

An Arc Bent toward Justice: How Myrna Mack's Research Helped Prove Genocide in Guatemala Decades after Her Murder

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In 1989, as I was conducting fieldwork with Guatemalan anthropologist Myrna Mack on the violent displacement of Maya-Ixil communities, I didn't foresee that the research might someday be used as evidence in a trial. But I think Myrna did. In one of our last conversations, in 1990, she told me of a project envisioned by Guatemalan Catholic Bishop Juan José Gerardi to investigate the army's "scorched earth" massacres of 1981-1983.

Not long after that, an army death squad stabbed Myrna to death outside our office in downtown Guatemala City. Bishop Gerardi was murdered in 1998, two days after the public presentation of the Church's Recovery of Historical Memory human rights study.

Pursuing justice in Guatemala for genocide and crimes against humanity has been slow, arduous, and risky. It's also been tenacious, an exercise in "optimism of the will," pushed forward by the determination of survivors and their allies. How was the mosaic of evidence in the genocide case painstakingly pieced together, and how did Myrna Mack's research from a quarter century earlier play a role?

Survivor testimonies were the heart of the Guatemalan genocide trials of 2013 and 2017-2018 against former head of state General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983) and his military intelligence chief, retired General José Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez. Nearly one hundred Maya-Ixil survivors from the municipalities of Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal spoke of things they had recounted before, to the Catholic Church's human rights investigators and to Guatemala's postwar Truth Commission: soldiers raped, tortured, and massacred entire villages.

They burned houses, destroyed cornfields, and killed animals. Survivors fled to the mountains, where the army bombed and starved them. This time, however, survivors were telling their stories in public before a panel of judges, where the accused architects of the scorched earth strategies might be held to account.

Dozens of reports from Guatemalan forensic anthropologists corroborated the testimonies and helped establish the material elements of the case: mass graves in the Maya-Ixil region were filled with the bones of murdered children.¹

Peritajes, or expert witness reports, helped prove the army's intent to destroy Ixils as a group, which was key to the genocide verdict. It wasn't enough for prosecutors to prove that the army had committed atrocities against Ixils; the genocide case had to show that the army intentionally targeted Ixil populations because they were Ixil. This couldn't be deduced by counting the dead. Rather, the core of the genocide argument was a distinction between motive and intent: the Guatemalan army's asserted motive was to defeat the guerrillas, but in order to do so it intentionally targeted entire groups, like the Maya-Ixil, that it considered to be enemies of the state. The army redefined indigenous populations into "good" Mayas (deemed to be on the side of the army) and "bad" Mayas (believed to be supporting the insurgency). "Good" Mayas could be redeemed, but in the army's view "bad" ones had to be eliminated. The army was not simply killing Mayas; it was killing Mayas in particular places where social organizing was most intense.

The peritajes helped make the argument about why the army targeted Ixils. Peritajes by Guatemalan researchers Marta Casaús Arzú and Hector Rosada Granados, for example, analyzed Guatemala's historic racism against Mayas and how the army deployed the National Security Doctrine, and its concept of the "internal enemy," against entire Maya-Ixil communities at the height of the counterinsurgency war in the early 1980s.²

In 2011, in the run-up to the arrests in the genocide case, Guatemala's Public Ministry asked me to write a peritaje on forced displacement in the Ixil region. I was to analyze the causes and characteristics of the forced displacement during Ríos Montt's regime, the conditions survivors faced as they fled into the mountains and the so-called model villages the army built to resettle the displaced population in the Ixil region.

Since forced displacement wasn't just a consequence of the armed conflict but was, instead, a central strategy of the army, the peritaje had to analyze why Ixil communities were massacred and driven off their lands, as well as how the militarized reconstruction of rural villages was an integral part of the state's overall plan. This opened up an analysis of the entire counterinsurgency doctrine and its relationship to the Ixil genocide.

Reopening an Archive from the 1980s

To write the report, I had to open up artifacts from the 1980s I hadn't faced in a long time: boxes, files, notebooks, and recollections. In one box I had copies of my field notes from interviews in the Ixil region and a complete set of Myrna's notes. Her notes were printed with an old dot matrix printer on parchment-thin paper. As I began to write, I turned those dry pages in my hands and stared at the names of the living and the dead, trying to draw some power from that tactile reencounter with the remnants of our work.

There were dense layers of witnessing in those notes. Survivors bore witness to us about those who were killed. Myrna filtered those voices into her notes. And in that moment I was left to bear witness to the work Myrna did, sorting through the

traces of people's lives for information and quotes that could constitute evidence in the trial. Another member of Myrna's research team, Paula Worby, gathered documents and secondary sources to add to the analysis.

