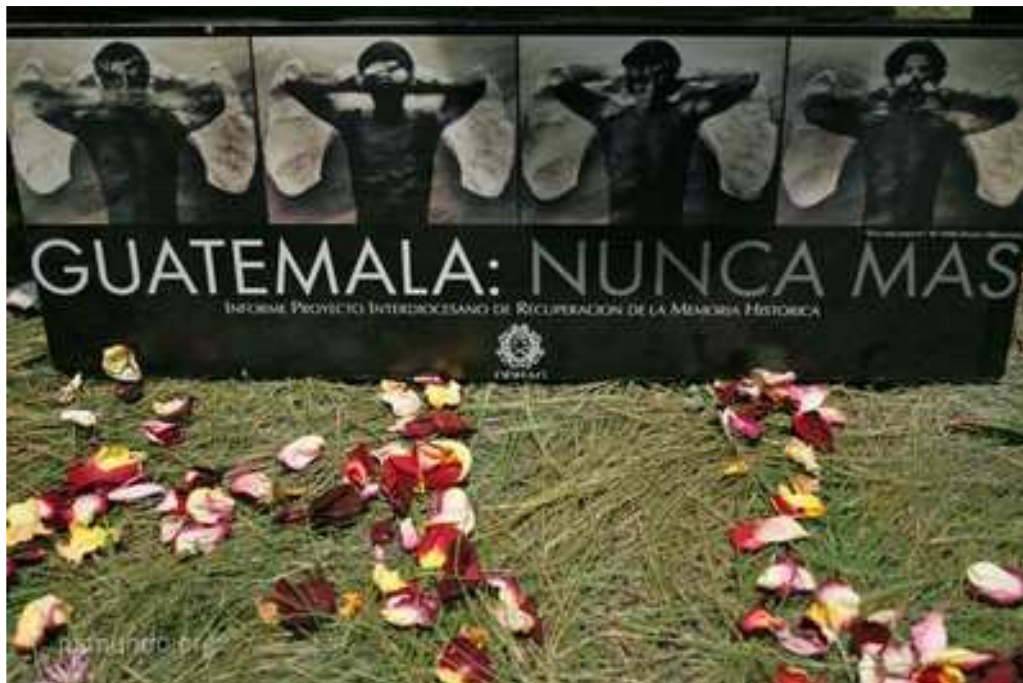


# Of Broken Strings and Heroes

*A field research on how people give substance to reconciliation in Nebaj, Guatemala*



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Image on the front page: from North American Congress on Latin America on [www.nacla.org](http://www.nacla.org).

Nunca Más was the name of the official report issued by Guatemala's catholic Church, REHMI, concerning the violations of human rights committed during the civil war.

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## **Foreword**

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In front of you lies the product of a field research which would have never been possible without the great people who are its subject. I am more grateful to them than I will ever be able to express, not only for their willingness to share their extraordinary stories with me and their patience during those times when I would not understand what they were trying to explain to me, but also I am grateful to them because they always treated me like they treated each other, at all times leaving me behind with the warm feelings of mutual respect, thankfulness and even friendship. They let me into their lives, showed their deepest emotions and trusted me with their greatest concerns, so while reading this, please keep in mind that not a single thing would have been conceivable if it was not for these peoples undivided attention and help. My special thanks herein goes to four of those people in particular. Jorge, Francisco, Thomas and Jaime. Not only were their accounts of crucial importance for my research, in a few cases my network and this research's proceedings were made possible by them. I will never forget how they were always there to help me out with anything and how they became dear friends.

Immersing myself in Guatemala's conflict and reconciliation for a longer period of time was not always easy. Me myself being a refugee from the former Yugoslavia whose life was influenced by the civil war that was fought there throughout the nineties, the subject of my research fitted me like no other but also brought me back to my own past. Having myself as the most important instrument in the field forced me to face my own emotions and presumptions. Being away from home during that process would be far more difficult if it was not for my mother who was always there to hear me out and offer me her advice. She spent hours with me on the phone when I felt that the researcher had become a subject of research herself and certain situations were beyond my own comprehensive abilities. Moreover I am thankful to my friends who were with me in Guatemala struggling with their own research and to people back home supporting me throughout this journey.

The last person I need to thank for his effort is my own supervisor Marc Simon Thomas. With his advice, enthusiasm and attention I was able to write a research proposal and finally transcript my data into this thesis that lies in front of you. In the end all fell into place, this whole experience leaving me behind with an experience that altered my life. For I feel that by going out there we first need to prove ourselves as persons and only then as upcoming

anthropologists. It is people we are dealing with and it is them that provide us with the opportunity to measure our knowledge and above all our humanness.

## **Introduction**

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*“Those who do not want to know or say the truth are also guilty”*

(Cohen in Remijnse 2004: 258)

A lot can happen in one's life during five years. Neighbors who have lived peacefully next to one another can turn into enemies, family members can turn into strangers, the place you have lived in can turn into a mess. This is what war can do to people's lives. Five years is the official period the conflict in former Yugoslavia lasted between 1990 until 1995 and being one of those people whose life has changed because of that particular war, the research I chose to do sometimes was a personal quest for answers.

For a period of eight weeks, from February the 21<sup>st</sup> until April the 18<sup>th</sup> this year I have carried out my field research in Nebaj, Guatemala. The purpose of this fieldwork was to find out in what way the people in Nebaj perceive the armed conflict that ended twelve years ago. With the data that has been made available to me during this period of field research I will try to answer the question in what way *substance* is being *given* to the process of reconciliation in Nebaj. In order to answer this question I will first analyze the conflict in Guatemala, specifying it on Nebaj later on. Thereafter I will shape the context for the concept of reconciliation and what exactly it means for the people in Nebaj, which leads to the last question to be answered, which is what actors nowadays are in what way involved in this process. In order to put all this into a framework I will provide this all with a theoretical orientation where I will discuss and explain several concepts and discourses in the scientific debate concerning violations of human rights, reconciliation and exhumations.

In the field I have used several methods to conduct the information I needed. In the first place this was participant observation, or since in most cases in my research the opportunity to actually participate was lacking, I mainly observed social gatherings and happenings. Besides that I used (semi) structured interviews and a lot of informal conversations. In doing so I made the decision not to use recording device after the first time I noticed it made my informants feel uncomfortable. As a consequence, inevitably, some information has gone lost, which I am aware of. However, the choice I made was based on the fact that people's non verbal behavior and emotions reveal as much as their spoken words, which weighted more for me than the attempt to record everything they said and risk that the things they told me would be too much on the surface. While having an interview I would

always bring a small notebook to write down the important things I picked up, or to write down some specific things said in Spanish in order to analyze them later when working out the conversation. The working out of the interviews was done by typing them out, putting paragraphs into schemes and summarizing all those paragraphs in a few words. By doing so I avoided coding fragments and later on forgetting why I had coded things in a certain way and I could describe situations without value judgments. This made it easier for me to later on understand everything I had written down without having to read through everything every time that I would need to look up some specific information. The names of my informants I use in this thesis all are feigned. The choice made to do so is based on the sensitivity of certain information that was trusted to me by several people, whom I do not want to endanger in any way whatsoever. Most of my informants are people working for organizations involved in helping victims of the civil war. Others are mostly people met accidentally or via friends, linking me to a new network of people whom offered me their help.

The analysis of my data was a process of rewriting and rereading. Interpreting my data, in the beginning, was mostly a matter of reading and hearing a lot about what had happened during the conflict from different points of view and answering my first question on the conflict. Having this context made it possible for me to understand, when knowing someone's background, why certain things were said in a specific way, and what they meant from a particular point of view. Knowing enough about the conflict and therefore being able to ask the right questions and knowing what I was talking about was crucial, and I do not think I would have succeeded without this. At some point I realized that I knew a lot about the whole situation because I had been into it for so much time that I was able to link situations to each other and understand the relatedness of different happenings and their interpretations. This was an investment that was more than worth it because had I not read and asked so much about the history of all happenings I would have never been able to understand and connect the answers given to me. As everyone else, of course I too faced difficulties while analyzing and interpreting all the information. I am aware of the fact that I will never be fully competent to perceive conflicts and people's sufferings in an objective way as for it is far too common for me considering my own background, nevertheless I have done everything I could to give the people in my own research their own voice, so that they can let the world know what has happened in their lives.<sup>1</sup> For all the stories are different and all the stories are worth of telling them.

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 1 to read more on my own reflection on the research

For thirty-six years Guatemala was involved in a civil war where the guerrilla, the army and other state related forces fought each other. The armed conflict started in Guatemala's capital where the ladino's tried fighting the upcoming elite who was depriving them of their privileges. During 1972 however, the guerrilla came to realize they were never going to win the war against the army in the capital where the states support was too big, which made them decide to flee to the mountains in the hope to be able to there win the war. In her book '*Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala's Peace Process*' Susanne Jonas (2000) discusses how the United States were of great importance in bringing dictatorial regimes to power in Guatemala in order to secure their own interests. Since Guatemala dealt with authoritarian regimes throughout the fifties, sixties and seventies, it came as no surprise when General Efraim Rios Montt seized power from General Romeo Lucas Garcia in 1982 and proceeded with his policy of mercilessly killing people living in villages in the mountains during his quest for the guerrilla. Between 1962 and 1996, the period of Guatemala's armed conflict, more than 200.000 people were killed or 'disappeared' and General Montts regime alone is held accountable for approximately 70.000 of those killings and 'disappearances' and therefore is seen as the cruelest of them all (Jonas, 2000; Kruijt, 2008:22).

Two of the prominent parties fighting each other during those thirty- six years of civil war were the guerrilla, who joined forces under the name *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG) in 1982, and the *Ejercito*, Guatemala's army. Besides the army there were several other state related forces of which the *Patrulla de Autodefensa Civil* (PAC) is the most important one. This PAC was founded by the army as an attempt to control more areas without physically having to be present in all of them. The patrols were formed out of local villagers who were pursued into joining and were instructed to spy on all the inhabitants and take action when someone was suspected of cooperating with the guerrilla (Remijnse 2004). Looking at this specific civil war, and the claims made by several people that the US and Cuba both played a major part, one must put this into the context of the Cold War that was being fought back then. While the US was looking for allies in her struggle against the uprising communism she was supporting dictatorial regimes throughout Central and Latin America. In the meanwhile, in most of these countries, insurgents were trying to take control and install socialistic governments. This could be seen in Venezuela, Nicaragua and El Salvador, which contributed to Guatemala's strive for more justice. Cuba, of course, was supporting those revolutionaries and therefore providing them with trainings and arms. For



that reason I must make clear that this conflict is one based on strong anti- communistic sentiments that had turned more countries into battlefields in the past.

