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The Violence after 'La Violencia' in the Ch'orti' Region of Eastern Guatemala

By

Brent Metz, Lorenzo Mariano, and Julián López García

If eastern Guatemala, or the Oriente, is taken into consideration at all in representations of Guatemala, it is depicted as a parched land of hot-tempered, gun-slinging, lawless ladinos (non-indigenous Hispanics with various cultural and phenotypic heritages). Part of this stereotype is the result of a simplistic contrast made between the ladino Oriente and the bucolic Mayan Occidente, but according to recent homicide statistics, there is indeed some truth to the imaginary. According to the 2007 data from the National Civil Police (United Nations Program for Development, PNUD), about 75 per cent of the *municipios* (municipalities) on the southeastern side of a diagonal line connecting Lake Izabal with Guatemala City and onwards to the Pacific coast have homicide rates of between 48 and 108 per 100,000, whereas only about 10 per cent of the *municipios* to the north and west (except for the northern Petén) reach these rates; most fall between 0 to 10 per 100,000. In this article, we seek to explain the Oriente's violence rather than presume that its people and cultures are inherently violent, as well as to break the perception that the Oriente is purely ladino.ⁱ Rather than essentialize the Oriente as violent, we, with our admittedly anecdotal but consistent information drawn from two decadesⁱⁱ of research, seek to ferret out the patterns and structures of violence. Not just anyone attacks anyone else, but perpetrators, victims, and causes tend to follow certain trajectories.

Our refusal to accept that violence is due to naturally "violent people" follows the lead of such researchers as Bourgois (1995), Galtung (1969), Farmer (2003, 2004), and Scheper-Hughes (1992), who have called attention to the underlying political and economic structures that accelerate the deaths of some types of people in a society. They have called attention especially to the dispossessed, who suffer racism, classism, and sexism—people who have little political representation, virtually no state or institutional safety nets, a near absence of healthcare, and minimal economic opportunities. Under such conditions, individuals cannot only be expected to die earlier from disease and hunger than those in 'civil

society', but these "zeros" in the official accounting system, as coined by Zapatistas in Mexico, are also predictably victims of violence by the powers-that-be and by each other. Thus, these theorists of structural violence turn the tables of blame from the most vulnerable to the most powerful, and of victimization from civil society to the marginalized. As will be seen below, such an approach works well for Ch'orti's, who are indeed excluded, impoverished, and victimized. Our research, in fact, delineates *how* such structural conditions can lead to greater "everyday violence" (Scheper-Hughes 1992) among the Ch'orti's. Explaining ladino on ladino violence using the structural violence framework, however, is more challenging, because ladinos are considered to be the dominant ethnic class in Guatemala, and in fact the ladino municipios where most violence occurs are *not* among the poorest in the country, but tend to occur at major import–export zones (Puerto Barrios, northern Petén, the Pan-American highway, for example: PNUD 2007). Overall, ladino communities experience more violence than indigenous communities, even in the Oriente. We must ask, what forces fuel a greater propensity for violence among ladinos? What forces have been turning sleepy ladino towns—where communal traditions, kin and marriage networks, and hometown pride are just as strong as in western Mayan towns—into places where violence is breaching the banks of the conceivable (*se salió del guacal*) in the residents' minds?

A History of Extralegality in the Oriente

To understand both the Oriente's reputation for being a violent place and the contemporary structural conditions for violence, we begin with its legacy for lawlessness. Colonialism in the Oriente was marked by extralegality, of "I obey (the Crown) but do not comply",ⁱⁱⁱ as Cortés was so famously to have said in Mexico. It was even harsher for the indians there than for those in the western and northern highlands because of the former's relatively lower numbers, the higher numbers of Spanish settlers, the absence of paternalistic regular clergy,^{iv} the higher potential for profit in cacao, sugarcane, tobacco, indigo, cattle, mining, and trade via the Motagua and Omoa trade routes, and an influx of impoverished ladinos in the 1700s (Brewer 2002; Feldman 1983, 1985; Fry 1988; Lutz 1999; MacLeod 1973; Metz 2006:41–53;

Terga 1980; Van Oss 1986). After an almost complete demographic collapse in the 1500s, the Indian population partially recovered in the province of Chiquimula until the mid-1700s, and then fell again due to the combined pressures of increased labor and tribute under the Bourbon reforms, natural disasters, epidemics, and ladino invasions (Feldman 2009; Metz 2006:45–46). Oriente ladinos were a mix of marginal racial groups, including poor creoles, mestizos, mulattos, freed slaves, and Indians who had abandoned their communities to escape tribute and labor demands. Some ladino peons formed populations on elite creole haciendas, while others formed independently in the interstices of haciendas and Indian communal lands. In many cases, ladino communities were just as poor as the Indian ones and just as socially cohesive for reasons of self-preservation and independence (Fry 1988:6–8). In the township of Jocotán, which lay in the heart of the Ch’orti’ area of Chiquimula, the number of ladinos grew from zero in 1681 to 74 in 1740, and to 440 in 1770 (Lutz 1988:24–26, 40–41; Torres Moss 1994:27), and in 1778 the 4,947 Spaniards and 11,124 ladinos in Chiquimula represented the highest numbers of non-Indians in any Guatemalan province (Horizont 3000 and Proyecto Ch’orti’ 2004:ix; Lutz 1999:130; Metz 2006:49). The ladino pressure on Ch’orti’ lands and society severely weakened (and caused the dissolution of) many communities in eastern Guatemala, western Honduras, and northwestern El Salvador (Metz 2009).

