Material and imagined traces of the dead: Landscape and Human Remains in Guatemala's Exhumations/Re-inhumations

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Material and imagined traces of the dead: Landscape and Human Remains in Guatemala's Exhumations/Re-inhumations[1]

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In Guatemala, 30 years after the country's armed conflict, forensic anthropology teams[2] continue to search for the dead and conduct exhumations. This work engages directly with the peace process, the affirmation of truth and the "dignification" of victims initiated after the 1996 Peace Accords. The *altiplano* (highlands), where most of the massacres took place, is dotted with graves hidden underground. While no commemorative monument marks the public space, due to lack of State-sponsored transitional justice process. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Guatemala, focussed on the techniques and practices within the exhumation process, we will question here the place of the dead in the Guatemalan landscape and its relation with the memory process. What does the dead's presence do to the landscape before exhumation? Do it totally disappears after the remains was exhumed?

Between 1960 and 1996, the Guatemalan conflict confronted guerrilla movements against several successive military governments. However, the majority of the victims were indigenous Maya people. Truth Commission reports 200,000 dead and disappeared, a shocking figure for a small country of about 11 million inhabitants at the time. This is the result of a terror policy applied by the army, For whom Indigenous inhabitants of rural areas were especially suspect of subversion, as a consequence of

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[2] I will use the term « forensic anthropology » in its american acceptation : it includes both forensic archeology and forensic anthropology, as well as the speciality of social anthopology in Guatemala.

ingrained representations associated with the figure of the “Indian” and because of the economic and social disparities, in a country where racism and discrimination are deeply rooted in the power structure. The majority of the victims were massacred by the military, and buried unceremoniously at the same place they were killed, during the decade between the 70s and the 80s. The extreme violence against unarmed indigenous civilians, however, raised awareness in the international community. At the end of the 1980s, the pressure exerted on the military government led to the holding of democratic elections, then to the establishment of a Peace Process. The Guatemalan Peace Process took place in a period of political transitions in Latin America, [a period] of reconfiguration in peace-building and post-conflict practices worldwide. Articulated with the model of Truth Commission, forensic anthropology was taking a more and more important role in Argentina, foreshadowing a Latin American model that would soon be applied in former Yugoslavia.

Guatemalan first official forensic team was founded in 1997. Initially, the task assigned to forensic anthropologists was one of producing historical knowledge and scientific evidence, with the option to build a case for genocide charge. Physical evidence from the mass graves would support testimony gathered by truth commissions. However, the power structure remained little changed in the newly democratic government. The State never achieved either the national recognition of the victims or the persecution of perpetrators, at any level. Meanwhile, as they acknowledge that legal justice or symbolic reparations to victims would not be implemented, the forensic experts experienced the diversity of massacres sites. At the beginning of the exhumations, their work was focus on emblematic worksites: large mass graves, resulting of large-scale massacre of hundreds of victims. But these are actually a minority among the modality of killing. Most of the victims belong in smaller graves. It was not uncommon for the army to bring a small group of captives into the hills surrounding their village, make them dig a grave before putting them to death and burry them. Sometimes, villagers would dig the graves for the captives, or a prisoner would escape. As a result, the locations of the mass graves are often known locally. As years goes by, information about grave is passed on or forgotten, assumptions become rumors. Rural communities victims of violence live in a landscape scattered by envisioned graves.

Once the exhumations began, the victims' families' requests to recover their loved ones became more insistent. In the following years, forensic practice transformed,

as the restitution of the remains became more and more central. With time, Guatemalan forensic teams became known internationally for their expertise not only in forensic science but also for their interaction with victims' families and their effective way to articulate scientific work and the symbolic dimension of exhumation as a "reparative" tool. It is a tedious work. At the date, forensic experts estimate that they exhumed about 15% of the remains. Guatemalan forensic has always been conducted independently, although within a judicial framework. Once the legal request granted, an exhumation process begins with the material confirmation that a supposed grave does contain remains. The forensic workers then identify the remains, before returning them to the family or the community to be taken care following the mourning rituals and buried in the cemetery. The path of the remains, from the mass grave to the cemetery is symbolically charged. As Zoe Crossland's work emphasizes, the exhumed remains passes from several status: archaeological and material evidence, disparate human remains, than remains of a dead individualized by what Layla Renshaw called the "affective identification [3] ". The transition constitutes a ritualized process of reincorporation. As such, archaeological exhumation is located within funerary rituals[4].

