Exhuming Popular Memory

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On May 28, 1998, twenty years after the Panzós massacre, I had the privilege of accompanying the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation to return the boxed skeletal remains of the victims to their wives, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, and grandchildren. This concluded the exhumation we began in September of 1997 for the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission to document the 1978 Guatemalan army massacre of Q'eqchi' Maya peasants in the plaza of Panzós.

As we entered Panzós, winding around the bend that passes the cemetery, there was chanting, applause and the honking of a hand-held horn. We were stopped in the middle of the road, surrounded by a cheering crowd. More than 400 people were waiting by the cemetery near the entrance to Panzós. Before we could take the bones to the municipal center to place them in coffins, the community wanted us to unload the cardboard boxes at the cemetery. Everyone wanted to help unload the trucks. The widows were laughing, smiling and crying. They embraced us. They kissed us. Each woman wanted to carry a box. The elder women performed a Mayan ritual until the sky opened in a heavy downpour.

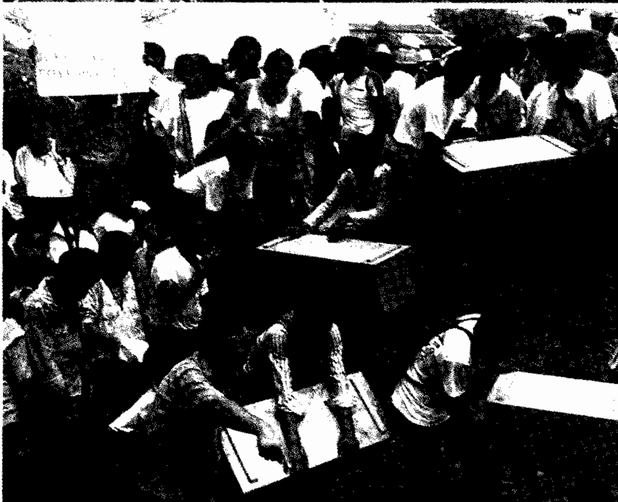
In the rain, we all ran the half mile down the road to the church. The women ran with the boxes on their heads. When we reached the church, the women placed the 38 boxes at the altar. It did not seem to matter that the speakers were almost completely blocked out of sight by the boxes. Everyone was wringing the rain out of their skirts and shirts. Most everyone was smiling – even those with tears running down their faces. There was a collective sense of victory. These monolingual Q'eqchi' women had successfully stood up to those who threatened them, to those who killed their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers.

Several hours later, following survivor testimonies and a Catholic mass, the widows again insisted on carrying the boxes from the church to the municipal center. This procession was more than symbolic. The widows were carrying the remains of the victims across the plaza where the massacre had taken place. It was in this plaza 20 years earlier that several hundred Q'eqchi' peasants had gathered to protest the loss of their lands only to be greeted by machine-gun fire from the army. Like the exhumation, each step of the reburial ritual is at once a memorial to the victims and an act of empowerment for survivors.

Inside the center, the remains were transferred from boxes to small wooden coffins. The artifacts (clothing, shoes, personal items) were placed on top of the coffins to allow survivors an opportunity to identify a lost loved one. Though not scientific, these identifications are important to survivors because of their wish to carry the coffin of their loved one. The coffins were marked for burial the following day. As all of this was done, the widows performed a ritual for the deceased.

At six the next morning, some 1,000 people gathered outside Panzós at the site where the land protest had begun on May 29, 1978. Carrying the coffins, holding banners in memory

Source: Victoria Sanford



of the victims and proclaiming the rights of the Maya, the burial procession began at 10 a.m. For the next few hours, we slowly walked toward the center of Panzós in the harsh sun.

The participation of Maya beauty queens in the procession followed a community tradition of beauty queens speaking up for justice. On June 15, 1978, when Amalia Erondina Coy Pop was crowned Indigenous Queen of nearby San Cristóbal, she denounced the Panzós massacre, which had occurred just two weeks earlier. Her statements were not without impact or retribution. A group of local ladinos, angered that she did not give her speech in Spanish and furious that she had spoken about the Panzós massacre, pressured the mayor of San Cristóbal and the fair's beauty pageant committee to remove her title and crown.

When the burial procession reached Panzós, participants again filled the plaza where the massacre had taken place. For the next several hours in the searing heat, survivors gave testimonies, prayers were said, and calls for justice were made. Everyone was invited to speak.

By early afternoon, the procession slowly moved out of the plaza, down the street and up the hill to the cemetery.

After the holes were dug, the coffins were passed into the grave. Throughout the burial, signs denouncing repression were held and widows called for justice.

Throughout the burial, widows also continued their prayers for the husbands and sons they lost to the massacre two decades earlier.

The widows and survivors of the Panzós massacre organized their community to request an exhumation and ultimately succeeded not only in the exhumation, but also in the retaking of public spaces: the municipal plaza, the church, and the cemetery. As a community, survivors challenged these public spaces as mere reminders of Q'eqchi' loss and remade them into sites of popular memory contesting official stories. Further, these same survivors and widows seized the space they had created not only to publicly claim collective memory, but also to move forward with legal proceedings against the masterminds and perpetrators of the massacre.