In the postcolonial period, Rafael Carrera’s populist War of the Montaña lasted for decades, in a reaction to the Liberal Central American state’s attempt to assert control over the Oriente countryside in the 1830s, even after Carrera himself came to power and the Central American confederation crumbled (Fry 1988). Support for the Carrera revolt, however, did not protect the Oriente Indians from losing land to entrepreneurs’ legal maneuverings (Woodward 1993:333). Worse still, when Liberals regained state control in 1871, municipal and communal lands were privatized. Many Ch’orti’s scrambled to obtain private titles for their lands, but ladino and Indian entrepreneurs both gained much in the way of coffee

and cattle lands at the expense of subsistence farmers (Fry 1988; Horizont 3000 and Proyecto Ch'orti' 2004).¹

When Charles Wisdom undertook his pioneering ethnography of the Ch'orti's of Jocotán and Olopa in 1931–33, Ch'orti's and ladinos were a divided society, with ladinos representing the state and controlling the external market in the town centers, and the Ch'orti's relegated to subsistence agriculture in the rural communities. They hated each other, and the Ch'orti's had the confidence to call the ladinos “sambos” (Wisdom 1961:266), a racial slur implying African heritage. The material differences between the two populations remained slight. The towns had no electricity, no cars, and no piped water, but they did control access to modern biomedicine, clothing, and low-level technology like sewing machines and record players (see photograph). Wisdom also reported that the growing Ch'orti' populations were already putting pressure on the land, as fallow periods were shortened and forests were not regenerating. It is also notable that Ch'orti's rarely murdered each other. Men did attack each other with machetes over women and land, but killings were rare, such as in the case of religious leaders thought to be praying for drought.

¹ Lauria-Santiago (2004) provides an excellent account of the sophisticated tricks used to appropriate privatized communal land across the border in El Salvador during the same time period.

Ladinos standing in front of Ch'orti' Sunday market in Jocotán, circa 1932



At the same time, the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico (1931–44) was gradually ushering in an era of modern repressive capitalism. A self-proclaimed fascist and supported by the US, Ubico privately despised Indians as a hindrance to development (Forster 2001:81–83). Using the pretext of the 1932 Indian revolt in neighboring El Salvador, he instituted a state of siege, as had Salvadoran General Martínez (Ching 2004). He replaced most public officials with military officers and deputized plantation owners, to the extent that they had free reign to murder problematic workers. He appointed a US officer to lead the national military academy (Instituto Politécnico Militar) and established a network of ladino officials (*intendentes*), military commissioners, and spies (*orejas*) in nearly every community, all coordinated by the sadistic Idígoras Fuentes (Adams 1990:141–42; Carmack 1995:197–98; Gleijeses 1989; Handy 1984:92–9; Jonas 1974:148–9; Oakes 1951:71; Woodward 1985:203–18). Most hated by Ch'orti's was the 1934 Vagrancy Law, under which poor Indians were forced to work without pay in dangerous road construction projects and pet projects of ladino elites (Metz 2006:58–61). Elders still recall the brutality as if it occurred yesterday, including being bound and forced to walk up to 50 kilometers carrying a

week's worth of stale tortillas, while the ladino foreman received 30 quetzales per month in salary. Some recount that a pillar of cement fell into a hole in a bridge construction project in Chiquimula, killing 22 men, and a landslide killed 18 in Ipala. Permission was not granted to recover the bodies; after all, these 'vagrants' were burdens on the state. Many campesinos fled to Honduras, El Salvador, and the remote peaks of the Oriente, never to return home. The dictatorship started a chain reaction of civil war in the Oriente (Metz 2006:61–84). Ch'orti's refer to it as the time of slavery (cf. Forster 2001:35–73 for San Marcos), whereas ladino conservatives herald it as the good old days of elite patriarchal control over Indians and women, much as conservatives do for the genocidal Martínez dictatorship in El Salvador (Forster 2001:35–36; Metz 2006).

When the regime was overthrown in 1944, Ch'orti's descended on the town of Camotán and killed three ladino officials, including the police chief. During the ten years of democratic reforms that followed, many participated in elections, peasant unions, rural schooling, government development projects, and land reform, but many others refrained, fearing a ladino revenge. This proved prudent. In May 1954 a small army of landowners attacked the local agrarian council in charge of land distribution in San Juan Ermita, stalling the land reform there. A month later, Castillo Armas' trigger-happy "liberation" forces entered Camotán and Esquipulas from Honduras, and many civilians and militia were killed in battles. After Castillo was placed in power by US Ambassador Puerifoy, Ubico's military apparatus was restored. Tyrannical military commissioners returned to their posts, and José Bernabé Linares, the chief of Ubico's secret police, was named National Security Chief. Puerifoy drew up a list of seventy-two thousand "communists"; an estimated nine to fourteen thousand people were arrested, and between two to five thousand were assassinated, especially in the Oriente (CEH I 1999:108–109, 353; CEH Anexo I 1999:278; Cullather 2004:151; Forster 2001; May 2001:5–6). For 25-year-old sergeant Rufino Guerra, the vengeance was personal, as his father's land had been invaded by Ch'orti's from Piedra de Amolar in Olopa. He led a military detachment to massacre entire Olopa communities organized in agrarian committees, causing survivors to flee to Copán Ruinas, Honduras, where many reside today. Some

Ch'orti's elders lament that they remain traumatized from being forcibly recruited by the army to participate in the 1954 massacres of their fellow campesinos.