In Montts case however, not only this particular reason caused him to aggressively pursue thousands of Mayan peasants. As a country colonized by Spaniards, Catholicism prevailed for decades in Guatemala. Yet, somewhere during the forties Protestantism started arising and gaining more domain, which can be ascribed to Guatemala's governments reigning. They were less and less willing to cooperate with the catholic Church who in their eyes had become too liberal and too progressive, which again is something the US played her part in by bringing conservative, authoritarian regimes to power who kept in mind the US's interests (Adams, 1970). It was nowhere in their interest that the catholic Church would become as progressive that analphabetism would drop as a result of the Church's programs, or that people would become smart enough to see that they were being held down by their government, because this would make them a potential danger for the authoritarian regimes installed by the US in order to prevent Guatemala from becoming one more communistic country. Nevertheless they could not prevent Guatemala from developing a guerrilla trained and inspired by Cuba, that would strive for equality. Thus, Rios Montt did not only fear the Maya population because he was convinced that they were communistic revolutionaries, he also thought of them as stupid pagans who practiced their *costumbres* combined with Catholicism, which did not correspond with his protestant worldview. For this reason a lot of innocent people were found dead and chanceless when the army would invade a village, perceiving every *campesino* as a guerrillero (Jonas, 2000).

In the follow-up of this introduction the first chapter of this thesis will consist of the theoretical framework containing the most important concepts I will be working with like the violations of human rights and reconciliation. The second chapter will offer a clearer insight in Nebaj itself and the current situation nowadays, in order to be able to put the theory and empery in context. Herein I will explain the conditions people are living in and why these are so important for understanding the whole problem. Chapters three, four and five will contain the empirical material conducted during the field research, wherein the first chapter will focus on the manifestation of the conflict in Nebaj and the different perspectives on it. The second chapter will give an insight in what exactly reconciliation means for the inhabitants, whereas the last chapter will focus on the actors involved in the process of strengthening the reconciliation. This will be followed up by a summary and conclusion in which I will make an attempt to answer the main question; in what way is *substance* being *given* to the process of

reconciliation. It appears to be an ongoing, slow process that requires much attention, and especially in Nebaj and the area Ixil is bound to one specific activity in particular, symbolizing the meaning of that what for them encompasses reconciliation at this very moment.

# 1 Theoretical Orientation

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Conflict is one of the many things researched by anthropologists. Herein attention is paid to the reasons why conflicts emerge, how they evolve, what means of destruction are used in them and how they come to an end. Previously I have given a brief overview of Guatemala's conflict. Below I will discuss the various ways in which human rights are violated during warfare and their underlying purposes. This I will use to explain the concept of reconciliation; how is it perceived and what activities appear to be important herein in order to overcome the trauma's gotten from the conflict? By explaining this I hope to provide a clear framework which I will further on use when describing my own experiences and findings in the field.

## 1.1 Means of violating the human rights

*“War is collective killing for some collective purpose; that is as far as I would go in attempting to describe it”*

(Keegan in Allen and Thomas 2000:165)

In her battle against the guerrilla, the army used different ways of frightening people and destabilizing their lives. The *Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico* (CEH) researched the violations of human rights committed during the civil war for two years and found that the army was guilty for 93% of all the violations that had been committed. From the data they were able to conduct they could identify 42,275 victims of which 83% were Mayan and 17% were ladinos. Of those victims 23,671 were fatalities of *ejecuciones arbitrarias* and 6,159 of *desapariciones forzadas* (CEH 1999:14-1). In her report the CEH mentions that arbitrary executions, forced disappearances and tortures were the main ways in which the army and other forces violated human rights.

One of the ways in which societies are being traumatized is the use of random killings. In the modern world wars are not what they used to be, meaning that now more than ever, civilians are victims unlike before. Where battles used to be fought far outside towns and villages so that no innocent ones could get hurt, nowadays this arbitrariness seems to be the way battles are settled. Due to the lack of control that for example is imposed on international conflicts, civil wars are covered in impunity and come without any regulations. The more you get to destabilize your enemies live the better, and that is exactly the effect created by

randomly killing people. Since one never knows when the enemy may come, and who might get killed, the insecurity raises to a higher level striking at the foundation of people's nature, which is the necessity to feel safe (Allen and Thomas 2000:163-188).

According to the Roman jurist Ulpian (3<sup>rd</sup> century): "By torture we are to understand the torment and suffering of the body in order to elicit the truth.". Torture is thus about vigor and torment to elicit information. In her book "*The Body in Pain*" Elaine Scarry (2005) draws an analysis on war and torture, in which she summons different reasons for torture. In this she explains how torture imitates death, unmakes the body and messes with someone's agency and ability to have power over himself. In this theoretical foundation one of the most important sources I will be using is the book "*Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina*" by Antonius Robben (2005). Professor Robben works at Utrecht University at the department of Cultural Anthropology and has carried out several field researches in his career, of which one of them was done in Argentina, concerning the political violence that occurred there between 1945 and 1979. His book on this matter I will be using frequently since it describes specific concepts and discourses I will be talking about. Robben (2005) explains the same thing as Scarry by making clear that when invading on someone's personal space one is fundamentally messing with peoples trust. In the book one can find examples where victims frequently declare how they feel like they do not belong anymore, and that there is no place where they feel safe (Robben 2005:226). Additionally Robben clarifies this torture which was used during Argentina's war by the government as a means of reeducating people in order to make them obedient and numb. Moreover he says, it was used as a way of conducting information, displaying invincibility, unmaking the society, traumatizing the nation and breaking peoples will to fight. Mary Ann Tétreault (2006) discusses the issue of torture and rape of men in her article "*The Sexual politics of Abu Ghraib: Hegemony, Spectacle, and the Global War on Terror*". Herein she explains that when a man's personal space and bodily integrity is being invaded this changes the way he views his masculinity and his ideas about purity. Another, in Guatemala's case more important matter, is the rape of women that occurred on a grand scale. In her book "*Race, Ethnicity and Sexuality*" Joan Nagel (2003) explains how vulnerable especially women are during conflicts, since they are seen as the *cultural gatekeepers*. On one hand, as being a woman, she is a far easier target, on the other hand, and that goes for Guatemala's conflict for sure, the women who were raped were *indigena*, thus seen inferior to the men of the military committing the crimes. Joan Nagel calls this the double jeopardy of women. In the first place they are targeted because of the fact that they are of the female race and thus more vulnerable, in the second place she is endangered

more because of the fact that she is of the ethnic inferior race from the violators perspective. Moreover, culturally, she is the one held responsible for the reproduction, which is why she is the gatekeeper. Women's behavior determines the way the men are seen which is crucial and can be traced in many cultures (Kottak 2006).

Besides tortures and rapes, forced disappearances were very common during the armed conflict in Guatemala. Official statistics issued by the CEH state that around 6,160 people disappeared of which 91% is to be blamed on the army. These forced disappearances are also well described by Robben (2005). In Argentina even more people than in Guatemala disappeared. They were often held in secret detention centers, secret prisons, thrown into rivers or the ocean, and numerous other ways in which they disappeared. In his book Ton Robben explains that these disappearances are a very powerful way of destabilizing peoples lives and making them insecure. Knowing that someone you love has died is terrible, but at least you know what has happened to that person he says. However, when someone you love just disappeared one day and never came back is even worse, because from that moment on one's life is a constant insecurity and doubt, in pursuit of the truth. Robben explains very well that the government of Argentina used this method on purpose, knowing that they would paralyze the nation as people would have no means to look for the disappeared one's themselves and they had no trust whatsoever in the government. In his book he asks the question *why* the government had to use these disappearances. He is able to make us understand that by extending the area in which the war was fought a new dimension was added: "This transportation from armed confrontations in the street and torture in secret detention centers to the privacy of the home and the intimacy of human existence reinforced the enmity in all four domains." (Robben 2005:277). By doing this the Argentine government was able to get to people's hearts since they were literally invading their personal space by messing with the privacy one has. Therefore, letting people disappear trough moving their remains from one grave to another, dumping them in the sea or abandoning at countryside's was a way of *dehumanizing* and *dissocializing* people. Even after explaining this Robben asks the question why a government decides upon disappearances rather than for example imprisonment or executions? In his analysis of this, he makes several distinctions, because, as he explains, the reasons for the use of this method varied. Albie Sachs (1973) describes in his "*Justice in South Africa: Perspectives on South Africa*" how the thought of paralyzing a nation by randomly letting people disappear or beat them up makes people mentally helpless and powerless since they have the feeling that they are facing an apparatus that they will never defeat. From his point of view making people indecisive is one of the most powerful

means of proceeding your own politics because the nation lacks the strength and will to stop the government.

One last way of violating human rights I will discuss here are the forced removals. During Guatemala's civil war many people were forced to leave their homes and move to model villages. Those villages were very often controlled by the PAC or the army meant to constantly monitor its inhabitants. Keeping an eye on them served the army's purpose because they hoped to catch people in the act of collaborating with the guerrilla in order to kill them or use them to elicit more information. Often model villages are used for this reason, to control people's lives as much as possible so that the enemy can get as little help as likely. It seems to be one more way of destabilizing people's lives, making them dependent and obedient in order to exercise one's own power over them, which can be seen in South Africa as well, where millions of people were forced into moving to the so called *bantustans* in order for the government to create a superior white state (Beinardt 1984). Overall we can say that any form of violating human rights discussed above and violence in general is meant to destabilize people's lives or as expressed strikingly all- embracing: " [...] Violence cast ripples that reconfigure lives in the most dramatic of ways, affecting constructs of identity in the present, the hopes and potentials of the future, and even the renditions of the past" (Robben and Nordstrom in Sieder 1997:21).

## 1.2 *Reconciliation*

*"Reconciliation ought to be solid, because eventually more people can die from the result of a false peace than from the original violent conflict".*

(H. W. van der Merwe in Ruden 2008:2)

After a period of conflict comes a time of reconciliation. This word and concept however, sound easier than they in reality are. In order to reconcile with the past a lot is needed and such processes can take up for decades. First I will explain what exactly is *meant* with the term 'reconciliation' in order to be able to later on proceed with talking about the process and the different activities that are seen as contributors to the strengthening of this process.

