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Creating History:
Remembering the Guatemalan Civil War in Kaqchikel Maya Schools

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Abstract:

In this paper I will discuss the ways in which the history of Guatemala’s civil war is taught in the public schools of the Kaqchikel Maya town of San Antonio Palopo. I find that teachers say that they discuss the history of the war in class, yet students appear to have a very low level of information regarding the war. I also find that history education in San Antonio appears to be more concerned with teaching morality than with facts, and that history appears to be understood principally in terms of thematic content rather than chronology or causality. My information is derived from classroom observations, examination of textbooks, and interviews with students and educators.

Introduction:

The Kaqchikel Maya town of San Antonio Palopo, located on the shores of Lake Atitlan, was fortunate in its experience in Guatemala’s genocidal 36-year civil war as compared to nearby communities such as Santiago Atitlan (Carlsen 1997: 158). Located in the relatively peaceful department of Solola, which suffered only 46 deaths – as opposed to some 28,000 in Quiche – San Antonio did not experience a permanent military presence, and only three residents of the community were killed or kidnapped by the armed forces (REMHI 1998: 393). Now, with the peace accords signed in 1996 and the worst of the violence two decades past, and entire generation has grown up in San Antonio – as in the rest of Guatemala – that has no firsthand memory of the war. For most of the youth of San Antonio, the war has become a part of the distant past, with little bearing on their present lives.

In San Antonio’s two primary schools, or primarios (Escuela Oficial Urbana Mixta 15 de Septiembre 1821, Jornada Matutina and EOUM 15 de Septiembre 1821, Jornada Vespertina; since these names are never used, and the schools are generally differentiated by pointing in the direction of the school under discussion, I will henceforth refer to them simply as the green school and the orange school, respectively), and one middle school (the basico), social studies teachers must make the decision of how to teach this new generation about both their community and their nation’s history with respect to the recent, violent past. Teachers and principals are in agreement that the history of the war should be taught, and the subject is included in the Guatemalan Ministry of Education’s official curriculum
for social sciences (history is not recognized as a separate subject). However, classroom observations and interviews with numerous students reveal curious discrepancies between what the teachers say they teach and what the students are actually learning. These differences, I believe, help to shed light on the way in which the memory of the civil war is being shaped for future generations in San Antonio Palopo, but also help to reveal the way in which educators in the community understand and teach history more generally.

Throughout this paper, I have changed the names of all interviewees.

Methods:

My research was simplified by the fact that all the people – students, teachers, and administrators – relevant to my project naturally congregated in San Antonio’s two schools. The situation was further aided by the fact that I was living with Jorge, the principal of the green school and basico, and his wife Ignacia, the only basico social studies teacher. Thus, I had easy access to two of my most crucial informants on a regular basis, and in addition to conducting formal interviews with them, I was also able to solicit clarifications and additional details in informal interviews and dinnertime conversations. Living with the director of my main research site also ensured that I was easily able to gain permission to visit classes, interview students, and examine the library.

Every day, I would visit one of the two primarios at recess. While the children screamed, wrestled, and played soccer in the hallways, I would attempt to find a teacher, who I would then ask to observe a social studies class. This was rather more difficult than it sounds, as teachers at both schools will often vanish from the building for long periods of time, or even fail to report for an entire class, but, once located, teachers were generally willing to help me. On a few occasions, teachers asked me what, specifically, I wanted them to teach about in the class which I was to observe, but I always responded that he or she was the teacher and I am just a student, and I simply wanted to see a normal social studies lesson. On some occasions, teachers welcomed me to give myself a brief introduction; at other times, class simply began with no explanation given for my presence. During class, I would sit at a desk among the students, if possible, or else at the teacher’s desk, if I was directed to do so by the teacher, and take notes on the class. Several teachers called on me to give answers in class, in which case I participated, but generally speaking I
was much more of an observer than an active participant. In this, however, I was not much removed from the majority of students, who were in most cases reluctant to participate publicly in the lesson. I visited social studies classes in third, fourth, and fifth grades – a total of five classes in *primario* – in addition to five social studies classes in each of the three grades of *basico*. Also, when possible, I read students’ homework assignments that pertained to history.