Assassinations of campesino union, cooperative, and Revolutionary Party (PR) members continued through the 1950s to the 1970s. A perfect storm developed of campesinos desperate for economic development and fair wages, Belgian Catholic priests attempting to abolish “idolatry” while preaching liberation theology, a millenarian movement in Olopa (Diener 1978), the sporadic presence of leftist guerrillas, avaricious ladino military commissioners, an unprofessional army, US military Cold War paranoia and ignorance; copious arms from the US and Israel resulted in a series of Ch'orti' massacres in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s.^v A “kill or be killed” mentality gripped many of the rural communities as military commissioners began torturing to extract the names of anyone organized in campesino unions, members of the Revolutionary Party, those seen talking to unknown people, and people congregating for any reason, such as communal rituals. Some ladinos claim that not only ladino but Ch'orti' military commissioners went as far as to accuse their adversaries of being guerrillas during the civil war. Fourteen Ch'orti' communities were massacred in the late 1970s and early 1980s alone, and Ch'orti's composed the first refugee camp (La Laguna, Honduras) in the civil war, where they were also persecuted by the army for being *tacamiches*, or guerrillas. The CEH truth commission did not emphasize the Oriente in its research, but the following is a rare excerpt about a Ch'orti' massacre (IIb 1999:54):

They took the mother and daughters from the kitchen, stripped them, threw them on the ground, and in front of their family members, every single soldier raped them ... laughing ... Then they stomped on them and stabbed their private parts and breasts with their bayonets. They killed the father in front of his wife and children. They let the boys go free. They threw gasoline on the house and burned it down. When the army left, the people took the women to the hospital because the girls were bleeding profusely and the mother was almost dead. They all died in the Zacapa hospital.

Even newborn babies were not safe from torture and death, because they were considered nothing more than pests. One case describes military commissioners torturing babies so that their mothers would reveal the whereabouts of their husbands (CEH Anexo II 1999:Caso 1210). While Ch'orti's suffered massacres at home, recruits were ordered to commit them in other parts of the country.

Some battles are still being fought. In the 1960s to 1970s, the "Pachecos" rightwing death squad of Esquipulas was a group of military commissioners who accused communities on the Honduran border of subversion, attacked them with army support, and expropriated their land for cattle grazing. In one such community, San José Las Lágrimas, the Pachecos sold some 1,100 expropriated acres (10 *caballerías*) to the army, which to this day maintains control. In 2006, CUC (the Campesino Unity Committee) led 120 refugee families to squat on the land, demanding its return. Two leaders of the settler group were then assassinated, the president of the group received death threats, and the regional leader of the CUC narrowly escaped abduction by plain-clothes army agents (Cooper 2007; Jennifer Casolo, personal communication; Protectionline.org 2007). Locals speculate that the army wants the land to protect a large clandestine cemetery there, or that this border area is a key corridor for contraband between Honduras and Guatemala, in which officers are involved.

Cultural and Psychological Consequences

The Ch'orti's treatment at the hands of the army has reinforced a sense that they are zeros, if not pests, in national accounting. When we arrived in the early 1990s, soldiers were still deeply feared, and some Ch'orti' ex-recruits were regarded as aggressive and dangerous. At town festivals, drunks with machetes sometimes attacked soldiers, while soldiers treated disorderly citizens with extreme brutality (Metz 2006:85–90). In one Olopa incident, two men, one of whom was a former soldier, were about to start a machete fight, but the military police beat both of them, despite the ex-soldier's plea of allegiance to the army. Today, people are still reluctant to discuss the war, which raises the possibility of post-traumatic stress. Memories of violence can take conscious and subconscious forms in bodily habits, avoidances,

silences, nightmares, sleeplessness, chronic pain, emotional distress, and alcoholism (e.g., Csordas 1994; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). For Ch'orti's, despite their amazing ability to conceal their suffering, some exhibit clear signs of post-traumatic stress through alcoholism, paranoia, and social isolation. Some, such as in Tanshá, Jocotán, were reported to have died of 'fright' (*espanto*) immediately after massacres. Given that the spirits of the murdered (*xerb'aj*) are thought to haunt the locations of their deaths, tragic memories are omnipresent (see López and Metz 2002:230-31; Metz 2006:86, 133-40).

While it can be argued that army and guerrilla brutality created a habitus of violence that has fueled domestic abuse, interpersonal competition, and organized crime, reasons for contemporary violence are deeper than the civil war *per se* (Binford 2002; Bourgois 2004). That the current violence cannot be reduced to a habitus, legacy, heritage, culture, ethos, residue, or spiral from the civil war is suggested by the 2007 homicide data, in which the areas most affected by the civil war – the west and north of the country – have lower homicide rates (PNUD 2007). Rather, reasons must be sought in the structural conditions that fanned the flames of civil war in the first place and have been exacerbated by neoliberal policies and globalization (cf. Binford 2002 for El Salvador). Economically, grossly unequal land distribution in a largely agrarian society remains; campesino population numbers have climbed, and for Ch'orti's the average landholding has dwindled below a hectare (Dary, Elías, and Reyna 1998:127; López and Metz 2002:84–86; Metz 2001, 2006:149). International investments have been made in the peace process – roads have been built, electricity installed in many areas, wells dug, water tanks built, new fertilizers and pesticides introduced, and education improved – but all remain woefully inadequate to keep pace with population growth and provide alternatives to failing subsistence agriculture. In some senses, there was more promise for development in the late 1980s and 1990s, when the state and international NGOs implemented small producer projects (e.g., DIGESA – General Direction for Agricultural Services) to curbe leftism, although these also caused internal dissension and sometimes violence. Many of these projects have since been cut. Ch'orti's continue to supplement their meager agriculture and craft production with the miserably low wages earned by seasonally picking coffee. Volatile international markets in coffee and fossil fuels, which influence fertilizer and grain prices, have

