In the shantytowns the presence of the police state was felt in the late-at-night knock on the door, the sudden appearance of masked men in uniform, and in the abduction of a husband or teenage son, and “bodies, slashed, mutilated and dumped between rows of sugarcane” turn up after arrest by men in uniform. (Scheper-Hughes 1996:7–8)

These descriptions of police and military operations, disappearances, and summary executions echo the situation in Chechnya at the beginning of the 2000s as described in all the human rights organizations’ reports (FIDH/Memorial 2000; Human Rights Watch 2001; Memorial 2001c).

The intimate link between political violence and organ theft legends is still dominant in Latin America, as demonstrated by the song “Desaparecidos” by Cuban rap group Orishas.²⁴ The song is dedicated to “president murderers, those responsible

²³ Several distinct periods can be schematically distinguished according to the type of military or police operation and the way violence was exerted: September to December 1999 was a period of intensive and extensive bombing and shelling of towns and villages. From January to March 2000, Russian forces entered Grozny and other towns, sometimes with extreme brutality (e.g., *Novye Aldy* in February 2000), and established control over the whole Republic. Since then, Russian troops have established numerous checkpoints and carry out “cleanup” operations to find alleged Chechen fighters among the civilian population.

²⁴ See full text in the original Spanish at <http://www.paroles-musique.com/paroles-Orishas-Desaparecidos-lyrics,p25030>.

for disappearances, those who traffic in children” and the violence of political repression is mixed with rumors of organ trafficking:

In the name of my dead friend
you already know what happened
he was captured, arrested
kidnapped
they took his clothes off, shot him
burnt the evidence
the same thing happened
to my ten-year-old neighbor
whose organs were not found.

Similarly, in Chechnya “there were rumors because nobody knew where people disappeared.”²⁵ Rumors “represent a more or less collaborative interpretation of events” and are “constructed to explain uncertain, ambiguous events or intangible fears, anxieties or perceived dangers” (Samper 2002:2, 4). From October 1999 to the end of 2000, 384 persons arrested by Russian forces were found dead or disappeared, and a further 187 disappeared in unknown circumstances (Cherkasov 2012). In this context, where people struggled to understand what was happening, we could follow Luise White when she argues that “what happened to people was not always so clear” and that rumors are frequently the best way for people to talk about their own experiences, when what goes on is “so well known that ... it could best be described in the commonplace terms everyone used in talking about it” (2010:34, 40–41).

The rumors in Chechnya may thus have started because of a perceived contradiction: on the one hand, a total disregard for Chechen lives on the part of the Russian forces (bodies dumped in mass graves, lack of investigations into the most serious crimes) and, on the other hand, autopsies performed on some bodies, indicating attention to the deceased and the cause of death. Struggling to explain this contradiction, people may have concluded that if these bodies were handled with more caution than others, it was because they were, for some reason, useful to those who handled them. The legend reveals the dominant state of mind in Chechnya at the beginning of 2001: the idea that Russian forces would operate on prisoners to remove their organs appeared much more likely than the idea that they would perform an autopsy to establish the cause of the death of a Chechen prisoner.

This belief fits into a more general discourse according to which the war is aimed at exterminating the Chechen population. Whether such a discourse focuses on young children (as in Latin America) or on young men (Chechnya), there is in both cases a perceived threat against the future and the capacity of the group to perpetuate itself. The violence exerted against the civilian population and against those arrested and detained is seen as motivated by a desire to destroy the nation: sexual violence against men in detention camps is described as “torture aimed at destroying fertility” (UNPO 2004). Thus, the idea that young men are killed to have their bodies

²⁵ Interview with Aleksandr Cherkasov, June 2012.

dismembered fits into a broader narrative of the conflict as a war of extermination, in accordance with the sentiment, expressed by many Chechens, that “every 50 years, they try to exterminate us.” Organ theft rumors appear as a variation of the discourse on extermination: they refer not to the political extermination of a nation but to some kind of medical and commercial rationality according to which Chechens are killed not only “gratuitously” but also for the economic benefit of their enemies. Since the same legend existed in Lebanon, we can draw on Fadia Nassif Tar Kovacs’s conclusions about the renewed horror and violence suggested by these rumors:

According to rumors, when prisoners were not immediately killed, they were gathered in heaps to form reserves of human organs from which to pick until exhaustion. They thus knew a fate worse than death, as they witnessed to the very end the decomposition of their own bodies. They were condemned twice, three times, a thousand times, they lived a thousand deaths; death of their human status, death of their dignity by extreme humiliation, complete destruction of their bodies, shredded to death by a thousand lacerations. The Other is reduced to the strict level of an object, with a pure utilitarian value. (Nassif Tar Kovacs 1988:73)

BEING TURNED INTO OBJECTS OF TRADE

Several investigations have been conducted all over the world to find out whether organ theft rumors are founded; they have concluded that while the organ trade is a real phenomenon, organ theft is not.²⁶ No case of assassination with the aim of extorting a person’s organs or of the forcible removal of organs from a living person has ever been documented. But the notion of “traffic” allows a certain amount of confusion about what is happening and implies the involvement of organized crime and transnational networks. Researchers who have studied the story of the “stolen kidney” in Europe (e.g., Brunvand 1993) show that, in time of peace, it expresses fear and defiance in the face of the extension of global trade and the uncontrolled progress

²⁶ Nancy Scheper-Hughes is part of the Bellagio Task Force on Organ Transplantation, Bodily Integrity, and the International Traffic in Organs. This independent body has set itself the task of verifying allegations of human rights abuses linked with organ transplantation, collecting data and conducting interviews in different part of the world (including Latin America, Asia, and Africa). Among the practices of the “organ trade,” they mention the trade of tissue and body parts in morgues, taken from unknown patients, but also the selling of kidneys (which can be described as a “forced” practice insofar as people are forced to do it because of their economic situation or abuse by medical personnel). The Bellagio task force exposes also the case of China, where organs of the people sentenced to death are used for transplants (the official argument of Chinese authorities is that this is done with the family’s consent) (Scheper-Hughes 2000). Veronique Champion-Vincent’s book on organ theft rumors is based on a report on transplants for the French Institute of Transplants (Champion-Vincent 1996). In the book, she summarizes the different reasons why the existence of organ theft is doubtful: technical constraints (organs can only be transplanted if they are taken from a person deceased in specific conditions—only 5 percent of those who die in hospitals in France), the sophisticated surgical equipment and technical staff required, and the necessity to ensure follow-up of patients (Champion-Vincent 1997:129).

of medicine, with images of “organs transported by commercial airlines in ordinary Styrofoam picnic coolers conveniently stored in overhead luggage compartments” (Scheper-Hughes 2000:193).

Such rumors can be reinforced by cases of gross medical abuse: for example, hospitals or morgues selling body tissues and parts taken from the dead for pharmaceutical or research purposes or harvesting and selling corneas of deceased patients without family consent (Bennet 2005). In Colombia, the murder of *desechables* (literally, “disposables”) and street children by paramilitary militias setting themselves the task of “social cleansing” ended in scandal in Baranquilla in 1992, when the bodies of those murdered were discovered at the university morgue where they were being used for dissection practice (Campion-Vincent 1997:108–109).

After a fact-finding mission on the “baby parts story” (stealing of babies so as to fatten them and sell their organs) in Guatemala in the 1980s, a 1988 FIDH report *Enquête sur un éventuel trafic d’organes d’enfants* concluded that, while there was indeed trafficking in children (abductions or sale) for illegal adoptions, there was no evidence of organ trafficking (quoted in Campion-Vincent 1997:24). This case suggests that a real phenomenon (illegal adoptions) can merge with a fictional one (the selling of baby organs) to give rise to the legend. Similarly, the rise of the organ theft legend coincided with a covert war against mostly black and semiabandoned street children in urban Brazil and with a booming market in international adoptions. The rumor confused the market in “spare babies” for international adoption with the market in “spare parts” for transplant surgery. Poor and semiliterate parents, tricked or intimidated into surrendering their babies for domestic and/or international adoption, imagined that their babies were wanted as fodder for transplant surgery. The rumor condensed the black markets for organs and babies into a single frightening story (Scheper-Hughes 2000:201–202).

