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Digging up Memories

The Value of the Word “Testimony” in Guatemala

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It is not possible to say who the first victim of terror in Guatemala was - from the early 20th Century, wave after wave of terror has bloodied the squares, streets and homes of hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans. A succession of political events enabled the country’s inhabitants to pin their hopes on an end to this night of terror – *spring in October*, the insurgent periods in the 1960s and 1980s and the signing of the peace agreements in 1996 were three attempts to achieve more peaceful social co-existence. These social efforts have not been enough to allow us to say who the last victim of the violence will be, but little by little the truth has been coming to light.

Last century was characterised by social victories that had to be wrenched from the transnationals and the oligarchy through blood and fire. The first half of the century was characterised by the modernisation of the country, its democratisation attempts, freedom of opinion and of the press, equality between men and women, the Labour Code and the right to assemble, the right to association and to participation in political and administrative life,

social security and the autonomy of municipalities and of the public university. Acknowledgement of the country's multiculturalism, human rights, the establishment of formal democratic structures and the struggle for demilitarisation of the power structures set the tempo for the last hot front of the cold war in the late 20th Century.

In 1991, after graduating from a regular school in the capital of the republic, I decided to study archaeology at the Universidad de San Carlos[1] in order to acquire the knowledge that would allow me to rediscover the splendour of the ancient Mayan civilisation through the study of its architectural remains. In 1995 I joined one of the forensic anthropology teams, which, with similar objectives, were carrying out excavations at places where massacres have taken place, retrieving bones and other remains from the ground, and collecting the testimonies of victims and survivors. It was very different from the job I had been trained to do. During my childhood I had been a witness to and victim of the process of "violence" that the country was undergoing. Several coup d'états and curfews accompanied my primary school studies. On a few occasions, military operations made us cancel holiday plans or trips to the country's interior, as it was unthinkable to travel in some places. However, it all seemed foreign and quite distant, nobody talked about it or they only spoke in whispers in the company of close, trusted friends. A very dear cousin disappeared from the family without a coherent explanation. Years later she returned, and told us she'd settled in Mexico. Without going into details, she told me that her distancing from the family had been "necessary", that her commitment to the "people's cause" had forced her to go into hiding and then find refuge in the neighbouring country. Little or nothing was said openly about the war, the combat, the disappearances, tortures, extrajudicial

executions and massacres that were happening on a daily basis, and that I would collect proof of years later. We were all silenced witnesses; in a way, many of us were accomplices to the impunity that is maintained to this day.

My first experience on the field was a fateful one: the concepts, theories and advice of people with more experience who told me how to behave and *what to do*, came up against a cruel reality: neither advice, nor recommendations, nor texts helped me to endure the harshness of the testimonies that we received every single day. Although at first it wasn't my specific job to "collect testimonies", the situation and the context meant that everybody became involved in the task. Dozens of people standing silently around the mass graves[2] watched the progress of the excavation that would unearth the bodies of their relatives, neighbours, fathers, mothers, siblings, children, friends, close and distant relatives, along with some of the truth that had been denied them for such a long time, and was then beginning to surface. The Committee for Historical Clarification (CEH) states: "During its field work, the CEH received testimonies that made it possible to document 626 massacres committed by State forces, principally the Army, in many cases supported by paramilitary structures such as the PAC [Civilian Self-Defence Patrols] and commissioned soldiers."[3] Most of the mortal victims of these massacres and those that followed as a result of them were buried in clandestine, illegal graves that mark special places in the cartography of memory: clandestine places where it is said that the dead *"have no peace"*. Any attempt to decipher this cartography takes us straight to the social nature of memory: "Memory can be viewed as a symbolic representation of the past embedded in social action, as a set of practices and interventions, so that reaching a real understanding of how memory constitutes identities when social

relationships are formed entails a real understanding of the practical uses, the way it comes to structures perception, determines policies and explains certain situations."[4]

The indications provided by survivors, the testimonies offered by neighbours, and the systematic work of widows, orphans and disappeared persons associations, human rights organisations and teams of specialists have made it possible to exhume corpses from dozens of clandestine graves to date, many of them marked with "clandestine flowers" that had remained symbolically - each site surreptitiously marked, each remembered privately, in secret. In spite of the experience accumulated by the many exhumations we were asked to carry out and support from psychologists and the church, the task is slow and traumatic and we're far from being able to put the shovel away. There is an ever-present hope of finding the bodies of all persons who were murdered and disappeared, before the work of exhumation is officially complete in each place. For this reason, locals participate voluntarily regardless of creed or gender. They comb the area, they remember, they examine their memories for details, they watch in silence, they remember the victims, they close their eyes and try to mentally reconstruct what happened - the terror returns. The exhumation process
forces them to question that dark past, to remember death: *What was he wearing? How tall was she? How old? What happened? How many times did they hit her? How many hits with a machete? Where were you?* These are some of the questions that stir up people's memories. What is the point of stirring up history in this case? What's the point of reopening wounds? For many people it means acknowledging their past, to others it's "doing one's duty" by the dead, holding ceremonies, carrying out rituals, looking for justice, healing the soul, denouncing.

