

Living with Ghosts

Death, Exhumation, and Reburial among the Maya in Guatemala

by
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Although more than three decades have passed since Guatemala's 36-year-long civil war, bereavement and posttraumatic stress continue to affect many survivors of that dark era, especially since it is only now that a few of the most infamous perpetrators of the violence have recently, if briefly, been brought to justice. The Maya were especially severely affected by the massacres and disappearances of the armed conflict. Because the ongoing relationship between the dead and the living that Maya value requires that the deceased receive proper burial, the exhumation and reburial of war dead have had cathartic effects for the survivors and have actively contributed to the construction of historical memory.

Aunque han pasado más de tres décadas desde la guerra civil de 36 años en Guatemala, la aflicción por la pérdida de seres queridos y el estrés post traumático continúan afectando a muchos sobrevivientes de esa era oscura, especialmente porque es sólo hasta hace poco que algunos de los más infames autores de la violencia han sido llevados ante los tribunales aunque sólo brevemente. Los mayas especialmente fueron gravemente afectados por las masacres y las desapariciones del conflicto armado. Ya que la relación existente entre los muertos y los vivos que los mayas valoran requiere que los muertos reciban una digna sepultura, la exhumación y el nuevo entierro de los muertos en la guerra han tenido efectos catárticos en los sobrevivientes y han contribuido activamente a construir la memoria histórica.

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Guatemala is a phantasmagorical land, haunted by its history and the ghosts of its dead. This article explores the meanings of bereavement in Guatemala and the reburials of victims killed during the political violence of that nation's 36-year-long civil war, processes that are simultaneously overtly political and intensely personal. Although more than three decades have passed, bereavement and posttraumatic stress continue to affect many survivors of that dark era, especially since it is only now that a few of the most infamous perpetrators of the violence are being brought to justice. (General Ríos Montt himself was charged and convicted with genocide and crimes against humanity in 2013 but was released after 10 days in prison.) Guatemala has come a long way since the publication in 1998 of the reports of its two truth commissions (the *Recuperación*

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de la Memoria Histórica [Recovery of Historical Memory—REHMI], conducted by the Catholic Church, and the United Nations' Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico [Historical Clarification Commission—CEH]) definitively placed the blame for the vast majority of the killings on the nation's armed forces. But the struggle for a clean historical narrative of what happened during those unhappy years continues, complicated by the conflict among different players for control of what constitutes "truth" and the fact that some of the material evidence of what happened remains underground. Much from this period remains unresolved even as the living move closer to their own more timely demises. It is the object of this work to explore grief and extended bereavement in Guatemala and to examine how a modern scientific quest for justice can intersect with intensely personal and culturally imbedded epistemologies of death and life to mark out pathways to a "usable" historical past.

This work suggests, following Halbwachs (1992), that grief is personal but also a social construction of memory. As Irina Silber (2004: 214) has demonstrated in her work on postwar commemoration in El Salvador, memories of everyday life—including those of lost loved ones—help construct a history that is embodied (here, literally) in material sites. In El Salvador and Guatemala in particular, there have been many efforts to commemorate those killed during the armed conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s through the work of truth commissions and the creation of murals, statues, and other public artworks to remember and to educate people about the traumatic past. In El Salvador a museum is dedicated to the "image and word" of the war. Commemoration is a public act, and as such it is vitally important in helping to codify a common collective historical memory; it lionizes both victors and victims and singles out history's villains. What is unusual about this task in Central America is that history, in this case, is being written not by the winners but by their victims. This remains true even now, when the narrative of the recent past is being adjudicated and contested by those who won the political war but lost the war of popular collective memory—the generals and those who continue to maintain that the great violence of the 1980s was necessary to "save the country from communism." The national polarization around the May 2013 trial of Ríos Montt, who was convicted of genocide but almost immediately released because of a legal technicality, illustrates that Guatemala's historical memory is still, to some extent, under construction.

The very permanence of commemoration (a materialization of remembrance) in monuments, statues, coins, and other material manifestations serves to affirm the canonization of the historical memory as it is constructed. Yet there is a finality and valedictory quality to it—a suggestion of a completed and perhaps even uncontested historical narrative—that distinguishes it from memorialization (preserving memories of people or events), which speaks more to the memory of individuals and of private loss, a recognition of personhood as much as a brick in the edifice of collective memory. While recognizing that non-Maya in Guatemala face these same challenges, this study focuses on Maya's responses to disappearances and death, including the role that the supernatural plays in bereavement, reconciliation, and historical memory and in the memorialization of loved ones lost to violence.

