

Teaching the Human Story of the Guatemalan Genocide

Forensic Anthropology as Transitional Justice

Overview

| Time: 60 minutes | Audience: 10-12th grade |

During genocide, targeted individuals are often forcibly separated from their families and loved ones or even kidnapped from their communities. In the aftermath, organizations and communities try to find the remains of individuals to honor or memorialize them. To do so, they draw upon forensic anthropology, which is a science that involves the examination of the physical remains of people or exhumation of mass graves. This assignment analyzes forensic anthropology as a transitional justice tool, which helps communities and people come to terms with violent pasts and transition to a more just future.

Learning Objectives

- 1) Students will understand the definition and pillars of transitional justice.
- 2) Students will understand how forensic anthropology addresses the pillars of transitional justice.
- 3) Students will analyze transitional justice forensic anthropology efforts in Guatemala.

Content Standards

HSS-10.10, 1, 2, and 3	HSS-11.9
HSS-10.4, 1,2, and 3	HSS-11.9.1
HSS-10.9.3	HSS-PoAD.12.9.5
HSS-10.9.8	HSS-PoAD.12.9.8

Transitional Justice

Transitional justice refers to a wide range of tools used to help people reconcile with violent or repressive pasts. For example, courts have increasingly held those responsible for genocide and other human rights abuses legally or criminally accountable for their actions. Many other transitional justice tools are found outside of courts. These may include community-based dialogues, memorials, and other peacebuilding or reconciliation efforts that provide alternative forms of justice and healing. Overall, transitional justice relies on four pillars:

- 1) truth, or uncovering and documenting crimes and victim experiences;
- 2) justice, or holding perpetrators accountable, either through punishment or reconciliation;
- 3) reparations, or providing material and symbolic compensation to victims, and
- 4) prevention, which often involves reforming institutions to protect civilians and prevent future violence.



Knowledge Check

What does it mean for something to be a pillar of transitional justice?

Do some of the pillars seem more important than or contradictory to others? If so, which ones?

Forensic Anthropology

Forensic anthropology can contribute to transitional justice. Forensic anthropology involves the use of science to examine physical remains of people or exhume mass graves. This might involve trying to figure out the identity of a deceased individual and/or assessing how they died. After genocide and other episodes of violence, families often search for the remains of their loved ones from whom they have been separated or who have been kidnapped or disappeared. To better understand this, we will examine the work of the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala, or FAFG.

FAFG employs forensic sciences to investigate, search, exhume, and identify the victims of Guatemala's civil war and genocide. This can also involve taking DNA samples and testimonies from victims' families. FAFG's co-founder and Executive Director, Fredy Peccerelli, gave a TED talk to explain their important work. Please watch the talk, and as you watch the talk, take notes on how you think FAFG's work contributes to the four pillars transitional justice: truth, justice, reparations, and prevention.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zqZPujAPuc>



Instructions

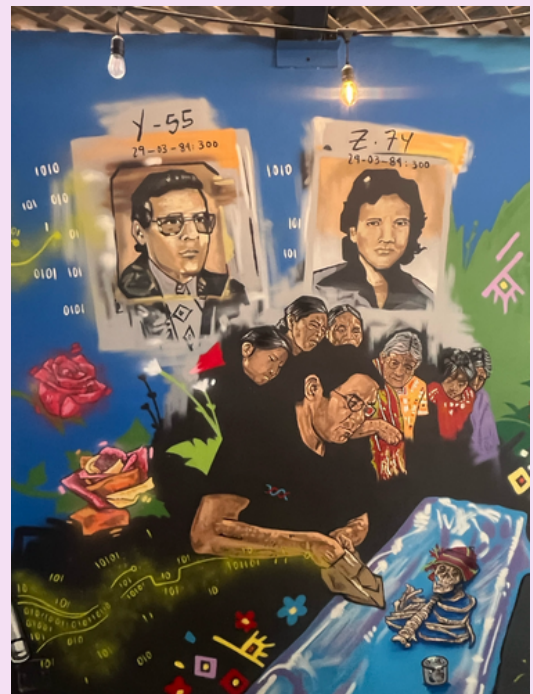
Discussion Questions

How would you summarize Mr. Peccerelli's work?

How do you think forensic anthropology is contributing to the pillars of transitional justice in Guatemala?

What questions do you have about forensic anthropology after genocide that were not answered in this TED talk?