turned annual 'hungry times' into full-fledged, perpetual famines (López 2009). The signing of the CAFTA-DR in 2006 has only deepened this, as imports of the most highly US-subsidized crops, corn and rice, rose in Central America by 36 per cent in 2006–2007, while the cost of the basic food basket has risen by 22.1 per cent (Tharin 2008). Over the past decade, the main hope of Ch'orti's, almost all of whom have never seen a world map, is to embark on the long, dangerous trip to the US, at which many have failed. If structural violence denotes conditions in which inequality causes some people to die an early death (Galtung 1969; cf. Farmer 2003), the Ch'orti's are a classic case. That Ch'orti's commit greater violence against each other can be explained as well.

Our data on homicide rates in the Ch'orti' area (Jocotán and Olopa) are limited both by the quality of municipal data and our collection of it. Ch'orti' deaths are not officially recorded if not reported, and they have often had reason not to involve the authorities when all parties tend to be punished, not just the perpetrators. The lack of adequate enforcement is in fact one motivator for people taking the law into their own hands in the first place. Despite an overhaul of the police force after the Peace Accords, the police still demand bribes to perform their duties, such as a recent case in Jocotán in which they refused to arrest a well-known murderer until the victim's family paid them money for petrol. When investigations are undertaken, they are plagued by poor interrogation tactics, little to no knowledge of collecting and analyzing evidence, such as fingerprints, and greater incentives not to continue than to proceed, due to criminal bribes and threats. That said, the mortality rates we collected for 1958–97 show that the percentage of deaths due to violence climbed slowly from 5 to 9 by 1992, and then curved rapidly to 24 by 1996. With 57 violent deaths in Jocotán in 1996–97, the rate was roughly 100 violent deaths per 100,000, more than double Guatemala's exceptionally high homicide rate of 44 in 2005. Similarly, for 2007, police statistics show a rate of between 11 and 47 in Jocotán and 48 and 108 in Olopa (PNUD 2007).

For the purposes of understanding structural violence, the circumstances of murders have been more impressive than the bare numbers; and we have been privy to a number of cases. These include robbery and murder by and of drunk men; assaults on those perceived to have been arrogant or

disrespectful towards others, including immediate family members; feuds over land; retaliations for sorcery; attacks on those who have profited from opportunities beyond the subsistence and local market economy; rapes; disputes between men over women; hit-and-runs on the local highway. One might add to these the innumerable cases in which children and elders are not adequately fed. The former are at best dropped off at newly designed and perpetually filled starvation wards in health clinics and hospitals, or worse, fed corn beer to keep them from crying and dropped half alive in abandoned mine shafts. The Ch'orti's of Wisdom's time would surely be shocked to see how anesthetized to violence their descendants have become, including the escalation of machete attacks, from occasions on which limbs were lost (Wisdom 1961:297) to the hacking to pieces of entire bodies. Guns are also being used more frequently, with a 10-year-old girl being accidentally killed by a youth playing with a pistol in Jocotán in the summer of 2009. For Ch'orti's as well as ladinos, violence "has overflowed the gourd."

How can the murders be linked to conditions of structural violence, namely, poverty, marginalization, and racism? Bourgois (1995) provides us with a useful avenue when he speaks of "lack of respect" among marginalized people—zeros in East Harlem—and Ch'orti's themselves can be heard speaking repeatedly of lack of respect, with multiple connotations. Elders complain that people no longer respect God, because they no longer sacrifice to God, and God in turned no longer counts Ch'orti's as the chosen people. For centuries, Ch'orti's' main strategy for physical and emotional defense against exploitation in a sea of ladinos has been isolation in self-sufficient communities. There, subsistence cultures were backed by a spiritual complex of regional rain-calling and fertility ceremonies carried out annually, of religious brotherhoods in Jocotán that organized regional ritual festivals, and of family Month of the Dead ceremonies and weddings open to entire communities. However, the brotherhood disbanded in the 1930s perhaps due partly to the military usurpation of power under Ubico (Dary, Elías and Reyna 1998:47–9, 265; Fought 1969:474); the rain-calling cults in Jocotán (Las Flores), Camotán (Guayabo), and Olopa (Cayur) were repressed after the 1954 counterrevolution; and since at least the 1970s many have found it impossible to hold fiestas for entire communities. The brotherhood to San Francisco in Quezaltepeque has now partially replaced the brotherhoods and rain-calling cults in the

Ch'orti'-speaking area, possibly because Quezaltepeque did not experience the same level of violence during the war. One informant for Danilo Palma Ramos' research team (2001:93) drew a direct connection between the Ch'orti'-speaking cults and the military repression:

Before 1954, before the so-called "Liberation" forces arrived, there were more prayers and rituals. But in the time of the Liberation it was all forbidden, because he who did those things was made to disappear. Many people arrived to investigate those things, and those who practiced the traditions were treated like sorcerers. Maybe that's why they disappeared or hid, because they were terrified. In other words, those traditions are still valued, but they are frightened from what happened in 1954. Well, that's what happened, and that's why the people are scared. But over there in western Guatemala, the persecution wasn't as bad, right? Those people in western Guatemala didn't feel the repression as much, but here in the Oriente we suffered from the Liberation [our translation].

One thing for certain is that without the multicomunal cults in which nearly every household was involved, the sense of community has been severely weakened.