In addition to observing classes, I also conducted interviews with teachers. Where possible, I carried out these interviews in empty classrooms; however, this was not always an option, and those interviews carried out while there were students present suffered greatly in quality because the incredible racket which the students produce would often make the teacher’s responses inaudible. Regardless of interviewing environment, I followed a semi-structured interview format, in which I had a general plan for the interview and a list of specific questions, but which I would adapt in order to allow myself to follow the interviewee’s answers and categories and to avoid unnecessary repetition of topics already covered (something which I considered to be important when a teacher was taking time out of class in order to talk to me). The list of questions evolved as time passed and I became aware of new questions which required answers. Most interviews, however, did share certain common questions: 1) the purpose of social studies, 2) whether or not the teacher taught about the civil war, 3) what the teacher says about the war, 4) whether it is taught or seen differently in a Kaqchikel Maya school as opposed to in a Ladino school, 5) questions about specific events or terms and the ways they were taught. My interviews with the principals followed largely the same format, which a somewhat modified set of questions that leaves out certain points relating to details of the lessons in favor of other questions on the origins of the school curriculum and the overall vision of social sciences.

Certainly the most challenging part of my research was the interviewing of students. In order to be able to gain greater depth than would be possible if I interviewed students in every grade, and reasoning that older students would be both more mature and familiar with a broader swathe of the schools’ curriculums, I confined my student interviews to students enrolled in *primero*, *segundo*, and *tercero basico* (equivalent to and hereafter referred to as 7th, 8th, and 9th grades, respectively) – the final three years of education available in San Antonio – speaking to approximately ten students in each grade. This represents about one
quarter of the total students enrolled in *basico* in San Antonio. As with the teachers and principals, I entered each student interview with a basic formula: begin by inquiring if they learned about the war, ask to hear what they learned, and then have them identify a few major terms such as Rigoberta Menchu, Rios Montt, Civil Defense Patrols (PACs), and the massacre in Santiago Atitlan. I concluded interviews by asking whether any specific sort of person was targeted in the violence. I kept the interviews flexible in order to follow up on interesting or unusual comments. In cases in which the student was visibly discomforted, I would try to put them at ease by telling them that it wasn’t a test, that I understand that there is so much history that nobody can be expected to know all of it, that I was just curious to hear whatever they could remember. In some cases, especially when the student was answering “I don’t know” to every question and was clearly desperate to escape, I would omit questions in order to let the student go earlier.

In order to interview these students, I would go to classes that I knew had free periods and attempt to convince students to talk to me. This was complicated by the fact that, during free periods, students would often disperse throughout the school. Furthermore, most of them were reluctant to give up their free time to answer questions. Many girls were so shy as to be unwilling to speak to me, while the boys posed the opposite difficulty, their answers to me interspersed with laughter-inducing asides to their friends in Kaqchikel. Another popular tactic with both genders was plead ignorance to even the most basic questions (several claimed not to recall a single thing they had ever studied in social sciences, even though they have this class every day), with the apparent hope of ending the interview as soon as possible; the boys pursued this strategy while grinning at their laughing friends, while the girls generally whispered their “I don’t know”s so quietly that they had to repeat themselves several times before I could understand. I soon discovered that conducting interviews in an empty classroom, with the door firmly shut, could go a long way towards discouraging the noisy crowd which disrupted so many of my early interviews, and would generally encourage the boys to restrain their showboating and the girls to become more responsive. However, even in a closed classroom there was nothing to be done about the students tapping and making faces through the windows, and thus there were relatively few student interviews that were not at least marginally disrupted. Because of the great range of cooperativeness displayed by students, I recorded after every interview
a few notes on the student’s apparent desire to provide accurate information, thereby allowing myself to distinguish more reliable informants from less credible ones.

I have described above the major sources of information in my research. However, there are a few other significant sources for my work: the first of these in my investigation of the library at the green school, the only library in San Antonio. This library is not more than a room with a single wall of shelves, of which two are devoted to social sciences. I went through these two shelves, book by book, searching indices for any mention of the civil war or related themes (such as racism, human rights, the peace accords, etc), and recorded information on the books’ presentation of these topics. I also spoke with the librarian, seeking to find which books are most popular with teachers and students, as well as to find which books she could recommend me on the subject of the war (none, as it transpired).

