

The Reading of the Names, the Calling Forth of Massacred Loved Ones in Rio Negro

By Grahame Russell, photos: Lazar Konforti and Grahame

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At midnight, March 13, 2017, Lazar and I followed Carlos, Bruna, Cupertino and other Chixoy dam massacre survivors -[pronounced Chi-shoy]- away from the all-night ceremony at the main massacre site, at the spot known as Pacoxom [Pak-oh-shom].

Walking single file, we slipped and slid down into a deep mountain crevice, strewn with boulders, matted with roots and branches.



With a few cellphone lights and candles, we scrambled to where Guatemalan soldiers and civil defense patrollers had tossed the bodies of 35 older girls and younger women from the village of Rio Negro.

Thirty-five years ago - March 13, 1982 - a total of 177 women and children from the remote Mayan Achi village of Rio Negro were rounded up by the U.S.-backed regime and force-marched up from the riverside to this spot – Pacoxom - on the mountain ridge above.



Looking down from Pacoxom to the Chixoy hydro-electric dam flood basin. The original Rio Negro community lies under 100m of water. It was on March 13, 1982, that the women and children were forced marched up along the ridge in the foreground.

Here, the armed men savagely killed the women and children: using ropes to strangle; smashing children on rocks; beating them to death with hard objects. During the killing spree, soldiers and patrollers separated 35 girls and women off, raped them, then killed them and tossed their remains into this crevice.

Every March 13, family and community members hike to Pacoxom for an all night ceremony to name, reconnect with and honor their dead. Some join this further hike down into the crevice to where the bodies of their raped loved ones were found.



Squished together on the crevice floor, candles were lit and spread around. Accompanied by the entrancing sound of two notes played softly and repeatedly on a homemade violin and one percussion

sound beating on a homemade drum, a Mayan priest swings smoking copal back and forth over the entire site and reads aloud the names of the women and girls found here, calling them to reconnect with gathered loved ones.



Half an hour later we scrambled back up to Pacoxom. Now 1am, I looked back down into the blackness of the crevice at the deep orange glow of dozens of candles, the presence of the girls and women.

The ceremony continued through the night, including the reading of the names of more than 440 Rio Negro villagers slaughtered in a series of five massacres in 1981 and 1982 (including March 13) as part of calculated efforts to clear the Chixoy river basin of its Mayan inhabitants, to then dam the river, to then fill in the river basin and thus complete the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank's investment project.



A family member reads aloud over 440 names; the Mayan priest repeats each name as part of his spiritual ceremony, with burning copal incense swirling around and the entrancing violin notes and drum beat.

At 6am, family members and loved ones gather their belongings and begin the hike down to the remains of the Rio Negro village, then to travel in small boats across the flood basin to the dam wall, then to drive out to Tactic on the Coban highway; or to begin the hike up to the top of the Baja Verapaz mountains and catch a ride from the village of Chitucan down the other side to the town of Rabinal.

It was not until 1993-1994 that the remains of the Rio Negro victims were dug up by the EAFG exhumation team (precursor to the FAFG Guatemala Foundation of Forensic Anthropology) and the Chixoy dam survivors were able to properly bury their loved ones and thus reconnect with them. They will be back here next year, connecting the new generations to their massacred ancestors.

The Chixoy dam massacres were similar, in many ways, to massacres across Guatemala in 1970s, 80s and early 90s, and that reached genocidal proportions in certain Mayan regions, including Rabinal, from 1978-1983. And in some ways, the Chixoy dam massacres were worse. As the World Bank and IDB's investment project neared completion, the massacres were meant to send a message to over 30 Mayan villages along the river basin. When word spread of the savagery in and around Rio Negro (and complete eradication of the village), the remaining communities "agreed" to be relocated, though the project was illegal from the get go and no community ever received adequate compensation and relocation.

Today, 35 years later,

- the Guatemalan government has not paid reparations, as ordered in 2012 by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, to the survivors of more than 440 villagers killed;
- a small number of civil defense patrollers and military commissioners – themselves mostly poor Mayan men – were found guilty of and jailed for the March 13 massacre. No military officers and none of the intellectual authors of the Chixoy dam massacres have been put on trial, let alone sentenced and jailed;

- a majority of the Rio Negro survivors continue to live today in conditions of deeply entrenched poverty in the former military concentration camp of Pacux;
- a small amount of reparations have been paid by the Guatemalan government (not by the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank that invested in and profited from the in-all-ways disastrous and deadly project) to victims of the illegal and forced evictions of over 30 communities along the Chixoy river;
- except for the precedent setting Sepur Zarco criminal trial, no justice has been done in Guatemala for thousands of mainly Mayan women and girls who were raped as part of the regimes' strategies of genocide, massacres and terrorization.

Against great odds, extraordinary work and struggle continue in Guatemala to seek justice for the atrocities of the past and to profoundly transform their racist, exploitative and repressive government and society.

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