It appears to be that the driving force behind reconciliation is truth. In her article "*A common what?: The Limits of Reconciliation*" Sarah Ruden (2008) states that South Africa never accomplished real reconciliation because it failed to tell the real truth. She is supported by many, amongst others Rosemary Lerner who explains in her article "*Between Conflict and*

*Reconciliation: The Hard Truth*” how she considers truth as a main condition “for the transition between situations of social and political conflict to those of reconciliation” (Lerner 2007: 1). Immediately after having said that she says to be fully aware of the limits of the possibility of telling the truth since many of those in charge still are not willing to take their accountability. Exactly this statement seems to be one of the biggest dilemmas for the truth commissions that arise after conflicts, wars or genocides. We have seen such truth commissions in South Africa, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and of course Guatemala. In most of the cases the main point of critique is that those ones charged, mostly governments, declined to tell the whole truth, give openness of documents and therefore neglect to take their responsibility, which often results in a slow or even failing reconciliation. This was very much the case in South Africa, which is described well by Jen Laasko in his article “*In Pursuit of Truth, Justice and Reconciliation: The Truth Commissions of East Timor and South Africa*”. Laasko herein claims that TRC’s can “play a powerful role in bringing human concerns to the forefront in an attempt to end impunity, recognize the suffering of victims and establish a fair history of the past” (Laasko 2003: 6). However he says, South Africa’s truth commission failed to do so since they lacked the authority to appoint victimizers and could not force the government into telling the truth, which refused to do so because they were supported too much by their own rank and file. In Guatemala exactly the same problem occurred when the government of president Arzú turned down the commissions advice in 1997 to give openness of the documents that contained information about the exact orders executed by the army during especially the eighties (Jonas 2000). So these truth commissions fulfill a crucial role when it comes down to disclosing the past. For the victims of armed conflicts a reconstruction of the past is of great importance because very often they were being presented as the ‘bad’ ones from the governments perspective, thus being able to have their reputation cleared means a lot (Robben 2005).

As Kristin Henrard (2003) states in her article “*Post- Apartheid South Africa: Transformation and Reconciliation*” revealing the truth about what happened in the past and forgiving those who committed violations aren’t the only aspects of reconciliation. Next to this telling of the truth which needs to be a starting point in a reconciliation process, justice for the victims is seen as one of the other very important ways of allowing the victims to reconcile themselves with the past. Justice, in the scientific discourse of reconciliation after an armed conflict is perceived as juridical justice, which consists of for example trying the victimizers and putting those ones guilty behind bars (Boraine 2001; Jonas 2000; Laasko 2003; van Zyl 1999). According to many, this is a very important step in the process of

reconciliation, for it extends the presumption that the victims are being taken seriously. Moreover, it assumes that victims can trust the government and a certain relation can be built up again, which is crucial in order to regain and preserve a nations trust.

Economic compensation is also seen as one of the things that makes people feel that they are taken for serious. Any effort done by the government to balance the losses of the victims is necessary. By offering victims an economic compensation is a way of showing respect and goodwill. Losing someone who initially generated income creates serious problems, especially in poor countries like Guatemala (Allen and Thomas 2002). In such circumstances, where every penny counts, everyone who is able to offer some sort of help, and this includes children, is very much needed. Those people who have lost family members during the armed conflict face difficulties when it comes down to working the land, selling goods on the market, and most important of all, having enough food on the table. Remaining in that vicious circle of not being able to provide for a living and therefore not being able to send children to schools is the reason why many of those families stay poor. In Guatemala there are lot of those families, which from my point of view contributes to the ongoing poverty in the rural areas. Compensation of material and other sorts of deprivations is another important way of showing the victims that one cares for what has happened. Further, reevaluation of the human rights and democracy contributes to this process of reconciliation (Henrard 2003).

Having discussed several matters that appear to be important in the process of reconciliation brings me to this last but no less essential noun. Dignity. This word can be seen as the sum of all the previous items discussed above, combining everything into one encompassing word that on its own is hard to describe. Once again we are dealing with an abstractive concept, something we could probably much better describe emotionally than using it in a scientific context, however, reconciliation itself sometimes, especially when explained by victims, is more of an emotional than scientifically explainable concept.



### 1.3 Exhumations and reburials

*“I appeal that, if the perpetrators have killed my husband, they must please bring his remains so I can bury him in a dignified manner”*

(Anonymous in Woods 1987:134)

This quotation indicates that one of the most important things for those left behind is being able to process the past and mourn, which would be enabled by having someone's remains and being able to bury that person. In his last lecture during the course *Culture, Violence, Trauma and Reconciliation* on the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2008 Ton Robben discussed this importance of burying the dead. In this lecture he focused on the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who strive to find their lost children in order to rebury them. This reburial that is often accompanied by an exhumation is a very symbolic way of reconciling with the past. Being able to demonstrate the last honor to your loved ones is seen as the least one can do and therefore very important. Burying the dead in sacred grounds can be found in many cultures and is a way of showing respect (Kottak 2005: p). Exhumations can be a crucial part of these reburials since often during conflicts, *if* even buried, bodies are concealed on clandestine cemeteries with more victims and left there. Being able to after years exhume and rebury the dead means knowing what happened, who is to blame for it and finally doing that one thing that is left to do, and that is reburying someone in holy ground according to own customs (Robben 2005). In his book Robben describes the discussions between the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and several human rights organizations, which cannot seem to agree upon exhumations. The human rights organizations are advocates for it, the mothers are trying to do everything they can to stop the bodies from being exhumed. Their argument is that the wounds of the disappearances need to remain open in order to resist a national process of forgetting. Their pain is what drives them and keeps them going these days, providing them with the spirit to fight for human rights internationally, broadening their platform. For the human rights organizations the excavation of the bodies is an essential step in the national process of forgiveness and reconciliation, since people can get closure on what happened. Both sides are to be understood, for these women have suffered a lot, and some are maybe justly afraid that after a while, everything will return to normal, while their internal suffering always will remain. As written in Francisco Ferrándiz' (2006) article on the opening of several mass graves in Spain, *“The Return of Civil War Ghosts”* “digging up mass graves is literally excavating memory” (Sanford in Ferrándiz 2006:2) which can be hard to handle.

Sanford nonetheless pledges for them as she says that the emotions, stories and memories brought up by exhumations are essential to a needed re-evaluation of a painful past (Sanford 2003). However, there are places where there is no doubt whether or not to exhume the bodily remains. As Alexander Hinton (2005) explains in his book *“Why did the Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide”* opening mass graves is a painful yet in a way healing ritual, that provides victims with again another opportunity to get at peace with the past.

Perhaps that is the only right explanation of what reconciliation means. Reaching that point where one can say they have peace with the past. In the previous paragraphs I have tried to explain certain concepts and theories I will be working with. Armed conflicts impose great traumas on societies, paralyzing them and leaving them craving for a new beginning. Unfortunately, things cannot be forgotten and even though the past lies behind us, it will always slumber through in daily life, leaving its marks behind. There are various ways in which human rights can and are violated during warfare like random killings, forced removals, disappearances and torture, all with another thought that lies beneath, but all meant to make people feel powerless and indecisive. They are all powerful ways to assure the continuation of the personal politics, suppressing citizens and degrading those who are not submissive. However, eventually, all things come to an end, so do armed conflicts, and with one ending a new era is marked. After years of war and agony a nation faces the challenge of rebuilding itself that can be appointed as the process of reconciliation. This can take up years, and from my perspective, it should. Governments seem to have a crucial part in this process, especially in situations where a country was involved in a civil war where the state fought civilians. Investing in this process and taking it serious is encouraged by several social scientists who claim that this responsibility governments have is real and should be accepted. Apologizing to the victims should be the first step, followed up by economic compensation after which the truth needs to be told accompanied by the trying of the victimizers in order to give a sign of intolerance towards commitments of crimes and violations of human rights, which stimulates the rebuilding of a nations trust. In this chapter I have focused on one activity in particular that stimulates this reconciliation, which is the excavation of dead bodies, in order to be buried according own tradition in holy grounds. In Nebaj, after twelve years this is the stage people are at today. One thing that should not be neglected nor forgotten is that reconciliation can be compared to a flower, or even to a child. It needs attention over a longer period of time in order to become successful and allow a traumatized nation to show its full colors again.

## 2 Nebaj and the area Ixil

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*Image 1: View on Nebaj from the freeway El Quiché- Nebaj*

Driving into Nebaj for the first time leaves you stunned since it lies in the valley of the Cuchumatanes, which provides with one of the most beautiful views. The area Ixil, or the *triangulo* Ixil as it was called during the conflict consists of Chajul, Cotzal and Nebaj, the last one being the biggest and most populated. For most people daily life in Nebaj revolves around working the land, owning a *tienda*, *panaderia* or *farmacia* or selling ones goods on the local market. Walking the streets will always offer you a chance to glance into someone's home where the women are busy making *tortillas*, *boxoles* or *atol*, washing the clothes in the so typical *pilas* whilst taking care of the children who run the streets playing with each other and all the stray dogs. Once more on the surface things tend to arouse the idea that what you see is what you get and Nebaj is the quiet, peaceful little village you would want it to be, and even though I want to be the last one to deny this, there is more to it than meets the eye.

It appears that the first serious violence during the armed conflict in Nebaj occurred around 1976. As mentioned before, by that time, the guerrilla had fled into the mountains once they had come to realize they were never going to win the war in the capital, where the army was too strong. The states armed forces thus followed the guerrilla into the mountains, perceiving every *campesito* as a *guerrillero* and collaborator, killing a lot of people along their search of the guerrilla. One of the main reasons why this area could become one of the severest to be

struck by the armed conflict is because of its very poor access to information. Since all the radio stations, TV channels and newspapers were controlled by the state, almost no-one in the area Ixil spoke Castellán and a lot were analphabetic as a result of deprived education, people hardly knew what was going on outside of their own world. When the army invaded villages and small towns inhabitants were overwhelmed and caught by surprise with often nowhere to go.