THE CONTEXT

Although Guatemala's civil struggle was by far the bloodiest of the Central American wars of the 1980s, claiming more lives than the armed struggles in El Salvador and Nicaragua combined, it remains relatively unknown and unremembered by much of the world. Most of the Guatemalan victims died during an intense period of state repression and violence that accelerated sharply between 1981 and 1983—corresponding to the Guatemalan army's scorched-earth campaign against the armed insurgency, a Marxist-inspired guerrilla war involving four distinct movements that unified in 1980 under the umbrella of the *Unidad Revolucionario Nacional Guatemalteco* (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity—URNG). The nadir of this period, now known simply as *La Violencia*, took place during the *de facto* presidency of Ríos Montt, under whose leadership the Maya were identified as “internal enemies” of the state. An estimated 150,000 Guatemalans died violently during the armed conflict, nearly half of them, by some accounts, during *La Violencia* (Bell, Kobrak, and Spierer, 1999).

Of those killed in the early 1980s, the majority (the truth commissions estimate upwards of 80 percent) were Maya, a fact that sharply distinguishes this period from earlier phases of the armed conflict, when its victims tended to be *ladino*¹ campesinos, trade unionists, students, reformist politicians, and the military's conscripted foot soldiers. The focus of violence on Maya people has given rise to the phrase “the Maya holocaust”—a reference not only to the loss of life but also to the loss of culture as rural Maya exchanged their indigenous identity for that of poor *ladinos* in order to live in relative anonymity in Guatemala's cities. Taken as a whole, the counterinsurgency campaign of the early 1980s was the worst calamity to befall Mayan life and culture in Guatemala since the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest.

Since the signing of the peace accords in 1996, Guatemala has been engaged in an intense struggle to come to grips with its history. An important aspect of this struggle is the exhumation of massacre victims, their return to their families, and their ritual reburial, in effect repatriating them to their communities. Although the exhumation of massacre victims and other “disappeared” is seen by many as a fundamentally political act, it has deep spiritual significance for the families and communities to which the dead are returned. The recovery of the dead is invested with deep meaning that reaches beyond simple emotional relief. In the words of Fredy Peccerelli (2013), the director of Guatemala's forensic institute, the recovery of the dead brings not closure but empowerment.

While the truth commissions and peace accords have been influential in framing the public debates that have helped establish Guatemala's fragile civil society since the end of the war in 1996, they also paved the way for more local and personal expression of mourning and memory, especially in Maya areas, where state-sponsored violence exacted such a disproportionately heavy toll. In some respects, posttraumatic stress and unresolved grief among the Maya manifests itself as it does in every population, through crippling self-blame, profound anger, interpersonal problems, and continuing and unresolved bereavement. In their work on genocide and collective violence, David Lorey and William Beezley (2002: xv) describe a “cultural history of remembering,”

by which they mean the “symbols, ritual, language, and use of public spaces in coming to terms with episodes of collective violence and achieving national reconciliation.”

The issue of justice remains somewhat outside the discussion here, although it is obviously central to a larger discussion of trauma. Frank Afflitto and Paul Jesilow’s (2007) *The Quiet Revolutionaries* speaks precisely to this issue, including the fluid nature of perceptions of justice and the varied ways in which surviving family members (the “quiet revolutionaries” of the title) seek legal redress for wrongs done to their loved ones. In Guatemala the wheels of restorative justice have moved slowly or not at all. This, inevitably, has led to an additional round of disappointment and frustration for powerless people; thus they are more likely to seek remedies at a local level, where community epistemologies and traditional understandings provide more satisfying results. It is at the local level that people have perhaps been most effective in seeking out remedies and continuing to come to grips with the long-term effects of collective violence on their communities. A key aspect of this includes helping to reconcile the dead within the complex Maya worldview, specifically through dreams. This is not to suggest that ladino victims of the war are less afflicted by trauma or haunted by their dreams but simply to say that this is a rather different story.