I would suggest that a similar confluence has happened in Chechnya. Indeed, several forms of trade had developed around Russian military bases in the beginning of the 2000s (arms, petrol), but the most significant was the payment of large sums of money to obtain the release of those arrested during cleanup operations and detained in the so-called filtration camp (FIDH/Memorial 2000; Human Rights Watch 2001; Memorial 2001c, 2002, 2006). In some cases, the corpses were even sold to the relatives who wanted to bury them; the body of Adam Chimaev, arrested by Russian forces in December 2000, was removed in February 2001 from the territory near Khankala only after relatives paid a bribe (Memorial 2001e). If dead bodies had thus been made an object of trade, it required only a small step to imagine that internal organs were also being traded.

THE FEELING OF CORPOREAL FRAGILITY AND DECAY

According to anthropologist Scheper-Hughes, organ theft rumors are the reflection and embodiment of a certain experience and “the stories are repeated and circulated because they are true at that indeterminate level between fact and metaphor”

(1996:5). Following Mary Douglas,²⁷ we could see the body and its dismantled organs as a metaphor for a dismantled society, as a materialization and “embodiment” of the symbolic and physical violence to which Chechen society is subjected. But to suggest “that the stories are metaphorically true, operating by means of symbolic substitutions, is not enough,” argues Scheper-Hughes (1995:5) as she points to the materiality of this experience. “The rumors express the subjectivity of subalterns living in a ‘negative zone’ of existence where lives and bodies are experienced as a constant crisis of presence (hunger, sickness, injury) on the one hand, and as a crisis of absence and disappearance on the other” (9).

According to Scheper-Hughes’s analysis, organ theft rumor testifies to the economic and social violence experienced by the poor in Brazil, violence that affects bodies first. In northeast Brazil, peoples’ bodies are mixed up and lost in cemeteries but also frequently in public hospitals; people fear that if they die in a hospital, their organs will be harvested so as to pay their debts.²⁸ Poor medical care and contempt for patients are materialized in the performance of unnecessary surgical interventions—including amputations—for otherwise treatable conditions. In a dental clinic visited by Scheper-Hughes, a dentist dubbed *Tiradentes* (“pulls your teeth”) accepted his nickname because the only intervention he could perform was indeed removing teeth. Teeth are a particularly visible sign of physical difficulties. Scheper-Hughes illustrates her article with photographs of a young woman, *Biu*, playing with her false teeth: she lost her teeth when young, and her husband left her as a result. This experience of decay of the body and the lack of access to affordable health care are made even more sensitive by the contrast to the extensive use of plastic surgery by rich Brazilians.

Scheper-Hughes’s argument is particularly interesting when applied to Chechnya in that it prompts us not only to deal with the question of extreme violence but also to pay attention to the general social context of poverty, illness, and poor access to health care.

In Chechnya, the war dismantled the public health system, which in 2001 functioned only with the support of UN agencies and humanitarian organizations.²⁹ People were injured by bombs and landmines; thousands underwent amputations requiring artificial limbs. The war had heavy consequences on public health more generally. After the first war (1994–1996), doctors noted an overall degradation of health with a rise in cases of tuberculosis and heart attacks (Baiev 2003:232). In 2001, people talked constantly about a rise in the rate of heart attacks and cancers.

²⁷ Douglas (1966) argues that when a group feels threatened by another group, this threat is expressed symbolically as a threat to the body; the body is a symbol of society and reproduces on a smaller scale the power and danger attributed to the social structure.