Over the course of years until the mid- eighties the cruelest violations of human rights were committed in the area Ixil, especially in the *municipio* and *aldeas* of Nebaj. In the department of Él Quiché where Nebaj is located nowadays there are still 1,361 disappeared persons, with a total of 4,850 in the whole of Guatemala. In Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal 1,597 people were forced to leave their homes, 1,557 disappeared forcibly and approximately 300 arbitrary executions took place (CEH 1998; Movimiento del Víctimas 2009). Poverty was and still is one of the biggest problems of this area with such a potential. In the department 85% of the people live in poverty of which 45% is severely malnourished. In Quiché 67% of the *indígena* children do not have enough to eat and since in particular the last years this area is dealing with severe water issues 25% of the people who die, die as a result of a water shortage or the lacking of access to clean drinking water.<sup>2</sup> This poverty served as a catalyst for the violence that occurred in and around Nebaj since the army used it in its strategies to manipulate people into for example working with them. As my informant Elmer Gutierrez who served as a *Kaibil* during the nineties explained to me, when invading a village during the so called *planes psicológicos*, airplanes would fly over dropping food- parcels and medicines as a way of persuading the inhabitants and especially the *líderes* of the communities to choose side of the army.<sup>3</sup> Perceiving this strategy in the light of the poignant poverty prevailing in this area, people were very easy to influence which explains the amount of people that joined the PAC during those years.

This poverty is as much of a problem nowadays as it was back in the eighties. There where it served as a catalyst in the past, it now serves as a braking mechanism on the process of reconciliation. Most people's concern is to make it through the day and it has never been this easy for politicians to manipulate the voters in this area. Those who join a political party are promised a lot and just before elections leaders of political parties come into town carrying corrugated iron for people's rooftops or mobile phones in order to persuade them

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<sup>2</sup> [www.waterforpeople.org](http://www.waterforpeople.org) via [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)

<sup>3</sup> *Los Kaibiles* are Guatemala's elite forces who were accused of rude violations of human rights during the eighties when under the control of the Generals Lucas Garcia and Ríos Montt (CEH 1997)

into voting for them. After the elections they sometimes send some bags of corn or *frijol* to eventually never return in order to redeem their debts and promises. Even though this has happened many times people still fall into the trap as they have nothing to lose: *“For them it is better to vote for someone who at least will give them a little bit of what they need than to stick to their principles, which lost their value long ago anyway. It means nothing anymore and everybody knows this”*.<sup>4</sup> People seem to want to move on with their lives the best they can and handing over some of their beliefs and wishes for the future apparently is one more way in which parents try to provide for a better living for their children.

So, on the surface the situation in Nebaj arouses the presumption that what you see is what you get and this small town indeed is quiet and peaceful. You would almost forget that it carries the wounds of a thirty- six years lasting civil war. Yet it does. Wondering around for a longer period of time makes you aware of the nuances as well as of the hidden emotions and thoughts concerning this painful past the inhabitants are still dealing with. This is a town where still everybody lives together. Those who fought the guerrilla, those who fought the army and those who fought but did not even know who or what they were fighting for. The following chapter will show an insight in how the conflict really is perceived, at least from the points of view offered to me by my informants who were willing to share their thoughts and emotions with me.

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<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Jorge on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2009

### **3            The manifestation of the armed conflict in Nebaj**

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#### *3.1    Perspectives on the armed conflict*

*“Why did I join the guerrilla? When I was eight they [the army] killed my parents. First my mother, then my father. Our grandmother used to take care of us, for there was no one else. But it was not enough... They had to kill my wife and two year old daughter as well. They were thrown into the Rio, which is where I found them. Joining the URNG was the only thing left for me to do. They [the army] had to pay in some way. So that’s what I did. And I stayed for seventeen years.”*

-Carlos T.-<sup>5</sup>

Carlos, the former sub commander of the URNG one day explains to me that the guerrilla was able to uphold the battle for all those years because they were combating the army on grounds they knew better and were accustomed to the harsh conditions they had to live in. Especially most of those who joined the guerrilla by the end of the seventies had personal reasons for doing so. He clarifies for me that the reason the violence turned out to be so massive and *demasiado* civilians died, was because of the fact that the state viewed all *campesinos* in the mountains as communists who were planning a revolution and therefore had to be annihilated. Carlos states that this was not true: “Of course people living in poor circumstances were hoping for at least agricultural changes, but for ninety percent of those people a revolution never even crossed their mind because that was simply not what interested them. Their main concern was to make a living and work their lands”.<sup>6</sup>

Quite the opposite point of view is presented to me by two men I get to know, from whom one served in the army during the conflict, and the other serves right now. Both men are of different generations, which provides me with the opportunity to find out how those who have been fighting in the mountains against the guerrilla, and the others, who are trained some ten years after the armed conflict, perceive the war and its aftermath. The oldest one, Louis, expresses how the state had to protect itself and its citizens from revolutionists who were about to seize power and take away peoples freedom. He tells me it was *muy duro*, camping and battling in the mountains where it was cold, they had not enough food, and how

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Carlos T. on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2009

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Carlos T. on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2009

they often sat there, awaiting the enemy of whom they did not even know who that exactly was. He confides to me how it was dangerous, since at times, guerrilleros would be working on the *campo* incognito, attacking soldiers when they passed by, catching them by surprise and often killing them.<sup>7</sup> Marito, the twenty-five year old soldier tells me that he has been working in the area Ixil since some three years, and that he finds it fascinating how little people seem to want to change.<sup>8</sup> He starts off by saying that “The guerrilla lost the war, the army won”. To me this occurs like a pretty strong statement and I notice how I question his motives and do not agree with him, but then he says something I have heard before: “*El conflicto armado fue muy sucio*”. He adds some nuance to his former statement that the army won by uttering that both sides committed crimes, but immediately after this account, as if he feels guilty for having said so, he adds one more time that not everything is solely the army’s fault. At that specific moment I come to realize that I was talking to a soldier who from his point of view was presenting his opinion on the matter to me, and that precisely this was bothering me. For I had come to sympathize with the victims, perceiving the army as the ‘bad guys’ and there I was, listening to this young man’s account and indirectly blaming him for the people suffering. He proceeds by explaining to me that the area Ixil is a very traditional one, where people hang on to their *costumbres* and culture, and that they do not really want to change. They still rather keep their children at home so that they can work on the land instead of sending them to school while it is free. According to him, only good education can help this area climb out of it is *pobreza*, but that it has not become much better in the last few years.<sup>9</sup>

Roberto is a man who has lived in Nebaj his whole life, works as a teacher and luckily has not suffered from the armed conflict in the way that he lost family or other loved ones. One day he tells me how he believes that things actually improved when Rios Montt took control. According to him Guatemala’s infrastructure bettered and most important of all he says, the education in the area Ixil got more attention. He confides to me that from his point of view the guerrilla is the one to be blamed for what happened to the people here. He tells me that it was the guerrilla who fled to the mountains, to rural areas where people hardly knew what was happening and were brutally exposed to this violence that had nothing to do with them. Moreover, he says : “They started looking for people to join and help them. They endangered a lot of villagers, and when some would refuse to help them, they would go into

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Louis on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Marito on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2009

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Marito on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2009

their homes and take all the food, water and medicine they could find, leaving those poor people behind in fear of their lives”. He tells me that people had to organize themselves into the PAC in order to protect themselves against the guerrilla who was stealing out of their homes and threatening inhabitants, almost forcing them into collaborating with them. According to him, thanks to Rios Montt the situation bettered, the guerrilla fled and the peace relatively returned in people’s lives.<sup>10</sup>

*While entering the room the smell of the incense burning immediately greets me and again there are fir needles all over the ground. In the left corner two men are playing a violin and a guitar, which will be repeating the same comforting melody the whole night. On the right side of the room the three coffins are lined up with the smallest, the one of Juan’s little sister, on the left. They are covered with traditional cloths in the colors green, red, black and yellow. All have purple and white flowers on top of them and in front of the coffins, on the ground, at least fifty candles are burning. In the same room the men present are sitting, drinking, laughing and talking the night away. In the kitchen the women are preparing ‘tamales’ and pouring quetzalteca into the coffee. They will be awake the whole night, watching over their dead in order to rebury them the next morning, for they have been waiting for this moment for twenty-seven years.<sup>11</sup>*

Others, like this family described above, who did loose loved ones, lived in Nebaj all of their lives and saw terrible things happen, which includes rapes, beat- ups, forced disappearances and tortures, are noticeably milder about the guerrilla, and mainly blame the army for most of the things that happened. I meet a man in front of the catholic Church in Nebaj on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February, the *Día Nacional de la Dignificación de Víctimas del Conflicto Armado* in Guatemala, who tells me that the next day he is going to rebury his mother, grandmother and six-months old sister who were killed in 1983. This man, Francisco, becomes one of my key informants. During that night they tell me that the severest violence in Nebaj occurred between 1981 and 1984, and that hundreds of people were forced to flee their houses and live in the mountains hiding from the army, mandatory moved to gated communities, and that a lot were less lucky and were killed, tortured or disappeared. They blame the army and the state

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Roberto on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2009

<sup>11</sup> The night I attend the wake and reburial of Francisco’s mother, grandmother and sister on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2009



for what happened, but also tell me that the guerrilla made mistakes too. This family is struck too hard by the war to be worrying who is to blame more. Their loved ones will never return.

It is clear that there are a lot of different ways in which the conflict is seen. People with different backgrounds have different points of view and those do not necessarily match. Above one can read that opinions on who is the one to blame for the violence differ, though I have found a certain communality. The violence in Nebaj relatively ended around 1989. The conflict still continued but the battles were fought elsewhere and civilians in this area were not that much endangered as they were before. My key informant, who served in the army during the conflict for ten months, and later was involved with an organization that works with victims in Nebaj, explains to me that most people nowadays blame the government for a lot of things that happened, and for the current situation. Promises are being made constantly, but only a few are kept. Most of the plans made during the signing of the Peace Accords are still just plans, and the government seems to be failing in compensating the victims and tell the truth.