DREAMING OF THE DEAD

Dreams may be revelatory and prophetic; they may bring good or bad omens and can guide personal destiny. In Maya culture, spirits and beings of many varieties appear in dreams: earth lords, year-bearers in the solar calendar, dwarf gamekeepers, owners of mountains and volcanoes, giants (sometimes blond and gringo-like in appearance), ancestors and dead relatives, and other supernatural beings (B. Tedlock, 1992: 455). Shamans, bonesetters, and midwives are often called to their vocations in dreams, where they may also learn the specialized epistemologies of their trades: the use of herbs, special prayers, the meanings of sacred stones, and other types of esoteric knowledge (B. Tedlock, 1992: 456). Under normal circumstances, village daykeepers (*ajk’ij* in K’iche’) serve as the interpreters of dreams, who can both divine meaning and prescribe remedies for dreams that are obscure or troubling or that demand specific ritual rectification (Colby and Colby, 1981).

So important are dreams that sleeping partners in Maya communities regularly wake one another up to discuss and dissect dreams, while dutiful traditional Maya mothers quiz their children about their dreams every morning (B. Tedlock, 1987: 120). In contrast to dreams in the Western psychoanalytical tradition, Maya dreams are progressive: they foretell the future rather than reiterate the past (Basso, 1987: 87; B. Tedlock, 1992: 458). So salient are dreams in Maya spirituality that dream interpretation has fallen under attack from evangelical pastors (who consider it the work of the devil) and from Catholic Action (which deems it superstition), although some Mayan evangelicals valorize dreams as a direct conduit for God’s voice (see Caballeros and Annacondia, 2001; Molesky-Paz, 2006: 155).

According to the ethnolinguist Barbara Tedlock, whose study of the language has helped unlock much of the Maya's rich interior life for outsiders, dreams are understood to fall under three "rules": they may represent the reverse of what may happen in real life, represent reality metaphorically or metonymically, or predict the future (B. Tedlock, 1981: 313). Vicente Stanzone (2003: 50) describes dreams as a liminal space "where the past becomes present and that present knowledge is passed on into the future." Dreams of the dead would fall into a fourth category, being perceived as visitations rather than allegorical representations or wish fulfillment. Tedlock distinguishes between "intertextual" dreams, which embody the myths, symbolism, and expectations that are unique to a given culture, and "contextual" dreams, which are affected by the particular events and circumstances of a given dreamer's life (B. Tedlock, 1992: 468). Dreams and dream interpretation remain a vital element of the Maya worldview today, and nowhere is this more evident than with regard to the dead, who return to terrestrial life through dreams to advise and guide but also cajole and disquiet their loved ones. As Afflitto and Jesilow (2007: 65) note, "Traditional Indians assign profound levels of cosmological and existential significance to dreams; they serve as mechanisms to facilitate the visitation of beings from the spirit world or as a means of telepathic communication via spirit means." While *ladinas/os* also report the visitation of loved ones in dreams and often use these encounters to determine whether a disappeared person lived or died, Maya dreams give greater credence to the agency of the dead in grieving and reconciliation with the past.

LIVING AMONG THE DEAD

Most Maya today believe that the dead live out their afterlife in a place that is some variation on the Christian heaven. The ancient sacred text known as the *Popol Vuh* describes the afterworld as Xibalba, the dominion of the gods, where the dead dwelt until they could be absorbed into the cosmic life force (D. Tedlock, 1996). The anthropologist Duncan Earle (1986: 143) has observed that in parts of El Quiché some K'iche Maya believe in a bifurcated afterlife that reflects both Christian and Classic Mayan belief systems—half of the soul goes to the underworld (El Mundo) while the other half is reborn after a prescribed period of time in one's immediate descendants. Garrett Cook (2000: 164) describes the floor of the local church and the Stations of the Cross (where the dead are commonly buried) in Santiago Momostenango as serving as a door or gateway to Xibalba, the underworld "inhabited both by the dead and liminal beings," including entities from earlier world orders. The afterlife is a "mirror" of the terrestrial world and preserves its authority and hierarchies. Thus dead elders or relatives retain their status after death (Earle, 1986: 143).