The traditional agrarian system also involved a hierarchical system of "respect" from youth and women to adult men, to elders, to spiritual experts, to the state, and ultimately to God (Girard 1949; Wisdom 1961). Several factors have contributed to its erosion, such as: the army's appointment of local commissioners and spies; poverty from increasingly inadequate subsistence agriculture; divisive Protestant and Catholic missionary campaigns; wages and new culture from seasonal labor migration; envy from differential access to new development, educational, or market opportunities; and forced army recruitment and subsequent military training (López and Metz 2002; Metz 2006). As the subsistence economy has deteriorated and communities have been penetrated by more external forces, it has become painfully obvious to Ch'orti's that they are not God's chosen, but at the bottom of the heap in a global

system that they are still trying to fathom. In response, many have abandoned the traditions and language over the twentieth century, while the more faithful harbor feelings of betrayal and envy. As mentioned, envy and suspicions of envy and sorcery are common sources of violence.

Ladinos, in the meantime, are more deprecating of Ch'orti's than ever. They now watch international television programs captured from satellite dishes (having been migrating to the US since the 1960s), drive cars, dress in modern clothing, and aspire to developed-world lifestyles, while many Ch'orti's have a difficult time just finding enough to eat. So, when a ladino nurse paternalistically blames a cholera epidemic on Ch'orti' dirtiness, when folklore festivals essentially celebrate "our little Indians", when political candidates and development project agents claim that they will raise Ch'orti's out of backwardness, when schoolteachers scold Ch'orti's for being lazy and undisciplined, when bank and store personnel largely ignore Ch'orti's whenever ladino customers are present, and when aid agencies and newspapers implicitly blame Ch'orti's for their own famines (López 2009), Ch'orti's often internalize it rather than return the insult as they did in the 1930s. They are often self-deprecating or deprecating of their neighbors. The Maya Movement has only partially been able to reverse this trend, and then only for more educated, literate Ch'orti's (Metz 1998, 2006). While poor Ch'orti's may not respect themselves or each other, they will certainly not excuse one of their own for being arrogant. Ch'orti's rarely attack ladinos or outsiders, although resentment can be evidenced by the four occasions on which angry, machete-wielding drunks threatened Metz; however, Ch'orti's who reap benefits from professional salaries, development projects, and marketing are prime targets of attack. For example, a rural representative of World Vision was attacked on more than one occasion, and his motorcycle hacked with machetes. A schoolteacher who served as a project liaison with town ladinos, and paid others to perform his labor in communal projects, was threatened several times and finally killed by one of his own family members. Women, in the meantime, are verbally if not physically attacked for being "whores" for participating in development projects, extra-communal marketing, or schooling.

In summary, we believe that the "loss of respect" in all of its manifestations is the link between the conditions of structural violence and instances of aggression. The case of Chilo in Tuticopote, Olopa,

serves as a case in point (Metz 2006:178, 229–30). His parents were massacred during the war in the 1960s, and he was raised by relatives. After migrating and selling illegal chichi (corn beer), he was able to buy a small plot of land, marry, and have five daughters. He was resigned to his poverty and responded to questions about striving for a better life by saying,

He who was born to have (wealth), must have it, and he who was born to be poor, poor he must die ... If one has been born poor, so he must be. Because by searching for good, one encounters bad. So, it's better to remain as God designed. Yes, because I'm one that roamed, and I am a vagrant as much as any other, but by God's light I came home again and here I am, no longer moving about evading death ... It's never the same as it is in one's own little home, even if it's sad.

He complained about the loss of respect for traditions: "It's no longer the same, because now they only want to walk boastfully, doing things, problems. Already they don't want to respect an elder ... [Before] nobody had a machete in his belt." A few years after he spoke these words, his wife, a midwife, was hacked to pieces with a machete for witchcraft because she delivered a stillborn child. Chilo, with some glint of faith in the new post-Peace Accords talk of human rights, tried to get the police and the local army to arrest the perpetrators, but they refused to investigate. Within the year, he drank himself to death, orphaning his daughters just as he had been orphaned.

PHOTOGRAPH: Chilo and his family.



The Inevitability of Revenge

If Ch'orti's have the family numbers, however, they take justice into their own hands, to the point that there is a sense of inevitability about violent revenge. The following case is a fairly typical sequence of events in a revenge killing, taken from López (2003:199):

One day, doña Gregoria, from the community of Tunucó Abajo, told me about how her son-in-law was macheted to death after he had murdered another campesino. It was a story of a death foretold. Her son-in-law, Manuel, after drinking one Sunday for several hours, ambushed Benedicto, who was returning from the Jocotán market. In broad early afternoon daylight and in the presence of several people nearby, without uttering a word or insult, Manuel blocked his path and hacked him to pieces. Manuel fled and his family abandoned their home, hiding with relatives. A few hours later, Manuel's house and

cornfield were burned to the ground. But everybody knew, including doña Gregoria, that this would not suffice, that Benedicto's sons would not be able to rest until they avenged the killing by murdering Manuel. One of the sons, Valentín, told me himself and anyone who wanted to listen: "he has to die, we have to kill him. My poor father is no longer with us, and he did nothing to deserve it, he's to blame for nothing, and that ingrate has given him a horrible death. He has to die. We have to kill him. Today, tomorrow, next month. We've been left without parents, we've been made orphans ... " It seemed, by the way they spoke, that the sons had a clear mission, and in fact after they did murder Manuel, Valentín confessed that they had completed their obligation so that the spirit of their father could rest in peace.