Doing one's duty by the dead

Death has a specific meaning among communities of Mayan descent. There is a permanent connection between the living and the dead, and the dead never lose their connection to "their people". Meanwhile, survivors commemorate the dead through special rites: dialogues in dreams maintain ongoing communication between the living and the dead, the dead ask favours, the living offer rituals, the ancestors look after communities and offer them protection. That's why in many cases, the exhumations were seen as a response to the dead asking for a fitting place in which to "rest", a legal "cemetery". Some of the graves were located on the basis of testimonies of people who had seen the dead walking around a specific spot. Everyone unanimously claims the right to put them in a place where they can be visited openly and without reservations, and where all kinds of ceremonies can be carried out.

"Victims" are usually tallied as people who died as a result of a violent act. In the case of Guatemala "victim" usually alludes to victims of extrajudicial executions, tortures, kidnappings or massacres. The survivors of these acts are rarely referred to - the men and women, fathers and mothers who fruitlessly roamed hospitals, police stations, prisons, barracks and morgues in search of their kidnapped sons and daughters. There's no mention of those who were widowed or orphaned, those who "escaped" death, fleeing from the repressive forces to the mountains, sidestepping persecution on river banks and gullies, defending their lives, exposed to rain, cold and hunger. Thousands of people returned dejected to their villages to try and remove the vestiges of death. Many tried to erase the images of terror, to distance themselves from memories. They, the survivors, are also victims. After preparing the anthropological reports we also attended the modest,

respectful burials of the remains found. The communities were fully involved, wanting to bear witness, now, to acts of truth – decent, fair, honourable burials. There were mixed feelings on the edge of decent graves, monuments to the truth, to faith, to the perseverance of the living and the dead. We should not forget to count among the victims those who lived through the terror and had to keep quiet, those who hid it while they went about their lives, those who had to endure while denying their history.

Perversely, as time passed the executioners continued to victimise the people, criminalising them, denying all the facts, justifying the barbarity. One exhumation after another, the truth came to light. At first, the spokespeople of the government in power at the time tried to deny the truth, saying that the executions never took place; when the (exhumed) bodies were presented, they maintained that they were guerrilla fighters killed in combat; when the signs of immobilisation and evidence of torture were shown they claimed these were isolated cases; when they were informed of large numbers of dead people, they maintained that these were involved in the conflict; when the bodies of pregnant women and children are dug up, and the intervention of the army comes to light, they are silent. Something has been achieved. The survivor that was branded a liar, manipulator or full of fantasies, has had his past returned to him through a painful process.

I've never heard a relative say or insinuate that the exhumations were unnecessary, but I have heard it from the murderers, public servants, army officers, commissioned soldiers, civil defence patrols and religious ministers from North American sects. No other actor has been as afraid of the truth as the executioners and their commanders. And so the truth gradually broke through. After the first testimonies, hundreds joined in, in the midst of intimidations, threats, mocking and negative comments that weren't just directed

at the people, but also the organisations that were dealing with the issue. Forensic experts, journalists, companions and leaders were threatened individually and collectively. There were anonymous letters, phone calls, emails, public declarations from army leaders... but the truth broke through, it was stronger.

Although it has always been stipulated that traditions are to be respected, that times for grieving, ceremonies and "sorrow" be respected, it's true that not all exhumation processes allow full identification of the necessary steps. In some cases, it was necessary to spend many days in contact with the people before they agreed to tell their story. In the first place, we're dealing with something that is not an everyday event for the communities. Secondly, there are time limits and limited resources and opportunities for accompaniment. The people know this – they are the compromises that are accepted in order to reach some degree of peace. This explains why the testimony collected to allow victims to be identified and events to be reconstructed involves a burden, insecurities and a degree of uncertainty. But when the time to talk presents itself and it's time for the truth to be told, then it is necessary to speak everything - one's own memories and those of others. The doubts and certainties, images, and words, which have been denied since the events took place, now emerge with clarity.

When I started this work, it never occurred to me that the exhumations would have such a strong effect on dignifying the victims, giving them back the value of the word that was officially denied them, giving witnesses the proof that something so terrible had never been a dirty trick of their imagination, and giving them a "safe" place in which to celebrate with their dead on special dates. This makes up for many things; it allows us to learn to hear "what people say" in a different way. Social memory is a network. Whether it is based on individual experience or not, testimony has

multiple values because it gives an account of the past. In the case of victim survivors of the massacres, just the simple fact of providing evidence of what happened allows them to feel stronger and recover the dignity they tried to take from them. Published testimonies also serve to move humanitarian solidarity by bringing attention to things that are not known, and they serve as an example: the testimonies of others demonstrates to those who have been quiet for so long that it is possible to talk. And so individual testimony strengthens, dignifies and forges solidarity; community testimony strengthens, dignifies and forges solidarities.