²⁸ As a case of this physical violence experienced by the poor, we could mention Jenson’s story in Colombia: the father of this young boy whose “eyes were stolen” had to give blood in order to pay for the treatment his son received in a Bogota hospital (Campion-Vincent 1997:172).

²⁹ These remarks and observations are based on my work as a translator and then as a coordinator for Médecins du Monde France and their programs in Chechnya and Ingushetia between 2000 and 2002.

The impression that an entire nation was ill and the feeling of decay are corroborated by data suggesting that “Chechnya is in the grip of what could be described as an epidemic of cancer”: “According to data on lung cancer from the whole of the North Caucasus for 2004, the incidence in Chechnya is more than five times higher than that in other republics” (Umarova 2007).

The corporal damage caused by war affects not only health but also physical appearance, and can be felt as vital decline. In 2001, Czech journalist and aid worker Petra Procházková met a young woman who lived in Grozny with her husband and children, surviving by collecting scrap metal. The young woman felt that because of the war she had “aged twenty years”: “My vision is poor and I can’t remember anything” (Procházková 2002). Procházková’s description of the young woman’s appearance echoes Scheper-Hughes’s description of Biu: “To look at her hands and teeth you’d think she was around sixty, but her eyes and face betrayed that she must be under thirty—which she was,” writes Procházková, noting that the young woman had only six teeth left.

According to Chechen surgeon Hassan Baiev, women resorted to plastic surgery after the 1994–1996 war as a way to mark the end of the war and erase its consequences (Baiev 2003:233). I would argue that organ theft stories, focusing on the damage done to bodies, appear all the more appropriate as a way for people to express their experience of war, in that they have the feeling that the social body is falling apart, but also that their own body has been irremediably destroyed by the war.

THE FATE OF A LEGEND: ARGUMENTATION AND PROOF ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

In May 1987, Italian radical members of the European Parliament presented a draft resolution condemning illegal trafficking in babies’ organs. The draft was turned into a written question addressed to the European Commission, which answered in July 1987 that no such trafficking had occurred. On September 15, 1988, a French Communist Member of Parliament proposed a motion condemning “trafficking in organs of third world babies,” referring to Honduras and Guatemala and explicitly accusing Israel and the USA. The motion was adopted and prompted the United States to issue an official protest (Campion-Vincent 1997:22–25, 143). More recently, in January 2011 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) “called for international and Albanian investigations into crimes committed in the aftermath of the conflict in Kosovo, including ‘numerous indications’ that organs were removed from prisoners on Albanian territory to be taken abroad for transplantation” (PACE 2011a).

No such resolution has ever been proposed in the case of Chechnya and the issue has not even been raised within these international bodies. I will take this difference as a starting point to understand the fate of a rumor at the international level. Who are the actors engaged in the process, which sources are considered legitimate, and what kind of arguments and justifications do they use to mobilize public opinion and put the issue on the international agenda?

LOCAL ACTORS AND THE SEARCH FOR PROOF

According to Scheper-Hughes, “since the poor of urban shantytowns and squatter camps are more rarely called upon to speak before official truth commissions, one could interpret body theft and organ stealing rumors as a surrogate form of political witnessing. The rumors participate in the spirit of the official truth commissions by testifying to human suffering on the margins and peripheries of the official story as it is revealed” (1996:9). In the Argun case, people engaged in a more active version of political witnessing, using the language of human rights and international law. By filming and photographing the bodies, and circulating these pictures through different channels, they took steps not only to testify but also to document what was happening in order to, sooner or later, establish the truth.³⁰ Mylène Sauloy recalls that in June 2001, “Chechens were asking for an international inquiry.”³¹

A video of the Argun corpses, recorded before they were buried, was sent to the Memorial Human Rights Center in Moscow. At that time, this organization was already one of the most active and well-known Russian human rights organizations working in the region. It had already been engaged in this kind of verification of rumors when the story of “poisoned T-shirts” emerged in Starye Atagi in August 2000 (Torgashev 2000). In March 2001, Memorial transmitted the video of the “Argun four” to an expert medical doctor for analysis, who tried to draw preliminary conclusions solely on the basis of the images.

