



Physical Anthropology Section – 2003

H67 This Grave Speaks: Forensic Anthropology in Guatemala

Adriana Gabriela Santos Bremme, BS, Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala-Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Apartado Postal 01901 1830 correo central Guatemala C.A.*

The goal of this presentation is to present the forensic community the results of the work done by forensic teams for a decade in the fields in Guatemala. These results seen in photographs and in several graphics show and demonstrate individual and mass graves with different patterns of inhumations. Inhumations performed by relatives, soldiers and paramilitaries in the decade of the 80s.

Forensic investigations provide key points of substantiation of physical and testimonial evidence in the reconstruction of the scene, it is a job for the multidisciplinary team who focuses in the exhumations in Guatemala.

Exhumations performed due the violent acts occurred in the 80s, during a period of several military governments; in which more of the civil population was affected. Over 80% of the victims were Maya indigenous people.

Some of these cases are now following a national and international legal process. These processes came about as a desire to denounce these acts for human rights violations by the families of these victims; who want to know where relatives are.

This investigation compiles the mechanisms of inhumation from clandestine graves. Individual and mass graves were found in which from one to twenty, thirty, sixty, or more skeletonized individuals could be seen.

The way to order the bodies, the different positions in which they are found, one behind the other, one thrown above others, gives clues to find which group performed the inhumation process.

In these regions (different counties, mountainous areas) the skeletons of individuals from different ages, sexes and conditions, articulated and disarticulated bodies, have been found.

In fact, because of the acts that occurred, relatives bury these dead persons and several bodies where also buried by military and paramilitary elements. In the first case it becomes easy to find these places because the relatives are witnesses. In some occasions a wood box was improvised and introduce personal things in a way as to offer them the other life; the things the people most commonly used daily.

In the cases where the army forces buried them, bodies can be found disposed in dramatic patterns, showing some ways of torture and the strategies of murder.

These places show diversity in the execution strategies: to behead, decapitate, hang, patterns of gunshot. In some places there are houses that have been burned with children and women inside; caves where the men were first stabbed and then throw.

In other cases like the ones where military detachments operated near the communities during these violent years, it has been necessary to use geophysical methods in the search for graves. The recovered evidence shows lassos round the neck, hands, and the faces covered.

In other cases bones, rope, and lassos are still found on the surface, near the roads, after 20 years these items stand as silent witnesses.

Graves, Patterns of Inhumation, Strategies of Murder