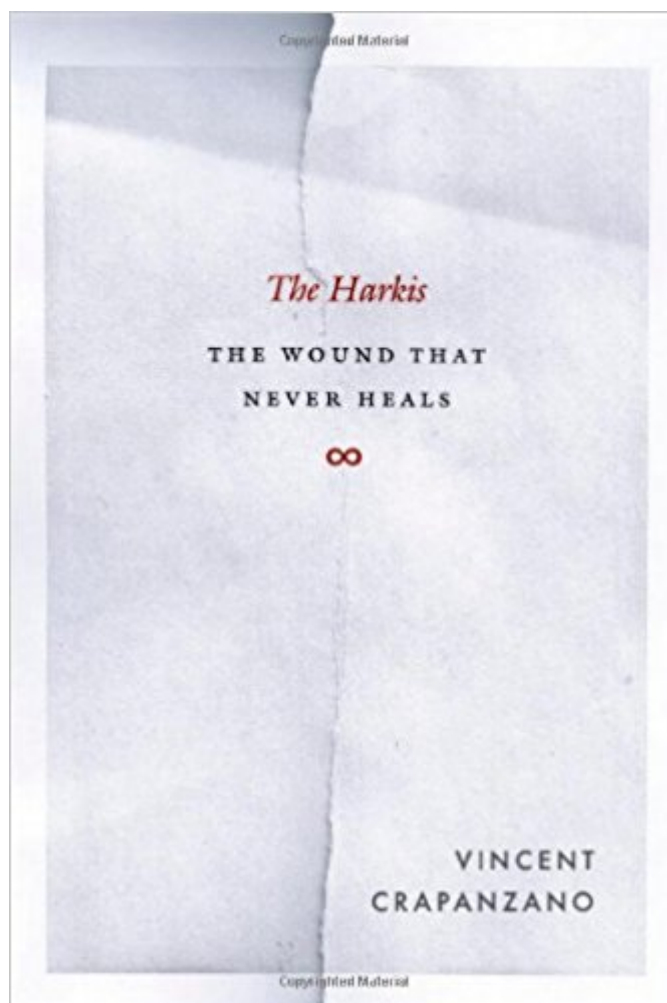


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The Harkis: The Wound That Never Heals



Synopsis

In this haunting chronicle of betrayal and abandonment, ostracism and exile, racism and humiliation, Vincent Crapanzano examines the story of the Harkis, the quarter of a million Algerian auxiliary troops who fought for the French in Algeria's war of independence. After tens of thousands of Harkis were massacred by other Algerians at the end of the war, the survivors fled to France where they were placed in camps, some for as long as sixteen years. Condemned as traitors by other Algerians and scorned by the French, the Harkis became a population apart, and their children still suffer from their parents' wounds. Many have become activists, lobbying for recognition of their parents' sacrifices, compensation, and an apology. More than just a retelling of the Harkis' grim past and troubling present, *The Harkis* is a resonant reflection on how children bear responsibility for the choices their parents make, how personal identity is shaped by the impersonal forces of history, and how violence insinuates itself into every facet of human life.

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Customer Reviews

"This is an extraordinary book written with great tact and delicacy on the complex weaving of themes of violence, betrayal, grief, and inheritance of responsibility in the worlds of the Harkis who find themselves on the wrong side of history. The style of writing mirrors the shifts of perspectives on the Harkis in French and Algerian social worlds, and it makes us feel the difficult terrain traversed by the ethnographer as he confronts his own taken-for-granted moral assumptions about what it is to listen to those who must confront violence from positions for which there are no

standing languages of either heroic virtue or suffering victims. This is a stunning achievement. — (Veena Das, Johns Hopkins University) — “A moving account of a people haunted by the past and imprisoned in the present. This is vintage Crapanzano: learned, sophisticated, and sharply aware of the moral contradictions and willful blindness of human life. — (Tanya Luhrmann, Stanford University) — “If Vincent Crapanzano had only sought to offer his visceral account of the enduring ways in which the experience of political exclusion, personal estrangement, and social apartness saturates multiple generations of Harkis, their bodies and minds, this book would be an extraordinary achievement. But it piercingly and powerfully does so much more. Betrayal, despair, and rage are the seared marks of successive political violences that permeate the intimacies of family relations, that haunt the emotional lives of the young who remain tethered to and torn by the guarded silences of their fathers and by their stories that cannot be told. Should we imagine we already know what it means to belong nowhere, to be shorn of the possibility of accounting for oneself, here is a book whose political and psychological insights recast what it is to write a history of the present at new depths and new heights. — (Ann Stoler, The New School) — “A work of rare sensitivity and deep psychological insight, *The Harkis* is magnificent. At once a history of one of the darkest chapters in French history and a profound reflection on human emotion, pain, suffering, and most importantly betrayal, this is a stunningly original exploration of the recesses of the human condition. — (Paul Stoller, West Chester University) — “*The Harkis* — sheds light on one of the most somber chapters of the Franco-Algerian — relationship. By means of extensive multigenerational interviews, Crapanzano brings to life the tragedy of the Algerian men who fought for France during the Algerian war of independence and were then abandoned. These men and their families were initially condemned to death, literally, by their country of origin and, metaphorically, by their country of adoption. — Herded into camps on their arrival in France and later into out-of-the-way communes their shabby treatment past and present is a stark reminder that the wounds of the war are still very raw. — — Fluidly written and skillfully analyzed, Crapanzano demonstrates the power of memory, both in its articulation and in its silences. — This is oral history at its very best. — (Patricia M. E. Lorcin, University of Minnesota) — “Crapanzano has developed a person-centered anthropology attuned to the psychological dimensions of the human experience. Whether focusing on a single person (e.g., his 1980 portrait of the Moroccan Tuhami) or a set of interlocutors from a defined group (e.g., his 1985 ethnography of white South Africans), he has consistently resisted the sociological impulse to treat individuals as exemplars of social types, insisting instead on the — depth — — revealed in the particular. Such a methodology