The dead do not cease to exist, then, but live in a realm—heaven—where they maintain an interest in their loved ones in the temporal world. This afterlife communion includes both the long-dead (for example, among the Q'eqchi' of Alta Verapaz, the Classic Maya of antiquity are closely associated with the powerful mountain spirits [Wilson, 1995: 80–121]) and the recently dead, who remain members of the extended family with all the pleasures and tensions that

that implies. Communication with the dead takes place regularly in dreams, in which they come to guide, comfort, scold, warn, and reprimand the living (Sparks, 2002). The twentieth day of the Maya calendar cycle (which is still used by many people today) is dedicated to remembering the dead (EPICA, 1996). They are honored and remembered by name, starting with the most recently dead and going back for as many generations as human memory permits (Cook, 1986: 146–147).

RECOVERING THE DEAD

The scorched-earth campaign that left so many tens of thousands of Maya dead or presumed dead posed a special set of metaphysical problems. The nature of the violence that took place during that period and the logistics of counterinsurgency often involved the kidnapping and disappearance of loved ones without the return of a body or any certainty as to its disposition. The Guatemalan military used disappearance as a strategy for avoiding questions about torture or other violations of the rule of law that might have threatened their efforts to subdue the insurgency. The use of forced disappearances and death squads was not a byproduct of counterinsurgency but a specific strategy of it, having as its goal not merely the extermination of politically troublesome individuals but also the subjugation of the general population through fear, intimidation, and psychological pain (Figueroa, 1991).

The psychological effects of a loved one's disappearance are unusually pernicious. Survivors may obsess about the lost one's imagined condition of imprisonment or suffering, or they may have unrealistic expectations of reunion even after a very long period of time. Afflitto and Jesilow (2007: 62) write, for example, of a woman who ran outside every afternoon at dusk for more than 15 years to see if her sons were at last returning from the fields. Others have found relief in coming to the realization that their loved ones are dead and free from torture and suffering. Yet even this sense of finality can easily be rattled by uncertainty about when and how loved ones died, whether and how they suffered (far from friends and family), and where and how they were buried.

A further problem was that during La Violencia the army engaged in multiple massacres, killing large numbers of civilians who were thought to be or sometimes actually were sympathetic to the guerrillas. After the massacres, while the survivors fled to the hills, the soldiers typically buried the bodies of the victims in unmarked mass clandestine graves. (In 2007 Guatemala had 170 registered "clandestine" cemeteries, a figure that does not include all "ordinary" massacre sites or the large number of common graves located on military installations [Afflitto and Jesilow, 2007: 69].) When the survivors returned, although they knew without a doubt that their loved ones were dead (having often witnessed their murder), they did not know—or, more commonly, were afraid to identify—the locations of their graves and could not, therefore, give them proper burial.

The ritualized disposition of the body of a loved one has important religious and psychological implications in nearly every culture, but in the Maya context proper burial also helps to ensure a happy afterlife and good ongoing relations

with the living. Without proper burial, souls are caught between life and afterlife, in the anthropologist Linda Green's (1999: 77) description "condemned in time between death and the final obsequies." Thus uncertainty about the death or the location of the body of a loved one leaves both the living and the dead in a liminal state that can be worse than death, a source of great anguish on either side of the great divide (Suazo, 2002). I first became aware of this phenomenon around 2007 while speaking with survivors from Baja Verapaz, who invited me to come and hear death testimonies from their hamlet near Río Negro, where, they reported, there were many dead. Without according the dead their proper status, survivors are unable to establish the postlife relations with them that are essential to the maintenance of family and community coherence and equilibrium.

THE PROCESS OF MOURNING

Elizabeth Jelin and Susana Kaufman (2002: 33), writing about Argentina, note that "a disappearance is a very special kind of wound. What disappears is a human being, a body, but also knowledge and information. Those close to the victim . . . could only say that something happened but could not clearly say what." Women, in particular, seemed to suffer from depression after a death, and they reported imperative dreams about lost fathers and husbands from which they could find no relief until the bodies were located and given proper burial. In the anthropologist Judith Zur's (1998: 224) words, "The armed forces literally expelled people from the world of the living, but as death was not expelled, the spirits cannot be disposed of—they form a new sort of patrol, becoming another terrifying presence, persecuting the living." Therefore exhumation and proper reburial are particularly important. Although communication with the dead does not cease with exhumation, it becomes less painful. We see this clearly demonstrated in a case in which a deceased little girl appeared in a dream to tell her mother just before her clothing was found in a mass grave to say, "Thank you, Mommy, now I am free" (Suazo, 2002: 36). In this context, exhumation and reburial become less an act of closure for the living than a new beginning for the dead.