### 3.2 *What lies beneath*

After the conflict ended most of the people who had fled Nebaj and survived came back, others stayed. Amongst those people are in the first place a lot of *guerrilleros*. In the second place there are people living in Nebaj who used to fight in the army and the last ones are the former *patrulleros*. On the surface all of them seem to be fine living at the same place, however, the more I talked to people and the more they trusted me, the more a whole different perspective was shown to me. As I have explained in chapter two, people in this area are very easy to manipulate, which all has to do with the poverty. By the end of the nineties still a lot of people were involved in the PAC which generated a lot of fear while everyone was and still is living next to each other. This is one topic Nebaj's inhabitants do not like to talk about, since they know that their neighbor could be their enemy, which causes problems in several areas for example informing the police of crimes. Many police officers or civil servants used to be involved with the army or the PAC and nowadays cover high positions in the *municipalidad* preventing people from filing charges. Since a lot of victims recognize their victimizers placed on these high positions, there are no feelings of safety or trust in the state whatsoever

as there is no confidence in those people who killed during the war, believing they were serving a good cause. “How could one ever trust the man who killed his brother?”.<sup>12</sup>

*“She called me a few times in the middle of the night, convinced of the fact that they [former PAC] were coming to harm her and her family. She told me that she heard rumors about them on the streets and that she could not sleep at night. With every sound she wakes up, panicking. You would think that they were just rumors, but they are not. Some are still righteously afraid to press charges for example, because the people working at the police station often are former ‘patrulleros’. Have you heard the story about Francisco Chenax who disappeared two days ago? They say it was them.”*

-Monica-<sup>13</sup>

During the gatherings of one of the organizations I worked with this anecdote above made me realize how hidden the fear of the people living in Nebaj still is. After two months, the day before I was about to leave Nebaj it finally came to me that some people probably still are in danger, and that the consequences of the armed conflict are bigger than I could have imagined. As Monica says a lot of police officers nowadays working at the police station or other official working at the *ministerio publico* used to work with the PAC or with the army. People are very often afraid of pressing charges because they know the one they are supposed to do this is the one who is to blame for the crime they intend to press charges for. People sometimes aren't even free to speak up in their own homes for they know their neighbor was a spy during the war. One afternoon while talking to my key informant he tells me how his girlfriend's sister, an *izquierdista*, one day disappeared. They knew exactly who was to blame and why she disappeared, they just could not do anything about it because they would put themselves in danger as well, because friends and family of someone who was on the ‘wrong’ side, also is seen as ‘wrong’.<sup>14</sup> As the quote above illustrates, even to this day there are still rumors, and they are having a grand impact on people's lives. Some still believe that there is no place where they can be safe since they were with the guerrilla, which can be linked to for example Robbins explanation how certain means used during conflicts are intended to unmake the society (Robben 2005).

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<sup>12</sup> Interview and quotation of Jorge on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2009

<sup>13</sup> During the gathering of ECAP I attended on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2009

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Jorge on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

## **4 The interpretation of reconciliation in Nebaj**

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*“When do you think it will be over? Yes, if they pay for my dead father things would be easier. Yes, if the government apologizes, we get to know the exact truth and the people who did this to us are behind bars, I would be relieved. But my father will still be dead, and I would still never understand why, even if I would know. Comprendes lo que quiero decirte? The pain just never goes away, no matter what, so if you ask me what reconciliation is? I do not know, you tell me.”*

-Jaime-<sup>15</sup>

### *4.1 Reconciliation in the hearts of people*

Reconciliation is a process that has been getting quite some attention in Nebaj. When uttering the word most people start off by nodding. I see them bowing their head, nod and shake it, stare at the ground for a split second, and then almost always the first thing they say is: *“Si, es muy difícil, reconciliación”*. It is clear that it is a well known word and that it is something people have an opinion on, but what I sense while talking to them about it is that they find it hard to capture what exactly it means for them. In their bodily expressions they almost always lower their back and slightly bow their head, and I have not spoken to one person who stood firm while explaining this concept to me. They do not respond particularly emotional to it, however there seems to be a significant difference between the way people speak about the conflict and the way they speak about the reconciliation. As I have explained before, people I have met were quite willing to talk about their experiences during the conflict, and when they did so, they told about it in a way in which a certain amount of rage still could be detected which provides them with a visible determination. However, when speaking about the process of reconciliation, some tend to make an impression that I can best describe with the words ‘hurt’ and ‘powerlessness’. Others, especially those working for organizations that work with victims of the armed conflict, which I will discuss later on, explain reconciliation in a very down to earth and practical way, which made me understand why those who are the victims, sometimes tend to look powerless to me.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Jaime on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2009

#### 4.2 *Reconciliation interpreted by the Nebajeños*

In Nebaj the process of reconciliation brings up a certain amount of words from which one in particular seems to be very important: '*dignificación*'. This word has no literal translation in English but if I would have to describe it, it would be somewhere in the line of dignity and in this particular case the honoring of the victims. *Dignificación* all has to do with the importance of excavating the dead from clandestine cemeteries and reburying them in sacred grounds according to Mayan traditions.<sup>16</sup> These *inhumaciones* seem to be of great importance, as people clarify to me, they feel like they failed to save their family members when still alive, and the only remaining way they can make up a little bit for that is by fulfilling the one duty left for them which is to give their loved ones the last resting place and respect they deserve. As I attend a wake and reburial of the mother, grandmother and little sister of Francisco, who were killed in 1983, the family tells me how they have been waiting for this moment for twenty-seven years. All that time they explain, they could not have peace, believing that the spirits of their deceased family members were still wandering around, still seeking for a way to leave this earth, seeking for a place where they would feel safe.<sup>17</sup> So this dignity in the first place seems to be the reparation of the dignity of those ones who died, and who deserve to be treated with respect. In the second place, by being able to fulfill this duty they have, people feel like they at least have done something to provide a safe resting place for their dead. Being given this opportunity the ones who are still alive sense that especially the government is taking them seriously which makes them feel appreciated more. For that reason, *exhumaciones* serve this purpose of showing respect to those who suffered and died during the armed conflict, as well as to those who have to live with the consequences.

Other words that occur while talking about dignity and reconciliation are *verdad*, *justicia* and *paz*. *Verdad* as it is explained to me, signifies the telling of the truth. Besides the reburials people want to know what exactly happened, who committed the crimes, and most of all, they want to understand why. In order to do so it is of great importance for them that those ones responsible take that responsibility, and that the truth is no longer hidden or somewhere in the middle of assumptions and denials. Moreover, not only knowing what has happened but also the telling of the history in a righteous way is vital in this reconciliation process. Especially when talking to former guerrillero's I sense that the way they are

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<sup>16</sup> Conversations held on and observations made on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2009: El Día Nacional de Dignificación del Víctimas

<sup>17</sup> Conversations with Francisco's family members on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2009

represented is very important for them.<sup>18</sup> In the past, especially the government of President Arzú that reigned the country during the signing of the Peace Accords, certain recommendations done by the CEH and REHMI were ignored and the army was taken in protection. For former guerrillero's, being represented as the 'bad guys' is one thing that causes great powerlessness, because they do not want to be the ones taking all the blame while the army gets away with cruel violations of human rights.<sup>19</sup> Laasko (2003) explains this same concept where it is important for victims of a civil war or genocide, that the truth is being told, especially by those who committed the crimes, as well as a righteous representation of the victims, where there 'image' is being restored.

When talking about *justicia*, people refer to two things in particular. The first one is the trying of those ones responsible for massacres, murders, rapes, forced disappearances and other violations committed during the conflict. Up until this day there are trials against military officers who are hard to prosecute because they are still protected by the state or dubious laws that make it hard to hold them accountable for what they have done. For most of the victims this is a problem that is hard to overcome, as Boraine (2001) shows in his article that victims of the apartheid regime felt like they never were fully compensated since most perpetrators were not behind bars because the state protected them. The second thing *justicia* stands for in Nebaj is this compensation of the victims. In a country where more than 200,000 people died there is an unimaginable amount of people that has lost family. A lot of women lost their husbands, sons, fathers, many children disappeared, hundreds of people were forced to flee their homes and leave their land and other belongings behind. The lives of those people were severely destabilized, and still are. In her article "*Customary Law and Democratic Transition in Guatemala*" Rachel Sieder (1997) describes this phenomenon of the importance of compensations in especially Guatemalan rural communities. As she explains, this seems to be a culturally implemented way of restoring the order since many towns and villages uphold a local law system where conflicts are resolved internally in order to save money and time by not sending offenders to the state court (Sieder 1997:50). The area Ixil is a poor one where people suffer from malnutrition, many cannot read or write, and there are a lot of land conflicts as a consequence of the war. All of those people feel they have the right to be compensated for the pain they suffered and that they have the right to receive financial aid to balance the losses of those ones who generated income. When talking to a man working for one of the organizations that helps victims receive this compensation, he explains to me that

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Carlos T. on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2009

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Carlos T. on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 2009

people want to be taken seriously. They want the government to recognize what has happened to them and to offer them the help they need. That way he says, Guatemala's citizens and especially the victims of the war, could start trusting the state again, feeling appreciated and respected once again.<sup>20</sup>

The word *paz* is more problematic to understand since the Peace Accords were signed in 1996 and Guatemala has been living in 'peace' ever since. But as a lot of other things in this country, this is not what it seems. Peace does not solely mean living without a war. The former guerrillero's I talked to confided to me that they are still at times threatened. I find out about a place called *Nueva Estrella*, which is located in El Petén and is a former guerrillero's community that built itself up after the conflict and entirely provides for itself. I get in touch with the community's leader Don Pablo, who tells me the history of their community and the difficulties they are facing. His account below illustrates very well how peace, even after thirteen years, is very relative and perhaps even fragile.