requires the humility of the ethnographer, a constant recognition that the mind, the subjective experience, of the other always remains opaque, and a self-reflexive mode of exposition that highlights the researcher's own limits, confusions, and dialogical development. (Paul A. Silverstein *Anthropological Quarterly* 2011-11-10)

“Combining interviews, literary analysis and psychoanalytical insights, Vincent Crapanzano traces the ways in which betrayal and powerlessness have played out in the lives of the Harkis and their children. For Crapanzano, their tragic story, skillfully recounted in this reflective and original ethnography, is a wound that never heals. [] When dealing with the historical aspects, Crapanzano's account is both original and illuminating. From his consideration of female auxiliaries (disparagingly known by the French as *harkettes*), to the prevalence of emasculation, both real, as a form of punishment, and psychological, as a result of their powerlessness in exile, Crapanzano's study gives the Harkis a hitherto little considered, but nevertheless valuable context []. The Harkis is a significant addition to the burgeoning literature on the Algerian War and its consequences, and it offers a troubling reminder of the shadow that the Algerian War continues to cast on contemporary France. • *Times Literary Supplement* (Sarah Howard *Times Literary Supplement* 2012-04-06)

“Vincent Crapanzano's moving book makes it clear that [the Harkis] were neither entirely victims nor perpetrators, neither entirely heroes nor villains, neither entirely innocent nor guilty. • • • (Tobias Kelly *Public Books*)

“Offers a moving and often disturbing portrait of a traumatized people and a thought-provoking consideration of the role of memory and storytelling in the forging of identity. • (Katrin Schultheiss *Historian*)

Vincent Crapanzano is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature and Anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center. Among his books are *Tuhami: A Portrait of a Moroccan* and *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology*, both published by the University of Chicago Press.

In *Writing Culture*, a collection of essays published in 1986, Vincent Crapanzano accused Clifford Geertz of foul writing and raised against him charges of ethnocentrism, male chauvinism, and sloppy metaphors. Knowing Geertz's exacting style and cultural sensitivity, the least one can say is that Crapanzano set the bar very high for himself. Actually, he didn't have to raise himself up to reach that standard: others did it for him, and proposed his earlier writings as an example of what a

postmodern ethnography should look like. In the same collection of essays, Stephen Tyler called forth the formation of a post-modern ethnography that would experiment with new forms of writing and pay attention to the reciprocity of perspectives, the dialogic context of fieldwork, and the fragmentary nature of experience. He recognized that instances of such a postmodern ethnography were few, but he specifically referred to Crapanzano's *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*. Written in the same vein, *The Harkis: The Wound That Never Heals* could also fall within this category of postmodern ethnography. What makes it postmodern, and is it still ethnography? People usually associate postmodernism with difficult words such as hermeneutics, post-structuralism, semiotics, or deconstruction; less often with plain speaking and accessibility of style. *The Harkis* comes without theoretical strings attached. Sentences are short, style is accessible, and reading poses no particular difficulty. Scholarly references are few and woven into the text or relegated in footnotes. Authors like Pierre Bourdieu or Giorgio Agamben are conveyed to bring perspectives and enrich meaning, but they do not form part of a theoretical argument. The narrative follows a chronological progression: the historical background of the "events" that pitted the French colonists and army contingents against the Algerian population and the FLN; the formation of auxiliary troops or harkas assisting the French in their counter-insurgency operations; the massacres of Algerian auxiliaries that took place after the Evian agreements and the messy exodus of those who succeeded to escape; their relegation by the French authorities in "temporary" internment camps or forest hamlets isolated from the rest of the French population; the mobilization, mostly led by their children, to claim recognition and elicit formal apology from the French state; and the transmission of memory from one generation to the next. The author's theoretical perspective, if any, is from ethnopsychiatry and the psychological effects of traumatic experience, which can sometimes straddle generations, as when the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. But the author's voice claims no particular authority. He brings into the text a multiplicity of perspectives: those of the Harkis themselves, as well as of their children, particularly those who were raised in the camps; but also those of French officers and soldiers who fought in the war, of bureaucrats who dealt with the "Harki problem", of former members of the FLN, of Algerians living in France, and of ordinary French commenting the author's research. No one holds the absolute truth about the Harkis: each perspective is partial, fragmentary, and subjective. The anthropologist's viewpoint is only one among many ways of constructing the situation of the Harkis and of understanding their plight. The researcher's construction can never achieve the goal of accounting for the other's life experience, for the mind and subjective perception of the other always remain opaque. As Crapanzano notes, our engagement with other people is always mediated "by language and our perception of language, by