Another secondary source of information was an interview I conducted with one of the three war widows living in San Antonio, a woman who, I was told, sometimes speaks to children at the school about her experiences. I hoped to speak to the other widows as well, but was ultimately unable to schedule an appointment. I visited the widow I did meet with at her home, accompanied by Ignacia, my host mother and the basico social sciences teacher, who served as my translator (the widow speaks only Kaqchikel). It was apparent to me that much of what was said was not translated; the widow would speak for several minutes in Kaqchikel, after which I would be given a few sentences in Spanish. Furthermore, when I attempted to ask clarification questions, they were often answered without reference to the widow, and the answers which were provided often failed to address the question or else seemed contradictory. For these reasons, as well as for the lack of comparable experiences to help evaluate this conversation, I have elected not to greatly rely on information from this interview.

My research faced the major limitation that my time in San Antonio did not coincide with the teaching of the war in the schools, which most teachers agree occurs in early summer, and I was therefore unable to observe the teaching of the civil war firsthand. However, I believe that, by speaking to educators and checking their statements against my observations of social science classes in general and the knowledge of students, I have
nevertheless been able to form a solid understanding of the content of these lessons and can reasonably draw conclusions as to the nature of education on the civil war.

Results:

At the most official level, and the level furthest removed from classroom realities in its three educational institutions, the learning experience of students in San Antonio is shaped the curriculums handed down by the national government of Guatemala, in the form of Ministry of Education-approved textbooks. In all the classrooms which I observed, the teachers based significant portions of their lessons on such textbooks, and their content must therefore be considered a significant part of the history education received by students in San Antonio. Having examined every book on the two shelves devoted to social sciences in the small library shared by the basico and the green school, the only library in San Antonio, I can report that the published materials provided to students are extremely limited. Of the books available, a large number are development reports published by international development banks, while many more are textbooks published in the 1960s and ‘70s. Among those books which have been published since the end of the war, including those used in primario, a clear pattern emerges in which the violence of the civil war receives little to no discussion, while the peace accords are discussed at length, generally as an introduction to a unit on human rights. Educacion primaria: ciencias sociales, sexto grado, published shortly after the end of the civil war, provides a representative example. In this book, the final unit of study is entitled “Peace in Our Country,” and offers the following sentence under the heading “Peace Accords:” “during 36 years, in Guatemala there was a terrible war in which thousands of people died” (Educacion primaria: 162). There follows a lengthy discussion of the various accords signed between the Guatemalan government and the UNRG, giving the high points of each – commitments to human rights, democracy, a multiethnic nation, and so on. That single sentence – “during 36 years, in Guatemala there was a terrible war in which thousands of people died” – constitutes the book’s entire discussion of the war which killed tens of thousands, and displaced hundreds of thousands more. I wish to stress that this was entirely typical of the books in the library, and, with only one or two exceptions, all books available to students which mentioned the war at all did it in a similar context, as a prelude to a far
more heavily-discussed peace accord and unit on human rights. The textbooks used in *primario* classes are generally in the same mold.

The textbooks used in all social science classes at the *basico* represent a significant change from those in circulation in *primario*. *Ciclo de educativo: ciencias sociales*, released by the same publisher as the *primario* textbook discussed above, appears to be of newer provenience than most of the books employed at lower levels (although many Guatemala textbooks, this one among them, lack copyright information, so it is difficult to be certain), and its pagination with Maya numerals suggests that it conforms to a certain style of progressivism and multicultural inclusivity in vogue in contemporary Guatemala. The *Primero basico* (*7th* grade) edition speaks favorably of the land reforms carried out by the Arbenz government in the 1950s, carrying on to a discussion of the Guatemalan civil war in the context of Cold War conflict in Central America. “Internal conflicts, invented in the most part by the United States… have caused suffering, loss of identity, and thousands of lives… military governments… opted for violent repression to eliminate these [guerrilla] groups” (*Primero basico*: 122-3). The book gives the number of dead at 100,000, with 40,000 disappeared; no mention is made, however, of specific massacres, of Ríos Montt or the other Guatemala presidents and generals who were responsible for the worst extremes of the violence, nor of the Historical Memory Recovery Project’s (RHEMI) conclusion that some 96% of the crimes committed during the war were the responsibility of the military. The *Segundo basico* (*8th* grade) edition of the book makes much the same points as the *Primero basico* version, discussing at length the role of “Yankee imperialism” (*Segundo basico*: 116), and addressing the general tactics used by the military – “forced disappearances, displacement, exile, prison” (*Segundo basico*: 122) – without going into detail or discussing specific occurrences.