Crossland affirmation that "forensic practice establishes a bond of commonality with the efforts of mourners to understand and make sense of the death of their friends and relatives" is especially true in the Guatemalan context, where forensic experts are deeply involved with interacting with parents of victims. As a consequence, the path of the remains, from the mass grave to the re-burial in the legal cemetery resonates, for most actors, as a metaphor for an individual and social path to healing. The evocative force of the exhumations leads to a metonymic representation of mourning and social reparation. The uncovering of the bones symbolically mirrors the injunction for displaying the Truth after conflict. Their passage into the hands of judicial officers, the weakest part of the metaphor, should symbolize the return of a rule of law and citizen's rights. Their restitution to the families and the re-constitution of the parts to a representation of a human's body is the dignification of the dead and the consolation for the living. Finally, the vigil and the re-burial should signify the remade of the normal order of things, the setting in order of the world. As various work on the use of bones

[3] Layla Renshaw, 2010, « The scientific and affective identification of Republican civilian victims from the Spanish civil war », *Journal of Material Culture*, 15(4), p. 449-463.

[4] Zoe Crossland, « The Archeology of Contemporary Conflict », in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archeology of Ritual and Religion*, Timothy Insoll (éd.), Oxford, 2011, p. 285-306.

in post-conflict context emphasizes, the materiality of the remains is critical to their symbolic efficacy. Verdery's pioneer work state the "advantage of concreteness" that bodies possess[5]. However, their concreteness is experience by the relatives only for a short period of time and contrast with the absence of material sign of memorialization. By comparing two censuses carried out by the organization "Virtual Memory of Guatemala", one can realize the gap between the multiplicity of exhumations in the national territory and the scant supply of memorials. The organization counts 95 "memorials" in the national territory none of witch is a national monument. Most of them are tombs, commemorative plaque, or mural painting. A commemorative plaque and the tombs associated will be considered as two occurrences, making the number a large overestimation. Few of them are located in public space as the central plaza or in a street. The tangible memory of the dead remains mostly in the cemetery after their reburial.

To understand how the intangible presence of the dead inhabits living space in Guatemala, it is necessary to look at practices, interactions between inhabitants and places. These interactions, sometimes discreet or invisible, highlight the ambiguity of the relationship to the memory of the conflict. Nevertheless, they are a powerful tool for the identification of mass grave's location. The localization of the graves depends almost exclusively on testimonies. Technological instrument are not very effective in detecting collapsing or change in the Guatemalan landscape and no archive is available. Forensic experts have to relate on their own trained eyes and on the memories of inhabitants. Memories are rarely accurate after a laps of time of 30 years, but it was preserved by local practices. Some relatives lit candles or bring flowers at the supposed massacre site for years. The knowledge of some graves' emplacement was also kept in the local memory by the fact that nobody goes there. Such practices of devotion or avoidance mark the places and allow to remembering where the dead are. They resonate with the local relationship to the land in Mayan custom and other actual practices related to the exhumations.

In Indigenous region, such as the Ixil country, the forensic teams make it possible for the relatives to perform Mayan ceremonies before or after the graves are opened. These ceremonies are part of the various ritual innovations related to exhumations that have emerged since the 1990s, in a already syncretic religious

[5] Katherine Verdery, 1999. *The political lifes of dead bodies*, New York, Columbia university press.

landscape. Popular religion practices borrow from various ritual registers (Catholic, Mayan). A local Maya ritual specialist explained to me how important it was to ask permission to the earth before removing the remains. “The spirit [of the dead], he explained, doesn’t belong to the place. You have to move it from place to place, without [it] hurting anyone”. Ceremonies around the graves are similar with those performed before travelling, or entering certain sacred places. They relates to the beliefs associated with moving through the hills. “*They is good hills and bad hills,* the specialist continue, *some people got lost. My cousin Pedro’s father got lost 10 minutes from his house. He went up the hill, he got lost*”. Pedro, a local tourist entrepreneur who assist at the conversation, add: “*A volunteer from Germany got lost in the hills. She followed a path, then she wanted to go back on her steps... We haven't seen her for weeks. There are enchantments (encantos). It was stronger for her because she is foreign and she was alone. We called the spiritual guide to do a ceremony, we were worried*”. For relatives belonging in the *costumbre*, the traditional belief, the earth must above all be thanked for having welcomed and preserved the bodies. A long time interlocutor, doña Catarina described tome how they did a Mayan ceremony after the exhumation of her uncle (along with various other victims). “*We put flowers and candles, after the bones were gone. It shows love and care, she said, thankfulness for the soil. Because [the dead] were there accidentally, it wasn’t a cemetery*”. The representation of the presence of the dead in the ground is imbricated with the ambivalent local representations of the hills, in the mountainous landscape of the Ixil region, associate with protective entities, whose power can also carry danger, including near inhabited places or on known paths.