translation and our understanding of translation, by narrative and descriptive conventions and our critical acknowledgment of those conventions, and by our projective capacities and our appraisal of those capacities."It has become commonplace in modern ethnography to name and quote informants more fully and to introduce personal elements into the text. Crapanzano goes beyond mere quotation: he understands the ethnographic encounter as a situation of cooperative story-making, and insists on the role of the researcher's engagement with the subject in the informal co-construction of the subject's experience. He eschews formal interviews or structured questioning and frames his contacts with informers as conversations and verbal exchanges. He is as attentive to the silences, gestures, and nonverbal contexts of his encounters as to what is being said. In quoting a person, he specifies his own relationship with the informant, the context of the conversation, and his reaction to the remark. As he explains, "I hope my references to individual Harkis will remind the reader that each Harki is a singular individual whose individuality resists its subsumption, not only in the inevitable stereotypes of social description, but also in the collectivized identity demanded by political action."Perspectival relativity is associated with authorial disengagement. The author points out that he has no political axe to grind or no skin in the game; but he confesses he was "caught" by the Harkis. This capture is inherent in the ethnographic encounter: "so intense and prolonged is ethnographers' engagement with the people they study that they can never fully abandon the commitment and consequent obligations to them that comes with their research." In the case of *The Harkis*, both the grievances of the stigmatized population and the American citizenship of the author played a part in framing their encounter. From the start, the Harkis and their children turned him into a witness of what they had suffered and offered testimonies by way of descriptions. As Crapanzano acknowledges, "the Harkis gave me their words, and, in receiving them, I was assumed to have given my word, not only to be faithful to what they had confided in me, but also to do whatever I could to make their case known in the English-speaking world."These expectations, although partly solicited by the ethnographer, were not easy to bear and sometimes produced misunderstandings or even resentment. Crapanzano confesses it bluntly: "I admit to a certain impatience, a troubling irritation, that some of the Harkis and especially their children produced in me at times." It is not only that the author does not want to testify for the Harkis' cause and be enrolled in their campaign for recognition: he feels ambivalent toward their very identity, and sometimes unconsciously projects upon them the stigmata and prejudices held by some segments of French or Algerian public opinion. This stigmatization transpires in the use of words that are meant to disturb and unsettle, such as the many references to the semantic field of "treason". The Harkis are described as having been betrayed by the French, but also as having betrayed their people and being stigmatized by

them as traitors. The "wound that never heals" is this constant rumination of betrayal and abandonment by old soldiers who are locked in their silence. They would prefer to forget the war, but they cannot, however hard they try, because it has molded their identity. As for the children of the Harkis, particularly for those who were raised in the camps, they suffer a double wound: that of the pain they themselves suffered in their upbringing and that which arises from their father's stubborn silence. It is with them, particularly the activists among them, that the author did the bulk of his research. Despite the author's oratory precautions, words like "traitors" and, even more, "collabos", are weapons that hurt and could even kill when they were articulated in a war context. They elicit complex feelings: as Crapanzano notes, the Harkis "inspire in the French, and, no doubt, in the Algerians, memories they would prefer not to remember and judgments they would prefer not to acknowledge." The word "collabo", attributed to no specific interlocutor but which the author claims to have heard being used on several occasions, is particularly offensive. Not only does it assimilate the Algerian war auxiliaries to the French wicked souls who collaborated with the Nazi occupiers during World War II, but it also indirectly compares the French fighting in Algeria with those same Nazis. No wonder many French citizens, including Harkis and their offsprings, felt insulted when this word was used during a TV interview by a visiting head of state. As Crapanzano notes, "however hard anthropologists try, the people they worked with are always a silent but insistent--a determining--audience." He wrote his book under the implicit promise that he would be as true to the Harkis as he could, and along the assumption that he would count Harkis' children, as well as French and Algerian intellectuals, among his readers. Indeed, he adapted his manuscript to these audiences. The second chapter in the original edition discusses a play, *Le nom du Père*, by an Algerian playwright, whose protagonist is a Harki. Harki associations in France found the play offensive and tried to stop its performance in protests and through the courts. This second chapter has been deleted from the French edition, published in 2012 by Les Editions Gallimard. Was it an editorial choice to shorten the manuscript, or did it stem from the author's decision not to stir controversy and rub a sore spot among his implicit audience? Wounds take time to heal, and some linger forever.

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