The primary authority referred to, in this case by Memorial, was thus a medical one. Aleksandr Cherkasov, who collected information on the case for Memorial, also used medical justifications to demonstrate that stories of organ theft were spurious. Organs for transplantation, he argued, cannot be taken from a body picked up at random: the compatibility between recipient and donor has to be verified and donors must be in good health. The situation in Chechnya, where people were not sufficiently nourished during the war, where tuberculosis was on the rise, and where no medical evaluations could be made was not favorable to organ harvesting and transplantation.³²

But in the case of organ theft rumors, medical argumentation and proof remain fragile. Firstly, no genuine, independent forensic expert analysis can be conducted in Chechnya, where experts lack the necessary equipment.³³ Furthermore, even if such expertise were available, it would not necessarily put an end to the rumors. Indeed, in the case of organ theft rumors, doctors and medical specialists appear in the dual role of judge and accused. Medicine is heavily suspected of abuses (illegal organ

³⁰ Residents of Novye Aldy adopted a similar approach when, after more than 46 people were killed by Russian federal forces, they waited for several days before burying the bodies, hoping for an inquiry commission (Le Huérou and Regamey 2012).

³¹ *Commerce d'hommes—Tortures d'enfants*. June 2001. Retrieved June 29, 2012 (<http://tchetchenieparis.free.fr/text/MS-commerce-6-01.htm>).

³² Interview with Aleksandr Cherkasov, June 2012.

³³ Memorial also underlines that material conditions necessary to handle bodies and conduct forensic analysis are not present in Chechnya: “The forensic expert of Grozny doesn’t have anything apart from rubber gloves and a scalpel” (Memorial 2001e).

transplantation, organ theft), and, at the same time, doctors are asked to confirm or dismiss these stories by referring to their medical knowledge.

Reference to a medical authority cannot convince those who defend the existence of organ theft. In the case of Jenson, the young boy whose eyes were said to have been “stolen” in a state hospital, Colombian authorities had the young boy examined by ophthalmologists in Hôtel-Dieu Hospital in Paris. After having examined the young boy, they concluded that his blindness was caused by disease and that the boy’s eyes had never been removed and were still in place. This argument from scientific evidence is made even stronger by the assumption that French doctors have no personal interest in defending the official version provided by the Colombian authorities. Yet, such scientific authority and political neutrality are contested by those who defend the theory of organ theft. Marie-Monique Robin, director of the *Body Snatchers* documentary, rejects this medical conclusion by pointing to collusion among doctors and concludes that “medical luminaries will never contradict each other” (Campion-Vincent 1997:175).

So even with reference to medical arguments, doubt remains about the possible veracity of organ theft rumors. How do different actors deal with this doubt? Human rights organizations find themselves in a difficult situation. Organ theft legends are simultaneously too dreadful to be believed and too horrible not to be taken under consideration. If these stories are true, they refer to particularly violent and vicious crimes that should be immediately addressed; human rights organizations cannot afford to dismiss them. On the other hand, they may be propaganda and these same organizations cannot afford to accept them without verification. The means for verifying such rumors are scarce, but the monstrosity of the stories makes doubt difficult to express and less likely to be heard.