Between 1992 and 2003 the Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala (Guatemalan Foundation of Forensic Anthropology—FAFG) exhumed 284 massacre grave sites in Guatemala, providing evidence for 669 of the massacres recorded by the CEH (FAFG, 2004). By 2013 the team had recovered the remains of 55,000 people, which it estimates to be only a fraction of the total to be exhumed over the next 10 years. One hundred forty-three of the early exhumation sites were in the Department of El Quiché, a predominantly indigenous region that had borne the brunt of the violence in the early 1980s. The team was originally established by the renowned U.S. forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow and manned by forensic specialists who had been trained to do similar work in Argentina; it is now directed by Fredy Peccerelli, a Guatemalan-American whose family fled Guatemala to avoid the very violence that the FAFG now investigates. By the FAFG's (2012b) definition, a massacre "is an arbitrary mass execution, either selective or indiscriminate, of five or more people at the same time and in the same place. The victims are defenseless—

either completely or relatively, in comparison to the victimizer—at the time of the attack.”

Although the pace of the massacre excavations has slowed over time, the FAFG continues to work on such projects and remains actively involved in the identification of the remains. Its focus has shifted from the exhumation of massacre sites to the discovery of mass graves in which bodies were dumped by the security forces over a relatively long period of time. It makes a distinction between disappearances in rural and in urban areas, noting that in urban areas the security forces took great pains to obscure their identity, while in rural areas they did not. The discovery of the first of four enormous mass graves of unidentified people in Guatemala City’s La Verbena cemetery in late 2009, from which nearly 13,000 bodies have been unearthened, underscores the extent to which political violence transcended geographic boundaries and blurs the lines between individual disappearances and massacres.² Other clandestine mass graves have been unearthened in rural areas (especially in and around major military bases) as well as regional cities such as Escuintla, Amatitlán, and Antigua (FAFG, 2012a). In 2010 alone, the FAFG conducted 119 such exhumations (FAFG, 2012c).

THE RITUALS OF REBURIAL

After the forensic material is recorded from a mass grave, the bodies are prepared for reburial. The rituals of reburial are threefold, involving the Christian requiem ritual, traditional Maya rituals for commemorating the dead and purification, and the erection of a public monument of some sort. The following description is a composite drawn from the 1997 documentary *Rub’el Kurus*, produced by the Centro Ak’ Kutan, on the reburials that took place in Alta Verapaz and El Quiché:

The process of exhumation is, even in its first steps, a community ritual; villagers work together to clear the brush covering the grave before the team begins its work. When the first bodies are found, a Maya priest offers prayers for the dead and burns incense to help carry the prayers up to heaven. Family members offer prayers at the grave site (FAFG, 2004). After the bodies are identified, either at the grave site or at one of the FAFG’s laboratories in Guatemala City, the remains are placed in individual ossuaries and returned to the families in the village. When it is time for the community-wide funeral, the bodies, in small caskets covered with the treasured hand-woven textiles usually placed over the newly dead, are carried through the streets of the village in a public procession, their presence “proclaiming a truth hidden for many years” (FAFG, 2004). A requiem Mass is celebrated at the local Catholic church, and the full names of the dead are read aloud.³ (The reading of each name is critical because it helps restore humanity, dignity, and individuality to a massacre victim.) The dead are declared to be martyrs, which places them in an exalted position within the communion of the saints. They are then taken at last to their final rest in the local cemetery. (In some cases, massacre victims are reinterred in their original grave site but properly this time, with respect and full identification.)

Next, led by the priest, the community goes in procession to the site of the massacre, where the survivors, led by a shaman and sometimes members of the

religious brotherhood, preside over the Maya aspect of the ritual. They offer prayers, candles, incense, and drumming to honor the dead and to purify the site. Next the community may raise an enormous white cross that some of the men have carried to the site on their shoulders, pouring concrete around its base so that it will serve as a permanent reminder of what happened in this place. On the cross are written the names and dates of birth of all who died, along with the date of the massacre. Finally the group slowly and silently returns to the church.