*“As the government knows we are a former guerrillero community, they still know how to scare us, threaten our children, patrol around our land and insult us whenever they can. We are in a huge debt because while buying this land in 1997 the state tricked us and let us pay way too much. Nowadays we have to work hard to pay this back, and we try to protect ourselves by attracting tourists to come here, so more and more people learn about us and about Guatemala's history, because we think it is one of the most important things: that people never forget. We are convinced of the fact that because we get some help from international organizations, they [the state] have not tried to really hurt us yet”.*

-Don Pablo-<sup>21</sup>

Next to these four words, *dignificación*, *justicia*, *verdad* and *paz*, which are so significant in the talking and thinking of the reconciliation process, I notice that many people refer to the phrase '*buscamos perdón*' which refers to their wish for the Government to apologize for what has happened, because they are the ones people hold accountable for orders given to violate human rights. The declaration of this apology not only encompasses the pronunciation of the word *perdón*, it is accompanied by actions that show the honesty of the spoken words,

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Xavier on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

<sup>21</sup> Conversation with Don Pablo on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

which can be translated into once again, the economic compensation so much needed in this area.<sup>22</sup>

In Nebaj reconciliation can be best understood through the word *dignificación* that appears to be a summary of the other words people use to describe what the concept means to them. It is in the first place something very painful for them as it reminds of the still fairly fresh wounds of the conflict. Secondly, even though they do use this range of words indicating that reconciliation encapsulates all those words explained, making it almost a holistic experience, the economic compensation still is on the foreground. During a conversation with Jaime he almost accidentally tells me how two brothers who received a compensation of Q12,000,- for their deceased mother, fought each other over who would get the most amount of money since they needed to split it, which illustrates the people's desperateness for means to survive.<sup>23</sup> Taking it a step further therefore seems to early and the government should show remorse by seriously laying her hands on this regions poverty, in order for people to take the reconciliation to the next level, for example the *justicia* they talk about but they still have not reached. According to some of my informants reconciliation never reaches a final stage, or a final destination, because for them, no matter what happens, the pain never can be taken away, by no compensation whatsoever.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Jorge on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Jaime on the 30th of March 2009

## 5 The actors involved in the reconciliation process

Quite immediately after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 several organizations started to emerge who work with the victims in and around Nebaj. Below I will discuss the different actors who are involved in the reconciliation process and the way they work with the victims. This I will illustrate by using the personal experience of one of my informants, Francisco Pedro Raymundo, who unfortunately knows all about these organizations and their operations. Afterwards I will try to answer the question how these organizations cooperate together and what activities are an important part of the reconciliation.

### 5.1 *Movimiento del Victimas and Movimiento del Desarraigados*

*“First my father was killed, then a year later my mother, grandmother and little sister, here in Turanza. I think I was ten and my brother was eight. The both of us saw what happened to our mother, grandmother and our sister. We were hiding under the pila just a few meters behind the house. Of course our family was not the only one under attack so a great panic emerged, people started running for their lives, going into the mountains hoping that they stood a chance there. Our neighbors started fleeing as well and helped us carry the bodies with us. More people were busy digging graves up on the hills and that is how clandestine cemeteries arose, with people fleeing their homes taking the dead bodies with them to eventually bury them somewhere along. It is against our tradition not to bury the dead at all. You can imagine that years later some do not remember where exactly they buried the bodies and more important, you can imagine that now people want their loved ones excavated from those improvised and illegal cemeteries, to be able to bury them according to our own customs. When my mother was being exhumed this man told me: “Here are the remains of your mother” but I told him that the skull he was showing me could not be hers because I had seen how she was shot in her head. Therefore I was sure she still would have a bullet. I was right, the next grave they showed me was the one where my mother had been. Here, this is the bullet. You see, in order to excavate we need the government’s permission and more people whose family members are buried on the same spot as is yours so that the same place doesn’t have to be searched twice. It may not sound that difficult, yet it is. In order to prove that I have lost family I need to have a declaración jurada which proves that the person I want to excavate was registered at the birth register and that I am in the possession of a death*



*certificate. Most people do not have those kind of documents nor are they able to obtain them by themselves since analphabetism for example is a big problem in this area. So they need help to get a hold of those documents, and they need help to file a petition for an exhumation. There again lies another problem, which is that there are still a lot of disappeared persons who need to be found in order to be able to proceed with the whole modus operandi, which is to eventually receive some compensation for the ones you lost”.* <sup>24</sup>

The organization involved in helping people out with legal procedures is the *Movimiento del Victimas*. This institution does crucial work in assisting people in order to obtain the right juridical documents. As argued before analphabetism is a big problem in the area Ixil so a lot of people cannot read the documents nor can they understand the juridical terminology used in them, which is why more and more people attend literacy classes in the little spare time they can find (M. Edelbroek 2009). The *Movimiento del Victimas* works in Nebaj since 1998 and has a widespread area of initiatives they help people out with. They have commissions involved with health issues, education, human rights, land conflicts, agriculture, victims of the armed conflict and exhumations.<sup>25</sup> The people I repeatedly talked to from the *Movimiento del Victimas* are working for the *Comisión de Tierras*, *Comisión del Victimas* and *Asociación Jurídica de Exhumaciones*. As explained to me by several informants, the *Movimiento del Victimas* is working with too few people and too little money. The money available mostly has to be used for exhumations and juridical procedures. Next to this the *Movimiento* offers practical help, for example being the distributor of corn and *frijol* offered by humanitarian organizations or from time to time sent by the government, and as advisor to people how to work their lands in the most effective and efficient way.<sup>26</sup>

For people working for the *Movimiento del Victimas* reconciliation is something that can be reached only if people are taken seriously. The state plays a big part in this process because they feel the government should step in and take responsibility for what has happened in the past. The lack of interest which is expressed in the negligence of the victims and the unwillingness to properly compensate them is one of the reasons why my informants from the *Movimiento* tell me that the whole process is moving in the right direction very slow. For most people the financial aid is essential in order to survive, and the grand disinterest of the government to provide in this generates a lot of rage and a certain

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Francisco on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2009

<sup>25</sup> Interview with coworkers of *Movimiento del Victimas* on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Isolina from *Movimiento del Victimas* in the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

numbness because people simply do not have the power nor the means to do anything about it. According to Maria and Miguel this is why true reconciliation that process where people will actually start looking for justice in the way that violators will be pursued, is still so hidden and minimal. If people are mentally and physically still ill because there is too little money made available for social help and there are not enough means to feed people, they will never take their process of reconciliation to the next level.<sup>27</sup>

Very much related to the Movimiento del Victimas is the *Movimiento del Desarraigados*, which is the organization specialized in the exhumations of bodies from clandestine cemeteries. As explained in previous chapters, having someone's remains is essential as the state demands that one can prove relatedness to the person one is asking compensation for. So if one knows on which clandestine cemetery someone's relative was buried, one can go to the *Movimiento del Desarraigados* and request for an excavation. Money, time and the government's goodwill are needed in order to do so. A clandestine cemetery does not exist of only one body, which means that more people have to be found whose family is buried on the same place so that the remains can be dug up at the same time. When this has happened, the Movimiento files a request for permission to open this particular cemetery. As the manager of Movimiento del Desarraigados explains to me, the state does not pay for excavations. When I react surprised and ask why, Pedro tells me that they just do not seem to be willing to do so and are not interested in financing justice. To be able to nonetheless excavate, the Movimiento always is looking for funding, and the excavations that do happen are for 80% financed by international organizations like The Red Cross.<sup>28</sup> I find out that the first excavation in Nebaj occurred in 1998 and that throughout 2004 and 2006 a lot of bodies were exhumed in several *aldeas* around Nebaj. Last year there were forty-three cases of which only thirty-six were 'resolved' because there was not enough money to pay for all of them. This year, Pedro tells me, hopefully starting somewhere in April, there are sixteen cases with a total amount of approximately two hundred bodies that will be excavated.<sup>29</sup>

After bodies are exhumed Pedro explains to me, the remains are sent to the forensic laboratory in Guatemala City. There, the required DNA material is conducted and compared to that of the people who claim to be family. Then the remains are obligatory stored in the laboratory for one year and picked up by family members. The Movimiento provides the people with coffins and crosses which after people can rebury their family members on legal

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with coworkers at the Movimiento del Victimas on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Pedro on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Pedro on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

and sacred grounds according to their own tradition. For these people reconciliation in the first place is the excavation of their loved ones who are on clandestine cemeteries. Providing them with a proper, sacred place where they can rest is a way in which they try to compensate for not being able to save them in the past. Pedro explains to me how complicated reconciliation is, and that the poverty of this area makes things even harder. People are still traumatized and not fully at ease to talk about the past, which is a direct result of the lack of trust Nebaj's residents have towards their local government since victimizers are working at the *ministerio publico*.<sup>30</sup>

## 5.2 *The Program Nacional de Resarcimiento*

*“After the government approved the filed documents and gave permission to exhume we took it to the next level, that is asking for economic compensation. Sometimes it felt like there was no end to it. You have to keep proving that you are in the possession of the righteous document and that you are telling the truth. So after we exhumed my father, mother, grandmother and sister we could ask for compensation. However, we did not receive reimbursement for all of them, for my father and mother, my brother and I together. As I told you sometimes it felt like I was the criminal and not those people who killed my family. Besides, I felt like a vagabond, begging for money even though as a victim I am entitled to ask for this compensation considering the fact that our lives dramatically changed after those days. It is just that the government cooperates laboriously. They put as little effort in it as possible, making us feel left alone with our problems like feeding our children and making a living in general. We went and gave all the documents we had, people from Movimiento del Víctimas helped us out there, because I was still learning to read and write, and we waited. So many victims come there for help, which is why it takes so much time. They need to go through all of your papers, and if anything is not the way it should be you can start off again. They try to stay nice, but they are working for Colóm, what can they do?”*<sup>31</sup>

The state related *Program Nacional de Resarcimiento* (PNR) was founded in 2005 and has a term of ten years to finish its work. At this moment there are six people working at the office of PNR who take care of a few things. Their main focus is providing victims with financial compensation for their losses, which is paid for by the state. This compensation can only be

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Pedro on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Francisco on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

filed if one has lost a parent, husband or wife, brother(s) or sister(s) and children, and there is a limit to it. Since the state has a set budget one can ask compensation for as many deceased family members as one likes, only two of them will be compensated. Juan, who is the manager of PNR in Nebaj, tells me that in 2008 1,536 people have received financial compensation in one way or another, with a total amount of Q28,954,889,-. PNR not only provides in this financial compensation for people who have lost relatives, they also try to help people with a place to live and land to work on.<sup>32</sup> During the conflict a lot of people were forced to leave their homes and land to escape the violence. After coming back, the homes and lands of most of those who fled were occupied by others, who then refused to leave, as some of my informants from Movimiento del Victimados also have explained to me. This resulted in a lot of land conflicts that still exist. Building new houses and providing people with money to buy new land is one of the other things the PNR is involved in, but once again, everything happens with the money made available by the state, which is not enough. When talking to Juan about what reconciliation exactly is, he makes clear to me that *justicia*, *dignificación* and *verdad* are the fundamentals on which reconciliation needs to build. He tells me how people need to know what happened, why it happened, who are the guilty ones and that those ones are charged for what they have done. When asking him how this shows and in what concrete ways people are trying to reach this he tells me: “*Por compensación*”. It appears to me that apparently in the first place people need to receive money and that this is, at least for now, their main concern and their perception of reconciliation.<sup>33</sup>

In order for people to be able to file for a financial compensation at PNR, they need to prove that the person they are filing the compensation for is really a family member and deceased. This matter causes problems for several reasons. In the first place, in order to prove that somebody actually is family, one needs DNA material. Obtaining this requires having the bodily remains, which is not always so. When one has a family member exhumed, this has to be reported to the *municipio* where the person becomes registered as dead. This *declaración jurada* is vital and needs to be presented to the state, which then decides whether or not the paperwork is complete to be giving one financial aid. An additional problem that victims face is that a family member still can be missing. As this causes difficulties for obtaining DNA material in order to prove someone’s right, those people can never be compensated unless more money becomes available to look for those disappeared ones.<sup>34</sup> Filing a request for

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Juan on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2009

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Juan on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Jorge on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2009

financial compensation thus is a time consuming, difficult procedure, as well as it is an emotional matter because it brings up memories from the past people would rather forget.

