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# what are the dead made of? exhumations and the materiality of indigenous social worlds in postgenocide guatemala

carlota mcallister

Guatemala's landscape is littered with an especially macabre variety of ossuary. From 1960 to 1996, a civil war there claimed some 250,000 civilian lives. Half of those were taken from 1981 to 1983, when the military embarked on a scorched earth counterinsurgency campaign in the mostly Mayan Western highlands, perpetrating what a United Nations-sponsored truth commission ruled were "acts of genocide" in the process. After centuries of dispossession and discrimination at the hands of the state and non-indigenous Guatemalans, rural Mayan communities had proven fertile grounds for guerrilla organizations seeking logistical and ideological support. Moving from community to community, soldiers worked to separate this life-giving water from the insurgent fish by killing everyone they encountered—men, women, children, and the elderly alike. The bodies of the murdered were then thrown into mass graves, which the earth's transfigurative agencies slowly converted into repositories of skeletons.

Forensic anthropologists began to open these repositories in 1991. They have never stopped since, and at the current pace their work is projected to continue for decades more. Although exhumations have been performed in many countries emerging from war, sometimes on a much larger scale than in Guatemala, no other country has produced such a slow and steady drip of bones over time. In this way, skeletons draped in the vestiges of distinctively indigenous clothing and sometimes

accompanied by living indigenous people have become internationally legible icons of Guatemala's shameful recent past (Figure 1). Questions about the relationship among this past, the present it produced, and the futures toward which Guatemalans, particularly Mayans, might hope to orient themselves, have in many respects become matters of what Vincent Brown (2008) calls "mortuary politics," an intertwining of the fate of the living with the agencies of the dead.

The power of Guatemala's skeletons to bear witness to horror comes from the notion that "the dead don't lie," in a phrase that Dr. Clyde Snow, the father of human rights forensic anthropology and the founder and mentor of Guatemala's principal forensic anthropology team,<sup>1</sup> was wont to repeat. Much forensic science studies processes in soft tissues, but forensic anthropology works exclusively with bones. Although the hardness of this material limits the conclusions that can be drawn from it, it has the virtue of couching those that can be drawn in what seems like an especially immutable material language.<sup>2</sup> And while clues to the identity of a particular set of bones are difficult to see without osteological training, many signs of violence – a machete cut or a bullet hole, a severed limb or vertebra – are disturbingly perceptible.<sup>3</sup> Not only do the dead not lie, therefore, they seem to speak their truth with a rare and forceful simplicity.

Giving voice to this truth has been an important and often dangerous project for those challenging the stranglehold that the perpetrators of genocide maintain over Guatemala, and it has achieved some notable successes. But calling this truth forth can also generate significant distress, even among those who willingly participate in the process. Exhumations also serve to return the dead to those who mourn them, a function, I suspect, that is often as important for the living as any forensic one, since the dead tend to harrow those closest to them with dreams or hauntings in which they demand rectification of their improper burial. Yet the efforts of the living to address—or, conversely, to ignore—such demands are difficult to accommodate within the parameters of forensic anthropology. This is not because Guatemalan forensic anthropologists have failed to recognize survivors' spiritual and cultural concerns or their ultimate ownership of the remains; in fact, they stand out globally among their colleagues for their efforts to respect survivor communities. But a science that locates the agency of the dead in their bones also intervenes, however unwittingly, in disputes that helped animate the events that turned living people into skeletons.

It was long a prerogative of the Mayan dead, even, or perhaps especially when properly laid to rest, to reprimand the living for failings in realms as

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FIG 1

Indigenous women pray at a mass grave in San Andrés Semetabaj, Guatemala. Photograph copyright Jorge Uzon.

diverse as land ownership and use, sexual behavior, commercial transactions, ritual obligations, and general social mores. The dead claimed this prerogative not as individuals, but as the ancestors, the *abuelos*, *qatit qamam* (our grandmothers our grandfathers, in Maya-K'iche'). The ancestors were the true owners of the land, an ownership signaled by small stone altars in many corn fields and larger ones at important sites in the landscape where the living were invited to pay the dead their due. But under this regime the dead were invisible and intangible, materialized, I was told, only as "air," with all the ubiquity and unmanageability that implies. The language in which they were wont to express themselves was equally difficult to grasp, one of the signs inscribed on and in the bodies of the living as tingles, injuries, sicknesses, or misfortunes, needing expert interpretation and ritual mediation, often at considerable expense, to be heeded.