Human rights and international solidarity organizations took different positions on the organ theft rumor in Latin America, some of them expressing caution while others trying to raise public awareness (Campion-Vincent 1997). In the Chechen context, Memorial concluded that the lack of convincing information and testimony and the fact of lingering doubt were sufficient for them to drop the issue. This strict approach to the verification of facts is reinforced by Memorial’s attunement to rumors and experience with detecting the mythical aspects of such stories: “I have heard about organ trafficking, I have heard about 40,000 children. When people count victims not one by one but by round numbers with several zeros, there is room for a mythical dimension.”³⁴

DENUNCIATION AND DEMONSTRATION AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Rumors of organ theft in Chechnya soon reached the various international actors who, in Europe and the USA, were mobilizing against the war. In September 2004, several members of the European Parliament, supported by the Green political group, launched a report entitled “Genocide in Chechnya, What Political Solution to the Russian-Chechen Conflict?” This publication was intended to mobilize public opinion

³⁴ Interview with Aleksandr Cherkasov, June 2012.

and featured photographs of tortured and dismembered bodies, including a photograph of the four bodies discovered in Argun with the following caption:

The Argun 4: discovered March 23, 2001, near the Russian base in Khankala. The four bodies were emptied of their organs, all four have had some skin on their shoulder removed. Since then, many similar cases: young men, in good health, found empty (scar from the neck to lower abdomen). First rumors of organ trafficking... (The Greens 2004:108)

Building on an old case and enriching the rumor with new inexact details (in the Argun case, only one of the bodies had a mark on the shoulder), this document nevertheless does not endorse the organ theft version. It talks cautiously about “rumors” only, as opposed to verified facts.

Stories about organ theft in Chechnya encountered differing reactions in Europe. “This is a very, very old chestnut, periodically rewarmed in the interests of paranoid propaganda,”³⁵ reacts a person using the pseudonym “jbe@” on the Chechnya-sl mail group, a mailing group “devoted to the current situation in Chechnya [and] focused on the human rights of the victims of the occupation.” Reacting to the post on the list of the article “Kremlin Trading in Human Organs” from the separatist website Kavkaz.org, jbe@ underlines that “one can not take any old organ and just put it anywhere you please,” referring to similar rumors in Latin America to show that the story is only a legend.³⁶ But other participants claimed to be convinced by the article because what appears unbelievable is not necessarily untrue; bir46@ argues:

Would you have believed in 1922–35 what’s going to happen in our dear Europe during WWII? No, you would not believed [sic] in such happening. You would have called such allegations paranoid propaganda instead. The fact is when a fenomen [sic] like nazism [sic] occurs in a full scale of the whole society, it’s all too enormous for a human mind to understand it at all.³⁷

Repeated references to Hitler and the Holocaust are meant as a definite argument against which no rebuttal can be made.³⁸ The same references appeared in a 1993 speech by Leon Schwartzberg, a rapporteur to the European Parliament, for a

³⁵ “Re: Kavkaz: Russian Army Doctors Trade Human Organs of Chechens.” Yahoo groups, April 4, 2001. Retrieved June 29, 2012 (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/message/15226>).

³⁶ “Re: Kavkaz: Russian Army Doctors Trade Human Organs of Chechens.” Yahoo groups, April 5, 2001. Retrieved June 29, 2012 (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/message/15261>).

³⁷ “Re: Kavkaz: Russian Army Doctors Trade Human Organs of Chechens.” Yahoo groups, April 5, 2001. Retrieved June 29, 2012 (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/message/15247>).

³⁸ See also the post on the list by k_emmil@ who explains: “To me and to most of my people, nazism or extreme cruelty towards the Chechens have been in place in Chechnya all the time.... Read for example Hadji Murat by Leo Tolstoy—you will see no difference between Hitler and Nicholas soldiers in Chechnya” (“Re: Kavkaz: Russian Army Doctors Trade Human Organs of Chechens.” Yahoo groups, April 5, 2001. Retrieved June 29, 2012 [<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/message/15265>]).

resolution “for a ban on the trade in organs for transplant.” Asserting the existence of a criminal trade in organs (“acknowledged facts of the mutilation and murder of fetuses, children and adults in certain developing countries in order to supply transplant organs for export to rich countries”), he concludes that “to deny the existence of this monstrous trade is like denying the gas chambers and cremation ovens during the war” (Campion-Vincent 1997:143–144).

