



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

### H129 The Social Effects of Recognizing Srebrenica's Missing

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain insight into how the successful identification and reburial of victims of the Srebrenica genocide have affected the lives of surviving families and influenced the political discourse in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the interface between science and society through the example of the DNA-based identification efforts developed to counter the devastating effects of the July 1995 genocide at the United Nations "Safe Haven" of Srebrenica.

For the Srebrenica victims whose remains have been unearthed, examined, sampled, and stored by forensic experts over the past fourteen years, identification has been the primary goal—that is, re-attaching individual identity to a set of previously unrecognizable remains. Yet the biotechnological innovation that has successfully returned names to remains and coffins to grieving families involves layers of recognition, from the instant of the "blind" DNA match to the moment a relative spies a still familiar piece of clothing. Identifying the missing thus encompasses both scientific and social recognition.

Nowhere is this more apparent than at the culmination of the identification process: the annual commemoration ceremony and mass burial held at the Srebrenica-Potocari Memorial Center on July 11 of each year. Once complete, the results of identification, namely individual coffins placed in individual plots, enable families and friends to care for the souls of their loved ones, knowing at long last where their bones rest. At the same time, the effects of identification, of recovery and reburial, radiate beyond the most intimately connected, entering into the political discourse of postwar Bosnia as recognition of social identity is demanded in the prayers and political speeches that preface the mass burials. Indeed, individual identity at times becomes subsumed in the ceremony's rhetoric of collective victimhood and, by extension, collective responsibility. In response, Bosnian Serbs in the region counter the scientifically-backed evidence of the scale and intensity of the Srebrenica genocide by tabulating their own losses and erecting their own memorials, chief among them the commemorative site in the village of Kravica at which Bosnian Serbs gather on the very next day, July 12.

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in eastern Bosnia since 2003, this paper examines the sociopolitical significance of the DNA-based identification process developed to recognize the Srebrenica missing, juxtaposing the expectations and responses of surviving families with those of Bosnian political and religious leaders, both Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) and Bosnian Serb. Three arguments emerge:

(1) for the surviving relatives of the missing, the identification process succeeds in bridging painful gaps of knowledge and in reconstituting families (if only metaphorically) torn asunder by mass violence through sanctified, witness burial; (2) tempering conventional assumptions that identification brings about social repair, an analysis of the multivalent meanings of the Srebrenica-Potocari Memorial Center and its rapidly expanding cemetery illustrates that political manipulation of the identification efforts has often exacerbated rather than assuaged tensions in postwar Bosnia; and, (3) the intervention of forensic science into the missing person issue, manifest in the capacity of the DNA-based identification system to identify Srebrenica's missing, has raised the stakes of facticity, forcing both Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs to document their losses in increasingly quantifiable terms. Thus when indicted war criminal Radovan Karadzic attempts to discredit the numbers and types of victims of Srebrenica July 1995 he must do so—however problematically—through the language of DNA. These three outcomes of the identification process remind us that the scientific and the social cannot be separated out from one another, just as individual identity cannot exist apart from social identity. In these ways, postwar Bosnia and specifically the case of Srebrenica's missing reveal the powerful role genetic science has come to play in grappling with the devastating effects of mass violence.

#### **DNA Identification, Social Repair, Commemoration**