After the exhumation and the reburial of the remains, devotional practices move to the cemetery. Unlike the practice of visiting sites of supposed graves, the practice inside the cemetery is part of the ordinary ritual practice. Candles are lit for All’s Saints Day only, even if individual devotions can be observed on altars inside the family houses. However, the absence of practice at the exhumation site does not mean that the dead are totally absent. Recent works on the dead materiality have highlighted the ubiquity and mobility demonstrated by human remains, especially when they're fragmented, scattered, reduced to dust. I am thinking in particular of the work of Marita Sturken about Ground Zero where the “need to provide some kind of corporeal presence mediate the absence” led to transform the dust into a new kind od substance through

diverse manipulations[6]. In Guatemala's hills, the bodies of the victims decayed in the hill earth, and only their bones were exhumed to be moved. As such, part of their material substance merged to the land. It is to be noted that Forensic archaeologists pay particular attention to dust and soil when exhuming and examining the remains. When relatives come to visit the laboratory, they are always shown that no exhumed element is lost. When they clean the bones, dust "that may contain human fragments" is recovered and carefully retained[7]. It will be returned and placed inside the coffin with the bones. However, the capacity of the dead for ubiquity let open the possibility that part of them stay with the hill. It is especially the case when no remains are found in the location invested by local devotions. The attachment to place does not disappear after the search proves that no remains will be found. Relatives often continue to associate the memory of their loved ones with the envisioned grave, sometimes assuming someone moved them, or that the "land took them and they will not reappear".

As Joost Fontein observed in the case of Zimbabwe "[…] the remains and presence of different pasts in the landscape (as ghosts and ancestors, graves and ruins, […]) are 'active'. […] they materialize autochthony and belonging"[8]. In Guatemala, after the armed conflict provoked a lot of population displacement in the indigenous countryland, the re-burials are an affirmation of the attachment to the land. The relations between the dead and the place is apprehended in terms of both individual and ethnic identity. The identified victims are buried by their relative in the place they were born, but those who couldn't be individually identified are not always kept waiting for a formal identification, they are collectively buried in the community.

If the cemetery is supposed to be the final place to rest for the dead and the closure in the path to healing, the complexity of the war history led to juxtaposition of memory and meanings in one place. In the region if Nebaj, indigenous inhabitants refugiees in the hills around their native land have buried their dead in a small parcel, a few miles above the deserted village. After the end of the conflict, they reintegrated their houses and created a new cemetery in the same parcel, just beside the mass grave

[6] Marita Sturken, 2004, « The aesthetics of absence : rebuilding Ground Zero », American Ethnologist, vol. 31, p. 311-425.

[7] See Clara Duterme, 2019. « Les os et la poussière. Parcours et transformation des restes humains exhumés au Guatemala » dans Valeurs et matérialité, sous la direction de F. Keck, Paris, Presses universitaires de l'ENS.

[8] Joost Fontein, 2011. « Graves, ruins and belonging. Towards an anthropology of proximity », JRAI. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2011.01715.x

emplacement, where remains are exhumed today. The choice of this place is a strong reaffirmation of autochthony and belonging, and the presence of the dead contributed to formalize the consecration of the land. On the opposite, some of relatives will never have the possibility to receive the remains of their loved ones, because they are already buried inside the sacred land of a cemetery. During the 30 years that have passed, new dead were buried above the hidden remains. Their families refuse to bother their dead in order to exhume the old ones. Juxtaposition and superposition of strates of hidden, descreete or dangerous memories are common in the Altiplano landscape if you pay attention. The ambivalent relation to the past can be seen in the lived space, between silenced past and memory overlays. In the village of Cotzal, a large building, perched on a hill, dominate the main street. Today, it is a school which welcomes the children of the village and trains the future teachers. This hill has always been occupied. When the village was founded, it was the first cemetery. However, the locals remember this place as the military camp of the 1980s. After a guerrilla attack, the military abandoned it. As most of these camps do, the place probably contained the remains of some of the "disappeared". However, no exhumation was done there. In the first years after the conflict, the school was built on top of it. When the foundations were dug, the workers found many bones. They could have been from the old cemetery, or the missing relatives. Nobody know. All were buried in the cemetery, in a mass grave.

Through these examples, I have tried to show how the memory of the conflict and the dead permeate the Guatemalan landscape. Due to the lack of a State-sponsored transitional process, There is no national memorialization process nor any monument to symbolize this past. However, in areas marked by conflict, the living space is imbued with the presence of the dead, real or imagined. Far from being homogeneous, the places are impregnated with polysemic memories, which juxtapose or overlap each other. The memory of the dead associated with places is articulated with local representations of the land, especially the hills, which are simultaneously represented as dangerous and protective.