

Pistorius And South Africa's Culture Of Violence

Warmer

What do you know about Oscar Pistorius and Reeva Steenkamp?

Vocabulary: Crime and Security

The following terms all appear in the article you are going to read. Put them in the correct part of the table below.

rape guard corruption razor wire graft offenses electric fence theft guarded community
racketeering murder beatings motion detector killings burglaries

Crime	Security

Now read the article.

Pistorius And South Africa's Culture Of Violence

Adapted from TIME magazine, Monday, Mar. 11, 2013

Four days before Oscar Pistorius shot her in the elbow, hip and head through the bathroom door at his home in Pretoria, Reeva Steenkamp tweeted a message about violence against women in South Africa. "I woke up in a happy safe home this morning," the 29-year-old wrote. "Not everyone did. Speak out against the rape of individuals." As Valentine's Day broke with the news that the 26-year-old who became a global icon in 2012 by running in both the Paralympics and the Olympics had killed his girlfriend, Steenkamp's words--repeated around the world--only added to the sense of improbability.

Was this homicide? Why did Oscar kill Reeva?

To understand Pistorius and Steenkamp, to understand South Africa, it helps to know the place where the couple chose to spend their holiday. Cape Town has arguably the most beautiful geographical feature of any city in the world: Table Mountain. Its central neighborhoods are a paradise of open-fronted cafés and pioneering gastronomy, forest walks and vineyards. Commuters strap surfboards to their cars to catch a wave on the way home.

But while Cape Town's center accounts for half its footprint, it is home to only a fraction of its population. About 2 million of Cape Town's 3.5 million people live to the east in tin and wood shacks and social housing built on the collection of estuary dunes and baking sand flats called the Cape Flats. Most of those Capetonians are black. Class in Cape Town is demarcated by altitude: the farther you are from the mountain, the lower, poorer and blacker you are. Cape Town's beautiful, affluent center is merely the salubrious end of the wide spectrum that describes South Africa's culture and its defining national trait: aside from the Seychelles, the Comoros Islands and Namibia, South Africa is the most inequitable country on earth.

No one trusts the state. For blacks, it's partly because of South Africa's historical legacy. And for all South Africans, but particularly for whites, it's partly because the ruling African National Congress (ANC) is tarred by corruption and criminality. Scandals involving government ministers seem like a weekly occurrence. About a tenth of South Africa's annual GDP--as much as \$50 billion--is estimated to be lost to graft and crime. The past two national police chiefs were sacked for corruption. In the southeastern city of Durban last year, all 30 members of an elite police organized-crime unit were suspended, accused of more than 116 offenses, including theft, racketeering and 28 murders. The initial lead investigator in Pistorius' case, Detective Warrant Officer Hilton Botha, was removed after it emerged that he faced trial on seven counts of attempted murder. Most damning of all,

the ANC's self-enrichment has helped widen the inequality that first propelled it to power. The result of this dismal record is that while murder rates are down from their peak, the resentment and violence continue.

Unable to rely on the state, South Africans are forced to cope with crime essentially on their own--and over time, that has shaped the nation. Policing is largely a private concern. In 2011, South Africa's private security industry employed 411,000 people, more than double the number of police officers. In the townships, vigilante beatings and killings are the norm.

The ultimate example of this private crime control is the security estate. The ancestors of the white Afrikaners, 19th century Dutch settlers, had their own response to overwhelming danger: circling their wagons in an impenetrable laager. The security estate--a walled-off cluster of houses protected by razor wire, electric fences, motion detectors and guards--is the 21st century laager. Its purpose is the same: separation from what Afrikaners call the *swart gevaar* or "black threat." The security estate is a private, individual, exclusive solution to that fear. And Silver Woods in Pretoria, where Pistorius lives behind electrified 8-ft.-high (2.5 m) security walls watched over by the estate's dedicated security force, is one of the most exclusive guarded communities in the country.