The day after Benedicto was assassinated, two police showed up, as the military commissioner had notified them of the murder, and they did not disguise their lack of concern as they went through the motions of protocol. They interviewed some of the people who lived near the murder site and asked Benedicto's friends and family if they knew who the murderer was, and although everyone knew the answers, all replied that they knew nothing. Only the commissioner informed them that Manuel's house and cornfield had been burned and that he had disappeared. Questions put to Manuel's family only served to complete the inquiry form: nobody knew anything about the murder, nobody knew who had burned the house, and nobody knew where Manuel was. Perhaps, his wife suggested, he had gone to the plantations to earn some money. Some relatives knew indeed where he was hiding, and even though the police arrived this time to investigate, which only happened occasionally, they returned empty-handed and without any intention of returning.

Manuel hid for more than three months, sleeping in the countryside and eating wild herbs. But soon he began visiting his family at night. It seemed like it wasn't ten days before he began appearing to visit his destitute kids. He stayed a while and ate his

first tortillas in days. Afterwards he'd show up every four or five days, normally at night. It wasn't long before many in Tunucó knew that he was visiting his wife and kids, and soon enough Benedicto's sons had caught wind of it. Not only that, they ascertained where the dogs were barking one night, and four nights before that, and four nights before that, and discovered through the grapevine where he'd been seen on local trails.

A month before he was finally killed, in the late afternoon, he arrived at the home of doña Gregoria. He drank some coffee, and without even noticing me, they began to talk in a way that Ch'orti's communicate with spirits (*magin*). She was angelically peaceful while he was so jittery in the shadows that he seemed a specter. Upon his leaving, doña Gregoria, who never wanted to speak a word to me about the murder, told me, "he's about to die." It reminded me of the way we would speak about a patient who is definitively beyond saving, and she said it with the same conviction that Valentín had told me weeks before, "he has to die." Perhaps everyone but Manuel's closest relatives and me knew that the noose was getting tighter around him, and later I wondered why no one warned him so that he could turn himself into the police or flee. Everyone was complicit in what was about to happen. I got my answer a little later when I asked a few Ch'orti's about whether murderers have the right to live, and why, and they told me that his life is no longer worth living. He couldn't return to cultivate his cornfield, or at least it'd take a very long time to be able to do so, he couldn't make or keep any friends, not even family, nobody would ask him to be their compadre, he could never stay with his wife and kids or remarry, he couldn't even visit town. He could only live like an animal eating wild herbs.

Ladino Violence

Ladinos commit and suffer more homicides than the indigenous (PNUD 2007). If Ch'orti' on Ch'orti' violence can be explained by structural conditions such as poverty and marginality, what about ladinos, who are generally less poor and marginal? Like Ch'orti's, ladinos have undergone a dramatic cultural transition from living in fairly isolated, conservative, patriarchal towns to exposure to the individualism of global consumerism. They are caught between conservative, hispanic, patriarchal values and the hedonism reinforced in mass media. Many would never dare to drink or smoke in front of their parents, no matter how old they are; they would not date without a chaperone, women do not curse, and they would use the formal Spanish "you" (*usted*) for all strangers, rather than the more modern form, *tú*. Like Ch'orti's, they are well aware of their lowly place in the global system, are very admiring of outsiders from Guatemala City, the US, and Europe, and attribute the hierarchical distinctions to race. Many accept that they have some Indian blood, although the insinuation that they have African blood, even when it is obviously true, is considered the worst impugnation. Many tend to be derogatory of Guatemala, making references to a nation of drunks, thieves, speakers of poor Spanish, country bumpkins, and embezzlers. Part of this is no doubt due to how respected foreigners treat them, but what strikes outsiders is the racism and sexism, which ladinos refuse to accept as problematic. Most believe deeply that Ch'orti's and other Mayan groups are backward and do not deserve equal treatment, and that women should out of courtesy be treated paternalistically, although lone women are fair game for predation. A favorite ladino parable is that of crabs in a bucket, in which any crab that attempts to climb out is pulled down by the others trying to do the same. The parable is fitting for criticising rampant envy and individualism over teamwork, but it also obscures the fact that many 'crabs' do escape by stepping on their fellow crabs, particularly the layer of indigenous crabs in the fetid base of the bucket. Perhaps the prevalence of such cynical attitudes helps explain what ladinos and Ch'orti's alike perceive as a culture of corruption, where individuals should "get what is theirs" when they are in positions of power. Every ruling party has been accused of corruption since the re-establishment of democracy in 1985, and none has been re-elected. The mayors in the Oriente are evaluated not by *whether* they are corrupt, but by the degree of their corruption (Metz 2006:215–217).

With many having been to the US as migrants and having watched television programs pumped out of elite Mexican, US, and Spanish fantasylands, their wish-list of modern luxuries is almost as extensive as that of consumers in the developed world. Much more than Ch'orti's, they are exposed to the glorification of violence and organized crime. One can imagine the possibilities when windfalls of money can be made via contraband. The Oriente has long been known for contraband, such as the Golf of Omoa illicit trade during the colonial period, and the illegal tobacco and alcohol trade with neighboring Honduras and El Salvador during the Ubico dictatorship. With expanding global networks, however, profits have never been better for exotic birds, monkeys, rare orchids, archeological pieces and, more recently, international migrant workers, narcotics, and children. When the DEA diverted Colombia-US narco-trafficking routes away from the eastern Caribbean to Central American and Mexico in the 1980s, the Oriente became a key transit point. Zacapa Mayor Arnoldo Vargas had been drug trafficking for over a decade when he was forcibly extradited to the US in 1992. The Zacapa mafia continued with various kingpins into March 2008, when the latest, Juancho León, who had several properties, eighty bodyguards, and was said to have funded and provided two helicopters for candidates in Guatemala's last presidential campaign, was killed along with ten others in a battle with the Mexican Gulf Cartel, "Los Zetas". The Zetas have since largely displaced the Zacapa cartel (Huitz 2008), and according to Carlos Castresana, head of the UN International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, the Mexican cartels are well on their way to taking over Guatemala City. Experts call Guatemala a "paradise" for trafficking, with its light border security, two coasts, internal waterways, and near-absolute impunity. An estimated 200 tons of cocaine are being moved through the country every year (Wilson 2009). The Ch'orti' area is in the thick of it. We know of at least three men involved in narco-trafficking who were gunned down in Honduras in 2008. Cocaine especially is available everywhere. When López was buying a beer recently at a corner cantina, he was offered a *naringazo*, or a line of cocaine, for about \$6.50. One public authority pinched his nose repeatedly while recounting the latest narco-murders and defending cocaine use as simply recreational, as "every US college student does it."