LETTING THE DEAD “SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES”

Because of the Maya’s belief that they can converse with the dead, we have an additional source of documentary material that sheds light on the significance of violent, unresolved death for individuals and their communities. These are the reported words of the dead themselves, who clearly articulate the challenges implicit in the lack of resolution of their deaths and their desire to be restored to their proper place in the cosmos. In the following dreams, most of them recorded by the FAFG as part of the forensic record at specific massacre sites, the dead “speak for themselves”:

In Don Juan’s dream a woman appears who was brought up out of a clandestine grave. She gets up, grabs her dishes and clothes, and goes over to her family members who are at the edge of the grave. She pulls back her hair from her face and says with happiness in her voice, “¡*Vamos!*—let’s go!” [CMC, 2004]

Don Marcelo lost his wife and son in a massacre. . . . He could not bury them in a dignified place because he had to flee to save himself at the time they were killed. Sometimes he dreams of his woman. He sees her from far off, pretty and young. He wants to speak to her, but he cannot. After the exhumation, Don Marcelo dreams again of his wife. She is closer now. He says to her: “Pardon me, my wife, but I have married someone else.” “Don’t worry,” she replies. “I am glad that your wife is there to look out for you; give her my thanks.” [CMC, 2004]

Don Domingo’s mother has appeared to him various times since her death. Before the exhumation, she came to him to complain: “Son, this old house is no good, I’m very cold.” Don Domingo suspected that she was probably right, since she was buried in a clandestine cemetery where the sun never shone. During the days on which the exhumation was taking place, he dreamed again of his mother, and this time she said to him, “Son, please, when they take me out of my old house, don’t invite a lot of people over, because I am ashamed.” After her body was exhumed but just before her proper reburial, his mother spoke to Don Domingo again: “Son, when you take me over to the new house, invite many people—throw a party!” [CMC, 2004]

A woman lost her husband, son, and three brothers-in-law. The husband came to her in a dream and revealed to her that he was dead and asked that she pay for Catholic masses for the repose of his soul. But the son and brothers-in-law were still alive. [Afflitto and Jesilow, 2007: 65]

After the second unsuccessful effort to exhume Isabel’s father-in-law, Don Sebastián, and her son Domingo, Don Sebastián appeared to her in a dream.

She saw two figures dressed in white. One of them asked her, "Is my son [Isabel's husband] here?" "No, he went to work," Isabel told the figure. Her father-in-law responded, "Tell him thank you, thank you very much for looking for me, for wanting to give me my place. But tell him not to give up and forget me. It's just that I am here, only I am a little farther up." Upon arising the next morning, Isabel immediately looked for her mother-in-law to tell her about the dream. This made them very content. The bodies were soon exhumed a few meters up from where the forensic team had been working, just as Don Sebastián had told them they would be. [FAFG, 2004]

Doña Pascuala and her daughter Dominga were near us [on the forensic team] when we were working in Río Blanco. They asked us to exhume Don Domingo, their husband and father. We had to tell them that we did not have time to do it because we were working at a different site a little farther away. In the night, Dominga dreamed of her father. She saw a person dressed in white descending into a deep gully. He said, "Daughter, don't be afraid, come down. Don't be afraid. I'm going to help you." Upon arising, she told her mother about the dream. They decided to visit the place that Dominga had dreamed about and leave flowers for the father. They went to the place where they thought he was buried. Doña Pascuala said, "If you dreamed that you have to go down there, then we will go down." They went down into the gully. Underneath some branches they found clothes and skeletal remains. They were convinced that it was their loved one. They told the son to guard the place while they went to find the police. While waiting for them to come back, the boy fell asleep. He dreamed of his father, who said, "Son, you have seen my clothes. You have seen that it's me." [FAFG, 2004]

CONCLUSION: REST IN PEACE

The exhumation and reburial of Maya bodies from the massacres of the 1980s clearly serves a political purpose, which is to provide evidence and moral ballast to the emerging metanarrative of Guatemala's recent political past. The exhumations are a transnational process, often employing foreign scientists and partially funded by a constellation of international agencies. By literally digging up its skeletons, Guatemala is engaging in what the historian Robert Moeller (1996: 1008) has called (in reference to Germany) a "search for a usable past," in which the nation can wrest some kind of meaning out of its national trauma and thus move forward into a better and more just future.