The reference to the Holocaust is linked here to a pro-Third World discourse and shows that to put a problem on the international agenda, actors are required to articulate these concerns with dominant concerns of the time. Rumors make it to international forums when the logic of political denunciation takes precedence over the standards of international justice and demands of judicial verification.

Attention paid to organ theft rumors in Latin America in the 1980s can be explained in the context of the Cold War. When stories about *casas de engorde* (fattening houses) emerged in Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica, the USA was engaged in providing support to *contras* in several Central American countries. These rumors were used in a global campaign against the United States by the Soviet press and communist newspapers all over the world. It was a French Communist who initiated the already mentioned 1988 European Parliament resolution on trafficking of organs of babies from developing countries. Organ theft rumors in Chechnya appear, on the contrary, in a context in which no political group is particularly interested in attacking Russia on this issue.

The lack of interest in the “forgotten conflict” in Chechnya contrasts with the direct military and political investment of Western countries in Kosovo. There is certainly also more reluctance to attack a strong regional power such as Russia than the small, newly independent Kosovo state. But the most interesting aspect of the Kosovo case is the argumentation developed by the rapporteur Dick Marty in his report to PACE: it reflects the conflicting tendencies of political denunciation and judicial argumentation and sheds lights on those international political arenas in which the Chechnya conflict was also evoked.

Though Dick Marty claims that “we have not engaged in mere rumor-mongering, but have rather described events on the basis of multiple testimonies, documents and objective evidence” (PACE 2011b:B§176), his report does not provide more evidence about organ trafficking than that available in Chechnya.³⁹ The logic of political denunciation pervades the text. Reactions of horror (“how these crimes descended into a further form of inhumanity, namely the forcible extraction of human organs for the

³⁹ Indeed, the report, criticizing previous investigations, mainly calls for an inquiry on what happened in illegal detention centers controlled by the Ushtria Clirimtare e Kosoves (UCK), the ethnic Albanian group fighting for Kosovo’s independence. It is based on an array of elements (the criminal nature of Kosovar politics, the presence of a doctor [Shaip Muja] engaged in illegal surgical operations, the contradictory explanations given by some of the accused). Direct witnesses can testify “only” to summary execution and forced prostitution and to the fact that some of the detained feared that they would be “cut into pieces.” The system of executing prisoners for the purpose of transplanting their kidneys is described on the basis of testimonies that are deemed “reliable and coherent” by Marty, but the reader is given no information to corroborate these testimonies.

purposes of trafficking”) are mixed with indignation—“I have examined these diverse, voluminous reports with consternation and a sense of moral outrage,” writes Marty about the activities of Kosovo’s highest-ranking politicians (PACE 2011b:B§75, B§70).

On the other hand, reference to international justice as the highest criterion of validity is also present, and Marty tries to make his point more convincing by recalling that potential cases of trafficking in organs were “alleged by a former prosecutor of international standing, let us remember” (PACE 2011b:B§3). Indeed, former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) Carla Del Ponte tackled the issue in her book dedicated to her work at the Tribunal in 2008 (Del Ponte 2008). When the dominant model of establishing the truth at the international level is the model of international justice, embodied by international courts including the ICTY, Del Ponte’s endorsement of the rumor seems decisive.

Yet the mere fact that PACE had to take up the issue is a sign of the fragility of the story. PACE opened its inquiry after the ICTY dropped the case: “Speaking after Del Ponte’s book appeared in print, Hague tribunal representatives insisted the organ-trafficking claims came to nothing because there was insufficient evidence” (Sarac and Roknic 2008). The PACE investigation appears to some as a second-rate solution, when there is no possibility to resort to international justice.

The Kosovo case points to the mixed character of such bodies as PACE and the European Parliament. When there is no possibility of recourse to international justice (either for political reasons, as in the Chechnya case, or for reasons of legal procedure), such bodies appear to be useful substitutes. Various actors seek, through the resolutions and decisions of these bodies, redress for violations and sanctions against the perpetrators. But these bodies do not have the resources of international courts (investigators, forensic expertise) to carry out their inquiries, relying only on witness testimony. They are therefore heavily dependent on the statements they receive and on the various local actors that communicate these testimonies.