After 1954, when a CIA-backed coup overthrew Guatemala's democratically elected president for introducing a land reform and with it—at least in febrile Cold War imaginations—the specter of Communism, this older mortuary politics came under sustained attack. Into Guatemala's rural areas the Catholic Church deployed priests and religious, many of them from Franco's Spain, to retrieve its souls from the specter's grasp. The new arrivals were horrified by the poverty they encountered, recognizing its potential for producing rural unrest. But they blamed it on the equally horrifying idolatry they read into the regime described above, accusing the cult of the ancestors of encouraging

the waste of money and energy on ritual goods and "debauched" celebrations and legitimating a gerontocracy that benefitted from the caste subordination of indigenous people (Diocese of Quiché 1994). The massive wave of missionizing and conversion to more orthodox Catholicism that followed was, in the title of Douglas Britnall's ethnography of its effects on one community, a veritable "revolt against the dead" (1979). The priests worked to generate what Kay Warren (1989) describes as a process of interiorization, relocating spirituality within the worshipper, one that also required exteriorizing agencies that could not be easily accommodated within the individual out into nature. The dead, once their immortal soul had fled, were reframed as mere flesh and bones, matter to be respectfully disposed of and mourned, but not granted powers of ongoing engagement. Meanwhile, the worlds and landscapes that engagement with the dead had sustained began to fall away, very hurtfully for some of the living.

The young men who were the champions of this revolt eventually became the critical interlocutors for guerrilla groups hoping to indigenize their struggle (Konefal 2010, McAllister 2008). The Church's reordering of interior and exterior helped midwife a *conciencia*—Spanish for both conscience and consciousness—that also allowed them to master the "coincidence of the changing of circumstances and the changing of human activity or self-changing" that Marx (1964 [1845], 651) describes as the practice of revolution by learning to exteriorize and act upon the conditions of their

oppression in more radical terms than those of social Catholicism. But mastering a practice does not necessarily mean mastering all its outcomes. In Chupol, a community that was known in the late 1970s as the “Vietnamese village” for the revolutionary enthusiasm with which its members constructed earthworks to hide arms and combatants, modeled on the tunnels of Cu Chi outside Saigon, the dead were eventually exhumed from pits the villagers themselves had dug, impaled on stakes the villagers had sharpened for enemy soldiers.

Given the propensity of the dead to intervene in matters of sin, injury, and reckoning with the past, it should come as no surprise that the relationship between such disasters and the revolts that preceded them comes up for discussion when their bones are made to speak. Often the intra-community conflicts that tend to surround exhumations are read by forensic anthropologists and human rights activists as motivated by political differences traceable to positions taken during the war itself. Supporters of the insurgency are understood as supporters of human rights work, and thus exhumations, while those who allied themselves with the state, often joining in the persecution of guerrilla supporters, are quite logically understood as opposed to exhumations. This characterization may be broadly reasonable. But it risks dismissing the moral and political seriousness of deeper currents of ontological trouble as manifestations of simple individual interest, and thus of reactivating those currents.

What should one make, for example, of the man who asked his neighbor who had lost six family members including both his parents what he planned to do with their bones, maybe make soup out of them? Was it a veiled threat, simple cruelty, an honest question, or all three at once? Another man not only lost 11 family members to the same massacre, but then spent six days fishing their bodies out of the river where they were tossed by soldiers, so they could be properly buried. When their exhumation took place 15 years later, however, he refused to participate or even to give blood for DNA testing to identify their remains, on the grounds that he was an evangelical Protestant. “I have nothing against the exhumation,” he told me as he led me on the five-hour walk out of the community. “But the river took them; let the river give them back.” It would be tendentious to see this renunciation of the claim of the bones on the dead and the claim of the dead on the living as a guilty cover-up.

On the contrary, such renunciations suggest that the questions raised by Guatemala’s ossuaries cannot be circumscribed by its contemporary mortuary politics. The ambivalent agency of bones that

can speak but only of their own abjection and murder both reflects and produces other ambivalences regarding the materiality of indigenous social worlds five centuries after the Conquest. In the wake of genocide, both recent and quincennial, not only exhumations, but also weddings, funerals, improved cooking stove projects, modes of travel, gender relations, criminal behavior, and myriad other matters are inflected by conflicts over how best to defend what *qawinaq*, our people, have retained from those who went before, *qatit qamam* – what threatens that legacy, how its current threats relate to those of the past, to whom demands for its protection should be addressed, and above all what is its substance. Exhumed bones remind the living that the question of what the dead are made of has not yet been settled, and that nothing, perhaps, can be settled without it.

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> I spent six months in 1997–1998 working as a volunteer on a number of exhumations with this team, the Foundation for Forensic Anthropology in Guatemala (FAFG), and then spent 14 months doing fieldwork in a Maya-K’iche’ community, Chupol, Chichicastenango, where the FAFG performed an exhumation in January 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Actually, as Dr. Snow always emphasized, bones are not only breakable but highly malleable: their plasticity produces many of the variations that forensic anthropology analyzes.

<sup>3</sup> Some forms of violence, of course, sexual violence, for example, leave no osteological traces.

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