Rereading Myrna's field notes in preparation for the trial drove home her loss, for it wasn't a tall stack. Myrna was cut down at age 40, just as she was reaching her professional stride as an anthropologist. And the written record of her work underscored the fragility of the political space for research during those early years of Guatemala's post-1986 civilian government, when the peace accords were still years away.

Myrna and her colleagues at the newly created Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences in Guatemala (AVANCSO) believed in the power of critically engaged social science research to help build more democratic and just societies. Myrna, especially, was insistent on the need for fieldwork to understand how the forced displacement of more than one-tenth of Guatemala's population between 1981 and 1983 impacted the social fabric of rural communities.

She knew the risks of doing research in the conflict zones, especially for a Guatemalan. We were stopped and questioned on every road and path by soldiers or the army-controlled civil patrol that guarded each village. All of this shaped how we did the research, making short trips to the highlands instead of lengthy stays.

Still, Myrna's methodology yielded results that ultimately proved useful to the genocide case. Myrna's first study on forced displacement, in 1988, focused on state policy toward the displaced (AVANCSO 1990). By examining government and military documents alongside interviews with survivors and key informants resettled into army-controlled "model villages," she combined a macro analysis of state counterinsurgency strategies—military and civilian—with a careful documentation of how those strategies affected individuals, families, and communities.

I joined Myrna's research team full-time in 1989 for a second study of the displaced. That study, published after Myrna's murder (AVANCSO 1992), added an extended case study of the rebuilt communities of northern Chajul. We spent more time in specific communities, gathering data on the pre-massacre history of those communities and the social history of displacement and resettlement.

We added archival data to document social struggles in the era prior to the forced displacement, particularly the history of land conflicts with the nearby coffee plantation, Finca La Perla (where the Guerrilla Army of the Poor had made its debut in 1976 by executing the landowner Luis Arenas). This history of land struggles drew the prosecutors' attention in the genocide case, since it helped explain why the army identified Ixils as rebellious and enemies of the state and, thus, targets for elimination.

Contributions to the Genocide Case

The inclusion of social history in the peritaje on forced displacement was one contribution Myrna Mack's research made to the genocide trials of 2013 and 2017–2018. To analyze the cause of mass forced displacement in Ixil region in the early 1980s, it was necessary to document why the army targeted Ixils en masse. Military documents showed how the army identified Ixils, as such, as subversives; the peritaje combined this with archival data and secondary sources to show a history of Ixil resistance to land and labor predations throughout the twentieth century, including uprisings in 1925, 1936, and 1971.

In 1980, Ixils were protagonists of a large plantation strike on Guatemala's Pacific Coast. Our research in the 1980s, as well as my dissertation fieldwork and interviews with plantation elites in the late 1990s, showed how the landed elite joined with military intelligence after that strike to depict Ixils, as a group, as seditious.

Adding social historical context provided key insights not available through survivor testimonies alone. In the March–May 2013 genocide trial, survivor testimonies lasted an average of 20 to 40

minutes. The judges kept the proceedings moving at a fast clip, probably because they feared the trial might be shut down at any moment, and they were strict about not letting people stray from the "legal platform" of the case. Survivor narratives had to begin at the moment when soldiers occupied the villages in 1982. This focus on the instance of spectacular violence isn't unusual in a trial format, of course, although the tempo of the second trial (October 2017–September 2018) was slower, and people spoke more about their lives, communities, and struggles before and after 1982.³

The analysis on forced displacement presented at the genocide trials showed that the massacres, displacement, and militarized reconstruction of rural areas in the Ixil region were all components of a coherent military strategy centered on a systematic reordering of territory in areas the army viewed as "red" zones. Forced displacement wasn't simply a consequence of bellicose actions; it was the army's modus operandi in the Ixil region. Following this "war of extermination," the military rebuilt rural spaces in a "war of reconstruction" to cement a permanent counterinsurgency state presence in the conflict zones and make them "governable."

In its military analysis, the army depicted the rural villages where most Ixils lived as a savage zone, impossible to govern without radically changing the patterns of military control. This urban/rural cognitive dualism was apparent in military strategy documents: urban spaces, where non-Ixils predominated, were described in the army's Counterinsurgency Manual as spaces of "order," where state power was relatively secure, while rural areas were depicted as threatening to the state. From 1981 to early 1982, the entire rural area of the Ixil region was deemed by the army to be full of subversives, or "bad Mayas" subject to elimination.