While it is likely that only a few people are involved in drug trafficking, the sense of violence “overflowing the gourd” has affected everyone and prompted some equally cold-blooded vigilante responses. Being conservative, protective of their privileges over the Indian poor, and skeptical that human rights will ever be sufficient to regulate people’s naturally corrupt behavior, some have veered in the direction of vigilanteism or “social cleansing”. In the past decade, at least three homosexuals have been found burned in Jocotán, and some drug users and petty thieves have been discovered with bullets to the head. Such ‘social cleansing’, in fact, follows a national trend. Claudia Samayoa (2008) of the Protection Unit for Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala reports that rightwing death squads are torturing and killing social ‘types’ including the poor, youth with tattoos or urban clothing, and urbanized Mayan youth who seem to be defiantly ‘out of place’. Similar campaigns were carried out during the Cabrera, Ubico, and Rios Montt dictatorships and in 1989–1992 against street youth. Ironically, some of the same elites whose avaricious land appropriations and market monopolies have helped undermine campesino livelihoods and caused massive displacement, now attack the displaced. Attacks have not only been against the poor and street youth, but also against human rights defenders, especially after the UN Human Rights Mission (MINUGUA) left the country in 2004. Extrajudicial executions jumped from 22 in 2004 to 648 in 2005, with 224 attacks on human rights workers (Amnesty International 2006). The executions follow the same patterns as during the war, including signs of torture, *coups de grâce*, the massacre of entire families, and persecution of anyone that attempts to identify or recover the bodies. Foxen (2007) reports that former civil patrol (PAC) members have been committing vigilante violence in the Occidente.

We are unable to link the perpetrators of vigilante violence in the Ch’orti’ area to death squads or former PACs, but Ladino vigilantes share a sense of responsibility for violently restoring order and respect. Some of the region’s conservatives recall the era of the death squads with nostalgia, when respect was enforced upon a disobedient population. On Esquipulas.com, one can read lamentations about how if the Pacheco death squads were still around, they would surely put an end to the rampant criminal violence.

Child Abductions

No other phenomena better exemplify the overlap of ladino and Ch'orti' structures of violence than the recent kidnappings of children (cf. Metz 2007). On Thursday, 14 June 2007, in the small town of Camotán, a nine-year-old ladina girl, Alba Mishel España, went missing around lunchtime after she had gone to a local store. When a woman called the mother just hours after the disappearance and said she knew the child's whereabouts, the mother recognized the caller, and she along with friends and relatives rushed to capture her. The woman led them on false leads to another town, and the enraged mob pressured her for information. All exits from the area were monitored. When the girl's body was found outside of town the next day, with her chest cavity cut diagonally with a saber saw, pulled apart, arm severed, scalp gone, and the internal organs and eyes missing, the mob dragged their captive out to the park to kill her, but she divulged two female co-conspirators, who were then ripped from their homes and dragged to the park as well. The police intervened, which is where Mariano's notes pick up the story:

About 30 police officers surrounded the Chiquimula judge, who was dressed elegantly while taking the testimony of the third woman. The other two had already been rescued by the police when the riot got out of hand. One was on her way to the hospital, after much of her body had been burned. The third was offering her version of events while tied to a tree in the central plaza. Near her was a pair of representatives of the Public Ministry and the Procurator of Human Rights, identifiable by their vests, although they did nothing but hold a notebook and give sporadic commentaries about the need to bring the woman to court and get to the bottom of this. The people shouted at them furiously, "Do you know what the impunity rate is in Guatemala? Ninety-eight per cent! And it's your fault!" They also yelled at the police. Rumors of a confession spread rapidly: the women had charged a mafia Q1000, Q2000, Q5000, Q20,000 for the girl, and the prices

kept going up in tandem with the rage. The prosecutor stood off to the side after taking the woman's declaration, and the police huddled around him, perhaps to explain how they had decisively rescued the woman ... Receiving the order, some officers went towards the bound woman, but the crowd grew angry and yelled at them, pushing them and blocking their passage. Shirtless male leaders shouted to the crowd, "Let's go! Are we going to let them take her? Let's stand together!" The tension mounted, and the police vacillated. They moved forward but the crowd pushed them harder, and soon there were blows thrown and it was out of control again. People ran after the fleeing police, and dragged the woman, who gave a sharp scream. The police stayed back. In a big mud puddle on the edge of the park the crowd left the woman's cadaver. During the struggle with the police, someone smashed her head with a large rock. Twice. Suddenly it died down: no shouting; little movement. None of the officials moved. The crowd took turns silently getting a look at the cadaver resting face down in the puddle, with a large rock on her head. Then they went home. Some stayed. Some laughed. When I passed by, an adolescent stared at me and proclaimed menacingly that this is what happens to child abductors ... others took photos with their mobile phones. The rain began to fall again. An hour later, the cadaver was still lying there, and people still passed to look.

