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## Guatemalans Try to Mend Ties Snapped by War

By DAVID GONZALEZ

ACUL, Guatemala — José Marcos Bernal stood among his neighbors and calmly recounted a tale that was as horrifying as it was common during this country's civil war. More than 20 years ago, he said, the army forced him to ambush and kill friends and strangers alike as part of its merciless campaign to eliminate rebel sympathizers.

The weary, mute faces of the others in the room were testimony to the lingering effects of that violence, which tore apart indigenous communities as elders and traditional leaders were killed. Now, six years after peace accords ended the 36-year civil war, villages like Acul are trying to restore the social and cultural ties that once bound them.

If the war was a brutal intrusion of modern conflict into traditional cultures, the attempt to heal that trauma is also an unexpected marriage of old and new. In dozens of villages here, survivors and perpetrators, men and women, seek healing and forgiveness, relying on a mix of contemporary psychology and confessional self-help with centuries-old Mayan beliefs.

For indigenous communities — which suffered the most during the war but have benefited the least from the peace — the regular sessions are an attempt to unite against the crime, despair and sense of abandonment that plagues the region.

"Despite so much violence, things have not changed in peace," Mr. Bernal said. "There is no respect. We have not learned from what happened and from what we were forced to do. There is liberty now, but it is as if they want us to kill ourselves off. I hope everything we share will help us improve."

His testimony came during an exercise to visualize and then draw the path of his life, part of the techniques used by the Utz K'aslemal, or "Good Life" mental health project, which also relies on Eastern meditation and Mayan cosmology. The project was started in the early 1990's, when Dr. Roberto Cabrera and Sister Barbara Ford, a Roman Catholic nun who was shot dead in an apparent carjacking in 2001, ran community health programs in Quiché province.

At the time, many villagers had complained of migraines and body aches that medicines could not ease. The nun and the doctor concluded that the people were suffering from the traumas of massacres, forced paramilitary service or years spent hiding in the mountains.

Eventually they extended their methods to communities where exhumations of mass graves had also reopened old wounds. Today 175 local people trained to be

"multiplicadores" — facilitators who conduct the sessions in remote villages — do much of the work.

"The communities had been like in a period of sleep and silence," said Flor de María Manzano Moz, a psychologist with the group. "What we do is let people express little by little what they have held back for so long. For the Maya, the word is important to them. To say something, to say you repent, you are respected."

Much has been said here in Acul, a village of 3,000 people, where a massacre claimed the lives of 30 people in the early 1980's. Residents recalled how they saw relatives slaughtered in front of them or how their homes were destroyed and their cattle stolen. For some, it is difficult to trust in others, since they have lingering memories of the informants who often singled out neighbors for retribution.

The sketch Rosa Raimundo García drew of her life was filled with chaotic squiggles that ran through jagged mountains until it reached green flowers and animals. When the army killed her husband, she said, she and her infant son sought refuge in the mountains. There, she said, the guerrillas suggested she smother the child, lest his cries betray their location.

"I got together with the other people with children because I would not kill mine," she said, one hand clutching her drawing and her other arm wrapped tightly across her chest. "Neither the army nor the guerrillas killed my child."

Mental health workers said one of their toughest problems was to restore the sense of community that prevailed before the war. While traditional leaders and organizers were killed during the war, the period since it ended has brought new divisions. The Evangelical churches that have proliferated in recent years look down on Mayan traditions, and the aid groups that came to provide food or housing often fostered dependency.

"What is truly happening now is the disintegration of community," said Benjamín Santiago Ceto, a session facilitator. "There is no organizing. Everybody works for himself."

Although Acul is hours away from the capital, the outer walls of the community center that sits in the shade of the plaza's cypress tree are covered with gang graffiti. A spate of suicides claimed the lives of several youths a few years ago, and residents lament the lack of any real help from the government.

"We feel poorer than ever," said Francisco Brito Morales, who lost his cattle during the war. "These ideas of mental health could help us a lot. We want projects like we had before, at least to plant crops and raise cattle. All we have now are fleas."