Alongside the textbooks, we must consider the town’s two principals – Marco Antonio (director of the orange school) and Jorge (director of the green school and the *basico*) – to be key in understanding the official vision of history education. In practical terms, their opinions are crucial as it is they who are responsible for selecting the textbooks to be used in classrooms from a range of approved titles. When asked whether the history of the war was taught in the schools under his leadership, Jorge replied “yes, but not very deeply… sometimes it is not worth the trouble.” Despite these reservations, he said that the
subject is taught in several years in *primario*, as well as all three years of *basico*, with students being shown a video (*Hija del Puma*, a 1994 film which recounts the story of an indigenous woman whose brother is kidnapped by the military during the war) conducting interviews, and learning about how many people died. In response to a question as to whether students learned about the massacre in Santiago Atitlan – a town just across the lake from San Antonio – Jorge told me that students learn about local history and events on a general, national level, but that “we don’t give much importance to it [the massacre in Santiago], it’s not worth it that they should learn the history,” and continued to say that he worried that teaching such events might encourage “violent youth, rebels, that are able to interpret it badly” and perhaps might seek to emulate such acts.

Jorge’s concern over the possible negative effects of a too-detailed history education reflects an overall preoccupation with morality in history education. He identified the role of social sciences as being the instilling of moral values, and suggested that teachers should “teach important positive values, and throw out the negative ones.” Asked to relate this to the teaching of the war and explain what values could be learned, he identified “unity, solidarity, [and] respect for people” as positive values to be learned from the war, whereas negative values included “violence, lack of respect, violation of rights, lack of respect for life, discrimination, [and] war between races.” Asked whether the conflict was related to present realities in Guatemala, Jorge responded strongly in the affirmative, saying that “there are antisocial groups that are doing something similar,” in an apparent reference to Guatemala’s current problems with gangs and violence.

Marco Antonio, San Antonio’s other principal, shared Jorge’s vision of social sciences as a subject largely concerned with morality, albeit with his own set of issues in mind. When asked as to the object of social science classes, he launched into a discussion of racism in the United States and the mistreatment of Guatemalans there. Like Jorge, he too related the current gang violence to the war, saying that Guatemalan refugees to the United States, facing discrimination in that country, turned to gangs and eventually brought that culture back to Guatemala. Marco Antonio also addressed the issue of racism within Guatemala and its role in the war, telling me that indigenous peoples were targeted disproportionately as victims of violence. Jorge implied something similarly, expressing that the army was largely comprised of indigenous people, and that most of those killed
were indigenous as well, and condemned this fighting within a race. However, neither Jorge nor Marco Antonio felt that the history was taught differently or had a different significance in a Kaqchikel Maya school than in a Ladino school.

The opinions voiced by the principals are necessarily paired with those of the teachers, for while the principals may set the official policy, the act of teaching the history of the war belongs to the teachers. Thus, teacher interviews are indispensable for understanding the framework of education in San Antonio. While teachers differed in their opinions as to the extent to which the war is covered in *primario*, all agreed that it was addressed in greater depth in *basico*. Most reported being satisfied with this system, feeling that students in *primario* were still too young to learn about such serious topics in detail. Freddy, a 6th grade teacher, told me that the students “lack the capacity to assimilate this information,” and so he consequently only reviews the history without going into details. Gregorio, a 4th grade teacher, told me that his students “are young, they don’t have much understanding” for a subject that he referred to as “traumatic.”