Giving a voice back

Different efforts to encourage and empower individual and collective testimony are not antagonistic. John Beverley says of the politics of truth: "One of the most important aspects of the peace process in Guatemala, as in other countries that have passed through similar experiences of genocide, is the work of forensic anthropology in reconstructing the massacres committed by the army and paramilitary forces during the counterinsurgency war. What Menchú in her testimonio and a forensic scientist do in the reconstruction of a past obliterated by the violence of power are not alternative or antagonistic, but rather *complementary* projects, which in their own process of development create forms of dialogue, cooperation, and coalition between intellectuals, scientists, educators, artists, and social movements of the subaltern, crossing previous class, gender, and ethnic boundaries."[5]

It's not easy to cross boundaries and develop the ability to speak and learn how to listen. Among those of us who played some role within human rights organisations and got saddled with activities aimed at confronting the past, there was also a form of silence. It's

been hard for us to talk about "that". Sometimes we too refused to remember the part of the terror that we also lived through. Our work wasn't a polite topic of conversation, it wasn't something we talked about on trips or breaks, it wasn't a shared topic of conversation with our families. When the eight year old daughter of one of my colleagues was asked at school what her mother did, she answered, "she looks for things, buried things, things that people have lost." But finding the dead among the "things that people have lost" is a process of remembering and sets up forms of cooperation among different social actors, returning the value of language by letting silenced truths be heard.

When we collect testimonies, I am often amazed by the composure of the victims and the fluency with which they speak. Once the silence has been broken, it seemed easy to talk about what happened, step by step. The most obvious thing was their concern for ensuring they were understood, for showing exact places and giving precise explanations. Over time, the technical aspect became almost purely a case of checking what the testimonies said. Eye witnesses pointed out elements with certainty, and these were then mostly corroborated on the field or in the laboratory. It is an apparently angst-free way of describing the events that continue to horrify us from the past – there on the field, those who saw death close at hand describe it solemnly. They are more concerned to ensure that none of their dead are left unexhumed than by the possibility of the past returning.

It has been impossible to guarantee the excavation of 100% of the clandestine graves. "Practical criteria" have prevailed - sometimes the magnitude of the events being denounced was prioritised, or the importance of a specific case, context and circumstances in which the events took place, their political relevance, the technical possibilities and the legal implications. It has been impossible to

exhume many clandestine cemeteries for “technical” reasons. Many of the dead are still crying out for dignity, but the legal and political processes haven’t allowed “cultural” reasons for carrying out an exhumation. This means that most of them had to form part of a research process that was in turn part of a “criminal process”, which requires complicated bureaucratic paper work that ends up limiting the leading role that communities can play in a process that is so important to them.

Two projects have given themselves the task of working to reconstruct part of the past of terror in Guatemala, based on the massacres we have found out about so far. But neither of them could claim to be “the Truth”. Both projects collected and processed information, narratives, stories and testimonies, investigated official and unofficial sources, interviewed the “actors” of the “internal armed conflict”, which cost hundreds of thousands of lives and is only reluctantly branded a “war” (although what difference is there?). Both projects systematised their valuable efforts and both drew up suggestions, recommendations and complaints, they held acts for the dead and allowed themselves an important space for talking about the past. The recommendations weren’t enough to make the mechanisms of repression disappear; on the contrary, they became more sophisticated: they remain hidden, preventing the possibility of the whole truth being spoken. One of their ways of denying the past is to deny new generations the chance to know history. As in the past, Mayan communities have to turn once again to the oral tradition that is passed from one generation to the next, from parents to children, so that social memory is kept alive. The mechanisms of terror remain and persist in different ways, and this explains the fact that in some communities it has been possible for memories to come out and

show themselves, while in many others they remain hidden, clandestine, buried, waiting for their moment to arrive.

The name of the author of this material has been replaced by a pseudonym at the informant's request. There are two reasons behind this decision: the first is the belief that it is still not completely safe to publicly deal with these issues, the second is that this testimony is considered to be the collectively owned.

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[1] The country's only public autonomous university, which governs tertiary education.

[2] The victims of the massacres were serially buried in improvised mass graves, sometimes dug by the victims themselves before being executed. Natural elements like caves or river banks were also used and intentionally collapsed in order to cover the bodies. Wells or latrines, pieces of abandoned roads and construction trenches were used as burial sites. At other times the executors would leave the bodies of the victims on the surface as "messages of deaths", and neighbours and/or relatives recovered the bodies in order to bury them as best they could. In all these cases, the places where the victims were buried are considered to be "clandestine cemeteries".

[3] Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio, 1995, Vol. 3, Chapter II, p. 715.

[4] Alon Cofino and Peter Fritzsche, "Introduction: Noises of the Past", in: *The Work of Memory.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, Illinois. 2002, p. 1–19.

[5] John Beverley, *Testimonio. On the Politics of Truth,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2004, p. 6.