As is the case in many places with a recent traumatic history, the process of constructing a usable past for Guatemala is more about politics than it is about bringing "justice" or satisfaction to the war's many victims. During the Ríos Montt trial, public buses traversed the country with large signs bearing conflicting messages paid for by politicians and interest groups: "No hubo genocidio (There was no genocide)" and "Sí hubo genocidio (Yes there was genocide)." Even 30 years after the violence, Maya bodies—or the purported absence thereof—demarcate the fault lines of Guatemala's political reality.

Dealing with the dead cannot fail to be a priority, especially in Maya culture, where neither the dead nor the living can move on until some of the problems described above have been resolved. But the discourse that appears in the dream narratives suggests that the exhumations do indeed provide relief and

some sense of empowerment to survivors, who can now be sure of exactly what happened to their loved ones. Confidence in the fidelity and reality of communication through dreams with the dead clearly helps to alleviate their grief.

Afflitto and Jesilow (2007: 66) argue that expectations of human behavior regarding bereavement are culturally specific. "Perceived dream communications and relative frequency of ruminations about the missing family members may represent constructive and adaptive coping mechanisms at work, especially for traditional Guatemalans, as opposed to being signs of compromised mental health or symptoms of distress." In some cases, as we have seen, the dead go so far as to instruct their loved ones not only to get on with their lives but to do so with joy. This is not to say that bereavement disappears but simply that it becomes a thing of the past. Exhumation and reburial open up social and emotional spaces in individual lives and communities where healing of a sort can begin.

It should come as no surprise that dreams play a large part in this process. "One result of the civil war on Maya people . . . [was] an increased emphasis on dreams and visions that enabled them to stay in touch with their own ancestors and the sacred earth on which they live (B. Tedlock, 1992: 471). Tedlock suggests that the revitalization of essential Maya spiritual expression—dreams and their interpretation—seemed to play an essential role in Maya revitalization at large and to promise a return to a "purer" Maya religious expression that predated even the conquest. As an informant explained to the anthropologist Diane Nelson around 1990, "I used to speak against traditional religion. We used to be the worst destroyers of our own culture. But now that I'm more involved, I understand the barbarity I committed and the need to support our traditions" (Nelson, 1991: 14).

It makes sense, then, that in this context the dead would need to be direct and articulate participants in the framing of a new intertextual dream imaginary that emerged around the political project of massacre exhumations. Here, the dead speak not only to bring comfort to themselves and their families but also to bring shame and accountability to those who killed them. Thus the dream narratives of the dead are at once deeply personal and profoundly political: the dreams provide unsolicited testimony to violence, and the dead themselves serve as not-so-mute witnesses to the atrocities that ended their lives.

That this final goal remains elusive is in some ways immaterial: time is on the side of the dead, who have all eternity to wait for justice. Dream testimony has no place in the Guatemala's long march to justice—the idea that the dead can speak on their own behalf falls too far outside the rational norms of legal and scientific proof to serve as any kind of admissible juridical evidence. But in the Maya spiritual world the voices of the dead, combined with the weight of collective rituals for reburial and mourning, have immense power to help wounded people begin to heal and seek justice. The presence of the dead in the process has been a comfort, the fulfillment of the contextual dreams about which Tedlock writes, and through the dreams the dead themselves actively contribute to the creation of historical memory. As an FAFG report poetically described the recovery of the villages of Chuchucá, Zacapula, and El Quiché: "The cornfield is blooming; the memories are blooming, watered by the rain of grief and sadness, and many questions that, little by little, begin to have an

answer. Hope also blooms; the green cornfield announces it" (FAFG, 2004). Both the dead and the living may now begin to rest in peace.

NOTES

1. The word "ladino" is deeply contested, as it can be both a cultural definition (i.e., an indigenuous person who abandons an indigenous "lifestyle") and a form of "ethnic" identity, referring to a person who is biologically of mixed indigenous and European descent. I am using the term here simply to mean anyone who does not identify him- or herself as indigenous.

2. Not all the bodies in the La Verbena common mass graves are the victims of political murders; they appear to have been used for many decades and also include paupers and other unidentified corpses.

3. Evangelicals may often take part in these rituals, although they will generally not attend a mass.

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