FAFG Laboratories:



Extension Activity: In-Depth Group Work

Divide the class into four groups. Each group should be assigned a pillar of transitional justice and one of the four case studies from Guatemala listed below. Using online resources provided via the links below, the groups should spend 45 minutes examining their case study using the provided link. The group should be prepared to report back to the class and share what they learned about their case study, including how forensic anthropology contributed to achieving their assigned pillar.

Truth

- **Case Study:** The exhumation of mass graves tied to the Dos Erres massacre.
- **Link:** <https://cja.org/where-we-work/guatemala/related-resources/justice-for-the-dos-erres-massacre/>
- **Guiding Questions:**
 - What was the Dos Erres massacre? When did it occur?
 - How do forensic investigations aid in reconstructing what occurred during the Dos Erres massacre?
 - How might identifying remains help families obtain answers regarding the truth about what happened to their loved ones?

Justice

- **Case Study Example:** The use of forensic evidence in the genocide case against Efraín Ríos Montt.
- **Links:**
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-43611867>
- <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/press-releases/pbs-newshour-reports-on-how-forensic-science-is-being-used-in-guatemalan-genocide-trial>
- **Guiding Questions:**
 - Who was Efraín Ríos Montt?
 - When was he tried in a Guatemalan court, and why?
 - How was forensic evidence used to pursue justice in his trial?
 - What might be some challenges of using forensic evidence to pursue justice in court cases?

Reparations

- **Case Study Example:** Returning remains to families in Ixil Maya communities.
- **Link:** <https://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-guatemala-ixil-20180903-story.html>
- **Guiding Questions:**
 - Who are the Ixil Maya communities?
 - Why is the identification of remains important for making amends?
 - What role does cultural tradition play in burial and, more broadly, in mourning?
 - Why is the return of remains important for transitional justice?

Guarantees of Non-Recurrence

- **Case Study Example:** The use of forensic findings in memory projects or education efforts.
- **Links:** <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/multimedia/2019/5/photo-essay-bringing-closure-for-widows-of-guatemalan-conflict>
- **Guiding Questions:**
 - What stands out to you about how different institutions remember? What are some similarities and differences you see in the memory projects?
 - How would remembering what happened prevent future violence?
 - Why might people want to cover or deny what happened?



Glossary: Forensic Anthropology & Transitional Justice

Accountability

Being held responsible for one's actions, especially in legal or moral terms.

Atrocity

An extremely cruel or violent act, especially one involving physical harm to many people. Often used to describe acts committed during war or oppression.

Civil War (Guatemala)

A conflict in Guatemala from 1960 to 1996, involving the government and various rebel groups. Many civilians, particularly Indigenous people, were killed during this time.

Efraín Ríos Montt

A former Guatemalan dictator who was tried for genocide and crimes against humanity for his role in the civil war.

Exhumation

The act of digging up a body from a grave, especially to gather evidence in a legal or scientific investigation.

FAFG (Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala)

An organization that investigates and identifies victims of violence during Guatemala's civil war, helping families find loved ones and contributing to justice efforts.

Forensic Anthropology

A scientific field that involves studying human remains (like bones) to identify individuals and learn how they died. It is especially useful in situations like war crimes or mass violence.

Genocide

Actions taken with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

Ixil Maya

An Indigenous group in Guatemala who were heavily affected by violence during the country's civil war.

Mass Grave

A burial site where many people are buried together, often as a result of war or mass violence.

Memorialization

Creating monuments, museums, or events to remember and honor those affected by violence or injustice.

Non-Recurrence

A goal of transitional justice aiming to prevent the same violence or injustice from happening again in the future.

Reparations

Actions taken to repair damage done to victims of injustice, which can include money, public apologies, or returning remains to families.

Testimony

A formal written or spoken statement, often given by a witness or survivor about their experiences.

Transitional Justice

A set of tools and methods used by societies to deal with legacies of large-scale human rights abuses or violent conflict. It aims to help communities heal and prevent future violence.

Transitional Justice Pillars

The four main goals or focus areas of transitional justice:

- Truth – uncovering and documenting what happened.
- Justice – holding those responsible accountable.
- Reparations – making amends to victims.
- Prevention – changing systems to stop future violence.

Truth

A pillar of transitional justice focused on uncovering facts about what happened during violent or repressive periods and making them known.