### 5.3 *Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial*

*“Those images I will never forget. The bullet I still have is the one thing that keeps making me aware of the realness of what I have seen. The sunny day, the stillness before they [the army] entered, the chaos, us hiding underneath the blue pila, the water still running. I still see how they pulled her by the hair, dragging her over the ground, tearing apart her clothes and making them dirty. White never will be white anymore. When closing my eyes I see the skull and the little bones, reminding me of her innocence [his little sister]. I will never forget those things and I do not know how I can live with all I have seen, as a young boy and as a guerrillero later on. How do I sleep at night when I still see the blood, hear the screaming and smell the burned houses when I close my eyes?”<sup>35</sup>*

*Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial*, as the name already suggests, mainly is involved in psychosocial aid for the victims. They work in two teams, one engaged in the *exhumaciones* and the other one in *torturas*. The team that works on exhumations coordinates activities with both of the Movimientos and PNR. The team working on the tortures mainly coordinates activities with *Asociacion de Justicia y Reconciliacion* (AJR) in order to provide them with people who are willing to talk about what they went through and what they remember. While attending a gathering of both of the teams I am able to hear a lot of personal stories, difficulties and reasons for working for this organization. As it appears, most of these people are victims themselves which motivates them and what makes them, in my eyes, one of the bravest I have ever met. Dealing with traumatized people every day and hearing stories about forced disappearances, torture and murder does not leave them unmoved, especially not as victims themselves, but they are one of the most dedicated people. When speaking to most of them about reconciliation, what I heard is that from their point of view the most important thing now is that people get over their traumas in order to be able to function again.<sup>36</sup> Monica explains to me how a lot of people are severely traumatized, still afraid and even paranoid. One anecdote she tells me is about a woman who used to call her in the middle of the night when hearing noises outside of her house, being convinced of the fact that someone was

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Francisco on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Josue from ECAP on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2009

coming to get her feeling unsafe in her own house. Monica tells me that this woman is only one out of many who deals with these kind problems. A lot of victims still believe that they are subject to espionage, threatenings and persuasion. It takes a great deal of time to gain the trust and confidence of victims in order to work with them. That is why reconciliation is very hard and hidden several people from ECAP tell me.<sup>37</sup> People first need to get over their own fears in order to be able to, for example, start looking for justice. Those who are too scared to talk will never file charges because they still believe they are in serious danger. ECAP's policy herein is that people cannot be forced into therapy or similar activities, that it should be their own choice at all times to face their fears and trauma's.

#### 5.4 *Asociación de Justicia y Reconciliación*

*“The two of them came in, carrying a camera and thanking me even before I had said anything. They explained what they were trying to do, and I could not agree more. They sat me down on a chair in my kitchen and told me to tell the story the way I wanted, take the time I needed and try to mention all the details I could remember, even if they did not seem important. So I told them how they killed my father who fought with the guerrilla, how they killed my mother by chasing a bullet through her head only because she was his wife. And how they killed my sister. I told them how they started burning Turanza to the ground, leaving nothing the way it was. I tried remembering how many of them I saw, but I was never sure I gave the right answer. Nor did I know who those people were. They were them, for me that was enough to hate them for the rest of my life! You ask me how people can vote for FRG? They manipulate everyone, but when I look at his face [Rios Montt] it makes me sick. I hope they [AJR] succeeds before they all get killed.”<sup>38</sup>*

The last organization that can be distinguished in this process of reconciliation in Nebaj is the *Asociación de Justicia y Reconciliación*. This is an institution that works from the capital, and as explained to me by their depute in the area Ixil, has been working in Nebaj and other *aldeas* nearby like Ilom, Xix, Cocop and Acul, since 2005. The works of this organization come down to gathering testimonies and confessions of people who survived the conflict and are willing to testify in front of a camera what has happened, what they have seen and who, according to them, is to blame for it. Hector, the delegate in Nebaj, explains to me that the

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with several coworkers of ECAP on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2009

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Francisco on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2009

purpose of these recordings and tracking of people who survived and are willing to talk, is to conduct as much evidence as possible to accuse Rios Montt of genocide and stand a chance in court. He tells me that the AJR mainly is investigating *Plan Victoria '82* and *Plan Sofia* in Nebaj.<sup>39</sup> These appear to have been the cruelest of all operations inflicted on the population in the area Ixil but up until today the state has never agreed upon giving accessibility to foreign and native investigators to go through these documents. In this investigation the AJR is cooperating with a couple of organizations like the ODHA, which is the human rights organization of the catholic Church of Guatemala and ECAP.

When I ask Hector how the term reconciliation in the name of the organization can be perceived, he explains to me that the kind of reconciliation they are looking for is directly related to justice. Trying to accuse Rios Montt of genocide from their point of view is the righteous thing to do, and this justice, which only can be established if those ones who are guilty are convicted, contributes to the process of reconciliation where people can actually try to have peace with what happened after they know the truth. "I cannot have peace before that evil man is in prison, and that is how many people feel. I can know, I am a victim myself."<sup>40</sup>

After this account on the organizations working on the process of reconciliation in Nebaj one can see how crucial every single one of them is. All of those people involved in this are dedicated and striving for the best for the cause. After observing everything for two months I came to realize how delicate, complicated and slow the process of reconciliation is. In overall, all of these organizations work separately although some of them work together more than others do. PNR needs to coordinate her proceedings with almost all of the organizations since they are the one paying people with the government's money. Both of the Movimientos need to work together as both of them are involved in exhumations, and both of them need to report their proceedings to ECAP considering the fact that they are the ones who offer support to the victims afterwards. All in all they need each other, and from the short time I was allowed to be with them and talk to them, they seem to be functioning well together. The victims need them to, because when there is a bad communication between the organizations this means that things can get even slower and more complicated for those in need of the help.

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Hector from AJR on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2009

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Hector on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2009

## Conclusion

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The reasons for Nebaj being one of the severest to be struck during the armed conflict, especially between 1976 and 1989 has been clarified in the foregoing chapters. The areas poor access to information and the considerable height of analphabetism due to deprived education are locally the most important things that made this possible. Another important reason why Nebaj and its surroundings turned into a battlefield was the guerrilla fleeing to the mountains hoping to there win the war. As a consequence of its neglected position in the country, being one of the poorest rural regions, residents were easy to manipulate into cooperating with the army by joining into the PAC, believing that was their only way out when soldiers started convincing them that it was the guerrilla who had started killing people. According to several human rights organizations and two official reports executed and published in Guatemala known as the CEH and REHMI it is proved that the army was guilty of 93% of all the violations that had been committed during the war. Over the course of the thirty- six years the armed conflict lasted several methods of violating the human rights were used. Random killings, forced disappearances, tortures, rapes and forced removals were no exceptions all serving their own purposes, but what can be summarized by the need to unmake the body and society, breaking peoples will, making them indecisive and therefore obedient (Robben 2005).

Twelve and a half years after the signing of the Peace Accords in December 1996 Nebaj is in a process of reconciliation. Immediately after the ending of the war a truth commission was established, the *Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico* (CEH), supposed to examine the violations committed during the conflict and to subsequently give advises on how to rebuild the nation. The CEH however faced the same problems as did other truth commissions in the past in for example South Africa, meaning that they lacked the authority and the power to appoint the victimizers and actually sentence them (Van Zyl 1999). President Arzú denied certain accusations made towards the army and refused to even consider some of the recommendations made by the commission in an attempt to protect the higher officials (Jonas 2005). Challenged by this the Guatemalan catholic Church started its own investigation publishing its results in 1998 and being even harder on the army than the CEH had been. These reports can be seen as early attempts to rebuild the trust and start working on the reconciliation, however, from my own experience in the field, I think this process has only just begun. For people living in Nebaj, the meaning of reconciliation is expressed in the following words: *dignificación, justicia, verdad* and *paz*. After two months I



came to understand that all these words combined could be summarized by the word *dignificación*, which encompasses the content of the others, being the one word that actually approaches the genuine meaning of reconciliation. The restoration of the victims' dignity is the most important thing and that is what reconciliation means to them, which again signifies that they want the truth to be told, the victimizers to be sentenced, the peace to continue, the government to apologize for the mistakes made and financial aid to be offered for those who lost family. Several social scientists came across more or less the same concepts while studying societies that had been through a civil war like Guatemala. According to Lerner (2007) the telling of the truth is one of the most important components of a successful reconciliation, and he is supported by Sarah Ruden (2008) who considers the South African reconciliation to be failing since the government fell short on telling the exact truth. Alex Boraine (2001) and Paul van Zyl (1999) seem to agree on the fact that justice however can be even more important than the telling of the truth because it provides in certain feelings of safety for the victims if the victimizers get prosecuted and sentenced.