For all its defenses, it failed to keep violence at bay. By Pistorius' account, his fear of an intruder, the fear that keeps the people of South Africa apart still, caused the man so many saw as a unifying figure to shoot his girlfriend dead.

The essence of Pistorius' argument is unyielding defense of his laager. In an affidavit read in court by his lawyer, Barry Roux, Pistorius recalled how the couple spent Valentine's eve quietly at his two-story home. "She was doing her yoga exercises and I was in bed watching television. My prosthetic legs were off." Despite having dated only a few months, "we were deeply in love and I could not be happier." After Steenkamp finished her exercises, she gave him a Valentine's present that he promised not to open until the next day. Then the couple fell asleep in his second-floor bedroom.

Pistorius used to tell journalists that he never slept easy. In his affidavit, he said he was "acutely aware" of South Africa's violent crime. "I have received death threats before. I have also been a victim of violence and of burglaries before. For that reason I kept my firearm, a 9-mm Parabellum, underneath my bed when I went to bed at night."

Pistorius awoke in the early hours of Feb. 14. He remembered a fan he had left on his balcony and fetched it by hobbling on his stumps. Closing the sliding doors behind him, he "heard a noise in the bathroom ... I felt a sense of terror rushing over me. There are no burglar bars across the bathroom window and I knew that contractors who worked at my house had left the ladders outside."

"I grabbed my 9-mm pistol. I screamed for him/them to get out of my house ... I knew I had to protect Reeva and myself ... I fired shots at the toilet door and shouted to Reeva to phone the police. She did not respond and I moved backwards out of the bathroom, keeping my eyes on the bathroom entrance. Everything was pitch dark ... When I reached the bed, I realized Reeva was not in bed. That is when it dawned on me that it could have been Reeva who was in the toilet."

Pistorius says he put on his legs, beat down the locked door with a cricket bat, called an ambulance and carried Steenkamp downstairs to his front door, where he laid her on the floor. "She died in my arms," he wrote.

Comprehension

1. Explain the irony of Reeva Steenkamp's final tweet.
2. In what ways is Cape Town representative of South Africa as a whole?
3. Give examples of "corruption and criminality" within the African National Congress.
4. Why are vigilante beatings and killings so common in the townships?
5. What do 21st century security estates have in common with the 19th century *laager*?
6. How did Pistorius justify keeping a firearm under his bed?
7. Why did he get out of bed early in the morning of February 14th?
8. Why did he think that the noise coming from the bathroom might be an intruder?

Discussion

- a) Do you believe Oscar Pistorius' version of events? Why (not)?
- b) Would you have acted in the same way as Oscar? If not, what would you have done differently?
- c) Do you think Oscar's possession of a firearm is justified? Why (not)?
- d) In your opinion, is Oscar Pistorius guilty of murder? Explain your answer.
- e) Read the epilogue below. What do you think of the outcome of this case?

Epilogue

3rd December 2015

South Africa's supreme court of appeal has found Oscar Pistorius guilty of murder, marking another dramatic day in a case that has gripped the world from the moment news first broke of Reeva Steenkamp's death.

The ruling comes just weeks after Pistorius was released from prison into the relative luxury of correctional supervision at his uncle Arnold's home in Pretoria.

The appeal court ruling means he is unlikely to be there for much longer: the minimum sentence for murder is 15 years in prison, three times the term he received following his original conviction of culpable homicide, the South African equivalent of manslaughter.

The appeal court's verdict was unanimous. "In these circumstances, I have no doubt that in firing the fatal shots the accused must have foreseen that whoever was behind the toilet door might die, but reconciled with that event occurring, and gambled with that person's life," said Judge Eric Leach, reversing the trial judge Thokozile Masipa's decision on the matter.

The court also found that Pistorius was not justified in claiming that he thought his own life was in danger, again overturning Masipa's ruling.

3rd March 2016

Pistorius' appeal against the murder conviction was rejected by the constitutional court.