Beginning in mid-1982, dispersed displaced populations were rounded up and resettled into urbanized "model villages" and "development poles," and the army sought to replace the guerrillas' communal-level leadership with its own local power structures, including paramilitary village-level civil patrols. Architects of the Guatemalan development poles combined classic

counterinsurgency doctrine with the study of colonial-era institutions of social and territorial control, such as the sixteenth-century forced urban settlements called *reducciones de indios*.⁴ In these reconstructed spaces, “good” Mayas could survive, precariously, while recovered “bad” Mayas, those who had not been killed, could be politically reeducated and remade into governable subjects.

The peritaje on forced displacement, and several other peritajes presented at the trials, such as those by Angel Váldez Estrada and Nieves Gómez Dupuis, countered the defense discourse that the army was rescuing the displaced from the guerrillas and focused on how this militarized reconstruction undermined the bases of Ixil communal culture and was part of the crime of genocide.

Finally, the peritaje on forced displacement helped build the argument that hunger was used as a weapon of war by the Guatemalan army. Survivor testimonies were replete with details about the harrowing flight into the mountains and deaths from starvation. By citing military documents (particularly the army’s “Firmeza 83” strategic plan), the peritaje showed that the army persecuted the displaced by intentionally destroying their crops and setting up a military cordon to prevent the displaced from seeking food and medical care outside of state control. The judges recognized this crime as part of the 2013 genocide verdict.

A Long Arc

Myrna Mack was often troubled by the ethical dilemmas of research. In 1988, she wrote of these doubts: “What troubles me is that all I do is talk to people. I draw out their sad histories, and that’s it. I feel my role reduced to one of extraction” (Oglesby 1996, 256). Her desire for deeper research praxis pushed her to help build support for genocide survivors among Guatemala’s civil society. Through her writing and speaking, she was one of the first scholars in Guatemala to bring the testimonies of rural massacre survivors to an urban audience. Many years later, in the genocide trials of 2013 and 2017–2018, Ixil survivors brought their own histories to the Guatemalan public.

In 2013, Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity. A higher court then ordered a retrial, and in the midst of the retrial, in 2018, the general died. His intelligence chief was acquitted twice, even though both courts agreed that the state had committed genocide against the Maya-Ixil. As I write these lines, two new Ixil genocide cases are slated to go to trial in Guatemala in 2020, four decades after the crimes occurred.⁵ It has been a long arc. And for many Ixils and other Mayas, the genocide was just one part of a much longer arc of colonial and neocolonial violence (AVANCSO 2008; Velásquez Nimatuj 2016; Batz 2018). Perhaps this time the arc will bend toward some sort of justice.

Notes

- ¹ For a summary of the Guatemalan genocide trial of 2013, see *International Justice Monitor*, <https://www.ijmonitor.org/category/efrain-rios-montt-and-mauricio-rodriguez-sanchez/> (accessed December 10, 2019). For the 2017–2018 genocide trial, see *International Justice Monitor*, “Guatemala Trials Before the National Courts of Guatemala,” <https://www.ijmonitor.org/category/guatemala-trials/> (accessed December 4, 2019). For analyses of the significance of the 2013 genocide trial by Guatemalan and international scholars, see the double issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research* edited by Oglesby and Nelson (2016).
- ² To show how the army targeted Ixils, U.S. statistician Patrick Ball testified that in the Ixil municipalities of Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal, from April 1982 to July 1983, the army killed 5.5 percent of the indigenous population and 0.7 percent of the nonindigenous population, a murder rate against an identifiable group comparable to acknowledged genocides such as Rwanda and Srebrenica.
- ³ On the perils of a human rights framing that freezes survivor identities around the moment of spectacular violence, see Grandin (2005), Oglesby (2007), Alarcón Medina and Binford (2014), and Crosby and Lykes (2019). On the debates over the role of history in war crimes trials, see Stover (2005), Wilson (2011), and Nesiha (2014); and on tribunal justice and “legal subjectivities” in Latin America, see Brunnegger and Faulk (2016).
- ⁴ Interview conducted by Myrna Mack with Rolando Paiz Maselli, former head of the National Reconstruction Committee, Guatemala City, April 21, 1988.
- ⁵ One case includes charges against three members of the military high command of the General Romeo Lucas García regime (1978–1982). Another case focuses on a senior military official from the Ríos Montt government who had been a fugitive since 2011 (Burt and Estrada 2019a, 2019b).

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