Besides these words there seems to be one more important component to the *dignificación* in Nebaj and that are the exhumation of bodies from clandestine cemeteries followed up by inhumations on legal, consecrated ground. In the whole process of reconciliation this particular activity is the vital one at this moment. Considering the fact that many clandestine cemeteries still have not been cleared and a lot of people still have not reburied their loved ones according to their own customs and traditions, this is very understandable. Ton Robben (2005) describes this ritual in his book, explaining the underlying significance of it for the victims. Not having someone's body and therefore not being able to bury that person conform the cultural requirements means failing to show the dead the last honor and respect. In Nebaj, this can be appointed as the stage the process of reconciliation finds itself at today. Bodies are being exhumed from clandestine cemeteries as we speak and people are fighting every day to convince the government to make more money available for the search of disappeared persons in order to bury them as well. Reconciliation means dignity and dignity's most important component this instant is the economic compensation. Thanks to the great poverty of this area and the early stage the reconciliation finds itself at right now, all people care about is enough food on the table. I think that every single component in the process of reconciliation is equally vital, the one cannot stand without the other and all lie in each other's wake.

Immediately after the ending of the conflict several organizations arose in Nebaj in order to help out the victims. Nowadays there are five associations working nonstop to help

out the best they can. In the first place the *Movimiento del Victimias* and the *Movimiento del Desarraigados* are mainly involved in taking care of the paperwork needed for exhumations and the filing for economic compensations. *Movimiento del Victimias* is the one who helps victims to look for disappeared family, obtain the right documents to be able to undertake further steps. Besides that they are the one receiving food- parcels with corn and *frijol* distributing it to the victims of the conflict. *Movimiento del Desarraigados* is specialized in arranging exhumations and the specialized teams to exhume the bodies, organizing protest marches to the capital and helping out with inhumations. Their contribution to the restoration of the dignity of the victims is indispensable since they are the ones providing in all the necessary goods. *Program Nacional de Resarcimiento* (PNR) is the second crucial organization making sure that victims can file for economic compensation. They are a state institution working with the government's budget and the government's rules which sometimes causes some trouble since people claim they are not operating independently which causes victims to think they are preys to corruption. Of course this argument cannot be denied, since corruption is a huge problem in Guatemala and since PNR is a government institution they will always be bound to certain restrictions. Nonetheless they do the best they can to pay all the victims the money they are entitled to. *Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial* (ECAP) is an organization that does not lie in the line of the previous three, who are mainly occupied with concrete situations. People working at ECAP are the ones providing the psychosocial aid to the victims while going through compelling situations like the exhumations or while processing the trauma's gotten during the conflict. They stand by the side of the victims offering their support to those who want it fulfilling the emotional task they have, dealing with the hardest stories ever heard. Even though Nebaj still isn't the best place for them to be working at, the people of *Asociacion de Justicia y Reconciliacion* (AJR) are the ones trying to take the process of reconciliation to the next level, which is accusing General Rios Montt of genocide, taking reconciliation to the next level. In order to do so they need all the evidence and testimonies they can get and are working together with the ODHA to accomplish this. Exact information on what has happened, how it happened, by whom it was executed etc. is essential in order to stand a chance in court, next to the known fact that what they are doing is dangerous, as the government needs no priors.

Eventually, reconciliation never ends. This is what my informants emphasized to me more than once. According to them certain conditions need to be met, certain people should be put behind bars "in order to never walk this earth again" and for now the most important thing is

that a solid solution should be offered for this towns and regions poverty. For now being able to excavate their loved ones and rebury them is next to the economic compensation what concerns them most. However, most of them said, even if all of these promises would be fulfilled, their pain would still be there. The scars of their past would still be there and that is why for them, reconciliation does not have an ultimate destination, which is no safeguard for the government to keep failing on their obligations towards the victims. Reconciliation should according to them be a priority at all times in order to build up the trust that was damaged during the conflict, crucial to preserve the fragile peace.

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## Appendix 1 Reflection

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Looking back on the period of writing my research proposal, arriving in Nebaj and starting off with my investigation along with now finishing my thesis it feels like time flew by. I find myself feeling like everyone forgot to tell me that it would all be over before I knew it and that then, I would wish I could do it all over again.



*Image 2: Making 'boxboles' with my host family.<sup>41</sup>*

In my second report that I sent home to my supervisor after some five weeks I remember saying the following: “The way I thought things would be was somewhere along the line of gatherings where people who had gone through horrible things during the conflict would talk to each other about this with a professional to lead the event. Moreover, I thought that it would be very clear who in Nebaj were opposed to each other (for example former guerrilleros, soldiers, former members of PAC) and that after thirteen years everything would be out in the open. Now, I realize that this was pretty naive of me to think”. If I were to describe how well prepared I was before entering the field, I would say that the previous quotation indicates this fairly well. Yes I had prepared myself by trying to learn and understand everything there was to learn and understand about field research, but I was in the least ready for what I heard and read about the conflict once I arrived in Nebaj and indulged myself in my role as a researcher. I came to realize that I had been too naive when it came

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<sup>41</sup> *Boxbol* is Nebaj's traditional food made of *masa* and *Ouskil* leaves

down to my own position considering my background and past so much related to my subject. Before starting off I had anticipated that I would probably hear tough stories about what people had seen and experienced, however I had not prepared myself well enough that there was a possibility that it would really get to me to that point where it could start to influence my research. So when that actually happened I caught myself not knowing what to do and how to react. Eventually I was able to take the required distance after postponing the research for a few days, where after I started observing myself purposefully in order to know when exactly I got too emotional so that I could guarantee the objectivity of my data better since at least I could be honest and clear about my feelings and presumptions I dealt with.

From the very beginning I was motivated and focused on finding out as much as I could in that short period of time. Doing a research on something I was that much interested in combined with my overall interest in people made that I felt comfortable when talking to people and in a certain way digging through their past. This might sound strange, and at times I too was afraid that I was bothering people with my questions over and over again until I became aware of the fact that most people enjoyed talking to me, since most of them wanted others to know what had happened in the history of Guatemala. The biggest blessing of all was the people I sometimes accidentally met, who later on appeared to be of great importance for the proceedings of my research. I can say that I am satisfied with the way I knew to create a network of people who helped me and I believe that is one of the main reasons why for me this has been a fairly successful research. One of the lessons for a research in the future that will most probably again fall in the range of conflict is my own position as a researcher and my emotional involvement. I now know that it is inevitable for the pain of losses suffered ever to fully heal, so I know that if in the future I would be dealing with the same theme I would again be confronted with myself. Moreover what was hard was not to lose myself too much in the research and the people who are its subject, since I was in no way able to offer any kind of material help, which especially my informants in specific were in need of. I think this is something that will remain difficult for anthropologists for the reason that on one hand we are researchers bound to certain ethics and rules concerning our informants, whilst on the other hand we are humans caring for people, wanting to help those in need, feeling responsible and in a way indebted. Finally, learning to see through my own prejudices concerning those informants who can be appointed as victimizers was crucial for my research. Yes I do sympathize with the victims more than I do with the violators and this maybe has something to do with certain happenings in my own life, but over time I succeeded in reaching a point

where I came to understand the violators too and where I could see the human side of all the parties which I think has contributed to the completeness of this thesis.

In the end I can say I got to know myself better. Being put to the test whether or not I was competent enough of fulfilling this field research and if I was the kind of person to be doing this I can answer that question now with a straightforward yes. All those feelings of uncertainty, fear of not doing it the right way and incapability eventually were there to see if I was serious about this. Even if I do not know if this is what I want to be doing for the rest of my life, it is definitely something I would love to do again. I learned by falling, making mistakes and making friends and I am thankful for it.



## Appendix 2      Resumen en Español (Summary in Spanish)

En esta tesis y mi investigación la pregunta central es: “En qué manera la gente en Nebaj, Guatemala da forma y sentido al proceso de la reconciliación?” Por la historia violenta a causa del conflicto armado que concedí unos treinta años, quisiera saber en qué manera la gente, hoy vive con esta herencia, que necesitan para fortalecer el proceso de la reconciliación y cuáles organizaciones se ocupan con eso. Para responder a esta pregunta investigué por ocho semanas la historia violenta en Nebaj, que exactamente pasó allá, que significa la palabra ‘reconciliación’ para los Nebajeños, las actividades importantes para fortalecer la reconciliación y las organizaciones que trabajan con las víctimas del conflicto armado.

Entre 1976 y 1989 la violencia estaba lo más fuerte en Nebaj y la área Ixil en donde el ejército y la guerrilla se combatían por el poder. La guerrilla y los izquierdistas quisieron más derechos para la población indígena mientras el gobierno quisiera de mantener sus privilegios. Especialmente durante 1982 y 1984 cuando General Ríos Montt tenía el poder en Guatemala, mucha gente encontró la muerte por medio de torturas, desapariciones forzadas, ejecuciones arbitrarias y emigraciones forzadas. Por eso en este tiempo mucha gente todavía tiene traumas y otros problemas, como por ejemplo miembros de la familia que se murieron, desaparecieron que significa que hay menos personas para ganar dinero. Para un región muy pobre como Nebaj, eso es un grande problema. Hablar sobre el conflicto era fácil porque la gente quiere el mundo de saber que pasó, pero hablar sobre la reconciliación es más difícil. Mucha gente piensa que el gobierno es responsable por la pobreza, los muertos y desaparecidos y otras condiciones malas. Los traumas después el conflicto son tremendos porque ellos que lo sobrevivieron saben demasiado y más importante, habían visto cosas terribles. Para los sobrevivientes exhumaciones de sus miembros de la familia que se murieron durante el conflicto es importante porque muchos están en cementerios clandestinos, que es contra los costumbres de las indígenas. Por eso en Nebaj, dos organizaciones se ocupan con estas exhumaciones de los muertos en los cementerios clandestinos para inhumarlos en cementerios legales conforme a las costumbres de las indígenas.

Pues en Nebaj hay cinco organizaciones que trabajan con víctimas del conflicto armado. Dos se ocupan con exhumaciones como ya decía, uno se ocupa con resarcimientos económicos, uno se ocupa con la ayuda psicosocial a las víctimas y la última se ocupa con la justicia y la desaprobación de Ríos Montt para genocidio.

Para los Nebajeños reconciliación ahora significa resarcimiento y exhumaciones. Los exhumaciones son las más importantes actividades porque sin embargo todavía hay demasiada gente que no están inhuman en la tierra consagrada, y el resarcimiento en este momento es la más importante forma de la reconciliación porque gracias a la pobreza eso es que tiene efecto en la vida de las víctimas. Pienso que más tarde, cuando el gobierno va ocuparse mas con las victimas otros niveles de la reconciliación se pueden manifestar pero ahora por eso es un poco temprano.