At the beginning of the 2000s, international organizations such as the UN or the Council of Europe considered that the only reliable and independent information about Chechnya was information provided by human rights organizations working in the field. Since these organizations did not credit the organ theft rumor, there were few chances that the story could go further.

CONCLUSION

Comparing organ theft legends leads us to a range of methodological questions that have long been raised by folklorists, anthropologist, and historians (Ginzburg [1989] 1992). How can the striking similarities between content, details, and structure of these stories be explained?

Among classical hypotheses, the postulate of a common body of texts and traditional legends would be very difficult to demonstrate here, when similar rumors appear on different continents. Diffusion and circulation, on the other hand, may be part of the explanation. The “baby parts” rumor migrated among Latin American countries with the mass media playing a significant role in this circulation. In the

Chechen case, the possibility of drawing upon and relating to other rumors of organ theft circulating on the Internet (especially about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) has reinforced and contributed to the widespread acceptance of the story. But diffusion cannot provide a comprehensive explanation. Should we simply conclude that similar contexts of political violence and fear give rise to the same kind of rumors? Should we assume that the human imagination is quite “poor,” that it “rehashes ever since the dawn of the ages” the same kind of stories (Bloch [1921] 1999:40), and that there is something universal and properly human in the fear expressed in these legends—the fear of disappearance, dismantling of the body, and the tearing down of the self?

A second methodological question is whether we should compare the text and formal content of rumors or their signification. Organ theft legends in Chechnya could be linked with the story of the “stolen kidney” that also circulates in Russia (*Izvestiia* 2006): a rich tourist in a developing country (or in a poor area of his own country) wakes up after a bleary night to find out that one of his kidneys is missing. In both cases internal organs disappear; both stories express fear of the progress of medicine and the commodification of bodies. But the kidney theft stories are told mainly in Northern countries, express a defiance of the poor, and testify mainly to Russia’s entry into the globalized world. In countries or groups under political or economic domination, organ theft rumors show a real fear of death, of the political and social violence experienced by a community, and of the imminent disappearance of the group. In this respect, they would be better compared with “baby theft” stories—rumors of children being abducted and sold—which also circulate in Chechnya as they did in Latin America and which testify to a feeling that the survival of the community itself is at stake (Murphy 2010:233–235).

The third theoretical question raised by organ theft rumors is a question of belief: do people really believe in the incredible stories they tell; if not, why do they report them and encourage their circulation? I would argue, along the lines of Luise White, that “not everyone believed these stories, or believed them all the time, or believed every version a neighbor or an acquaintance repeated. Nevertheless, each repetition, each repudiation, each amendment and refinement ... made it a more immediate way to talk about other things” (White 2000:41). Even those who transmitted the rumor in Chechnya may not have really believed it; it nevertheless provided them with an immediate way to talk about the extreme violence to which their society had been subjected and to put into words the consequences of the war on minds and bodies.

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СРАВНИВАЯ НАСИЛИЕ: СЛУХИ О КРАЖЕ ОРГАНОВ В ЧЕЧНЕ И ЛАТИНСКОЙ АМЕРИКЕ

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В 2001 году во время войны в Чечне появились слухи о том, что российские федеральные войска арестовывали и убивали молодых людей с целью изъятия внутренних органов и последующей продажи их для трансплантации. Подобные слухи о торговле органами встречаются и в других ситуациях экстремального насилия. В статье представлен анализ того, как слухи о краже органов в Чечне распространялись и как они были восприняты на международном уровне. Этот чеченский случай сравнивается в работе с аналогичным в Латинской Америке. Главным результатом статьи является анализ таких функций, выполняемых слухами, как передача травматического опыта, коллективные способы выражения страха и осмысления последствий войны для чеченского общества.

Ключевые слова: война; насилие; слухи; Чечня; Латинская Америка