Two days later, violence erupted again when a Chiquimula woman, who was popularly suspected of being a smuggler, was attacked by a mob in Jocotán after she was seen speaking with an 8-year-old Ch'orti' girl and her aunt, who was presumably about to sell her. The police again intervened and saved the women, but a gun battle ensued, resulting in their flight from town and two police vehicles being burned. The police returned two weeks later, only after Jocotán's newly formed Security Committee procured an agreement from the national government to shorten their local rotations to a few months, boost their numbers from six to forty, include both military and regular police, and expand their patrol to the rural areas. Still, abductions were being attempted in Ch'orti' communities in late 2008.

Child trafficking points to the structures of violence, including racism, poverty, marginality, and sexism. According to virtually everyone asked, Ch'orti' children had been reported missing for over a year prior to the conflagration of June 2007, and according to one newspaper account (*Prensa Libre* 2007), twelve Ch'orti' infants were reported missing in May 2007. Yet, ladinos did nothing, and some Ch'orti's must have been complicit in the sale of children. The three female suspects in the Alba Mishel case were all originally from local rural communities. Some national press accounts categorized the mob attacks as falling into the same irrational, emotional, lawless vigilanteism as seen in western Guatemala, implying that it was an "Indian" phenomenon. Despite the fact that most lynchings occur in the ladino capital, a media prejudice connects them to "the interior" where irrational campesinos and Mayans are thought to predominate. Yet ladinoized Ch'orti's who had moved to town formed almost all of the Security Committees after the police were chased from town, whereas the more powerful and better-armed whites were not interested in collaborating to establish a rule of law .

The case of Alba Mishel also sheds light on how ladino and Ch'orti' revenge killings share similar characteristics. Far from being a wild mob, the ladino gathering in Camotán deliberated at length, had clear leaders, and seemed to be in consensus for retribution. They united not to investigate as much as to carry out a sentence. As with Ch'orti' feuding, there was no other recourse than an "eye for an eye." As if to affirm their strategy, in May 2008 the prosecutor investigating Alba Mishel's murder, and a child prostitution ring in which police officials were allegedly involved, was gunned down in Chiquimula (Reuter/Europa Press 2008). In June, the two surviving abductors were sentenced to fifty years in prison, but no one higher in the trafficking chain was prosecuted (US Department of State 2008).

Conclusion

With the signing of the Peace Accords, residents of the Ch'orti' area have undergone a profound consciousness-raising in human rights by the UN Mission (MINUGUA) and collaborating partners like Mayanists groups and churches. Initially, Ch'orti's were fearful that any talk of human rights was

subversive and dangerous, but for a few years they began to regard the ideas of human rights and legal process with hope. Town-dwelling ladinos also became noticeably more respectful towards Ch'orti's, or perhaps more cautious (cf. Hale 2006). Yet the Oriente is now more violent than ever because the structures promoting violence remain in place, including failing subsistence agriculture, inadequate state services like education and law enforcement, lack of adequate market opportunities, and ongoing if less blatant racism and sexism. Like Bourgois' (1995) marginalized crack smokers and dealers in East Harlem, Ch'orti's' tortured struggle for respect and self-recognition can lead to self-destructive behavior, including a hypersensitivity to perceived arrogance and insult, and the drive to vengeance. These slippery slopes of violence have been greased by consumerism, international migration, the glorification of mafias in film and music, and newspapers that regularly put bloody bodies on the front page. Inconceivable just a few years ago, today a "narco" Ch'orti' student can threaten a teacher on the soccer field: "if you bump into me again, those two over there will put a couple of bullets through your chest." The sense that amorality and violence are overflowing the boundaries of 'the normal' has led to reciprocally violent attempts to re-establish equilibrium. The Ch'orti' vengeance killings and ladino lynchings share the same sense of inevitability, of responsibility for having to set things straight, of keeping the authorities at a distance, and of communal complicity.

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ⁱ Counting Ch’orti’s is an arbitrary process because identity is more contingent than ever. While there are only about fifteen to twenty thousand speakers of Ch’orti’ in Jocotán and Olopa, as many as 150,000 campesinos in Jocotán, Olopa, Camotán, La Unión, San Juan Ermita, Chiquimula, Quezaltepeque, San Jacinto, and Esquipulas latently identify as “indigenous”.

ⁱⁱ Metz has conducted about three and half years of research in the region since 1990, including 22 months in 1991–93, during which he lived in three Ch’orti’ rural communities in Jocotán and Olopa and learned the language. López visited for the first time in 1989, after which he has conducted over three years of research in several communities of Jocotán and Camotán. Mariano began research in 2002, mostly in Jocotán and Camotán, and has spent about a year and a half there. López and Mariano both spent time there in 2009, and Metz’s last visit was in 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Obedezco pero no cumplo.

^{iv} For example, unlike much of western Guatemala where friars administered religious services throughout much of the colonial period, in eastern Guatemala Indians were assigned priests to whom they had to pay salaries (*sinodos*) and baptismal, wedding, burial, and other fees, despite the fact that this was illegal (Fry 1988:127, 130).

^v For a detailed review of the political violence in the Ch’orti’ area from the 1930s to the 1980s, including the massacres of the 1950s–1980s, see Metz 2006:57–90, and Metz forthcoming.