However, despite this generalized agreement that an in-depth study of the civil war is the proper domain of the *basico*, teachers in the *primario* expressed a range of ideas on the proper treatment of the subject in their own classrooms. One end of the spectrum is best represented by Sandra, a 4th grade teacher and one of the oldest teachers at the school, who informed me that the history of the war is covered as a part of citizen formation, a subject distinct from social sciences. Along with the civil war, she told me that citizen formation covers “the rights of peace, values, what the fatherland is… gender equality, actions of peace, values, what are political parties, families, democracy, norms of courtesy, how to live in harmony, members of society,” as opposed to social sciences, which she told me is “only the history of the origin, the stone age, the bronze age” and similar topics. Sandra expressed no reservations regarding the textbooks, and when I asked her what she hoped students would learn from these lessons, her answer stressed the importance of values as opposed to any other category of learning.

The opposite end of the spectrum of teacher opinions was expressed by Gregorio, a young teacher of 3rd grade who worked in the classroom directly next door to Sandra’s. Whereas I found it difficult to steer my interview with Sandra onto the topic of the war and she consistently gave responses that responded only minimally to the question, Gregorio
began the interview by telling me that “the history of the internal war is very complex and painful,” but continued to expound at length, frequently providing details and opinions well beyond the question I had asked. “Obviously it is very important that they have to understand what happened… and that the teachers should teach what happened and not manipulate it,” he told me. He was of the opinion that “the textbook is written by people that want to paint the history bright. The government doesn’t want to teach the true history… the government doesn’t want that we should know this… [the books] talk of the peace but don’t talk of the war,” and that there are some teachers whose history lessons ignore the fact that Rios Montt’s “intent was not to protect the nation from the war, but to disappear many people, to erase entire people and cultures, like Hitler.” He stressed the need for teachers to be critical of what they read and to go beyond the government-issued textbooks in order to find uncensored histories.

Gregorio told me that the war was the fault of the small number of wealthy families which controlled most of the land and wealth in Guatemala, and, similarly to Jorge, bemoaned the fact that indigenous soldiers had killed other indigenous people (“killing their own race, their own brothers”) – however, unlike Jorge, he said he was further saddened and angered by the fact that they did this killing at the orders of Ladinos. Also like Jorge – and many other interviewees – Gregorio expressed the sentiment that there is still not peace in Guatemala, although once again he expressed this in stronger terms than did the others. While many interviewees spoke of the serious problems of gangs and violence in Guatemala today, Gregorio referred to the “supposed peace” in Guatemala, telling me that “there still is war, we are always at war – with hunger, poverty… they kill more people than the war.”

Gregorio was clearly far more radical in his ideas than the majority of the teachers with whom I spoke. He was unique, for instance, in discussing the racial element of the conflict and for identifying indigenous people as being specially victimized by the military. However, several other teachers echoed his description of the textbook version of events as being excessively minimal, and it was not uncommon for teachers to tell me that part of their role was to find additional resources with which to supplement and broaden the curriculum.
Thus far, I have discussed only the teachers in the _primario_. However, as all educators were in agreement that the most significant study of the war occurs in the _basico_, this means that Ignacia, as the only social sciences teacher at the only _basico_ in San Antonio, is perhaps the single most important person in shaping students’ education on the war. Ignacia, following the general trend among teachers, feels that the explanation of the war in the textbook – even in the more comprehensive _basico_ textbooks – is inadequate, and thus chooses to supplement her lessons with a video (_Hija del Puma_, which she said “makes the students realize that it was very hard, that the military massacred many people, women, children, old men, and it was never investigated. They see, ‘this is real, this was hard’”) and research projects that include speaking with the war widows who live in San Antonio. When asked what are the most important things that she hopes that students should learn, she spoke in very general terms – students should learn why it happened, what other countries aside from Guatemala suffered from internal conflicts, and what the consequences were. Asked to be more specific, she said the most important thing students should take away from these lessons is “that they practice the values, for example, peace, liberty, the rights that every person has… the _campesinos_ didn’t have rights, and from this the guerrillas were created, because they were not treated equally.” When I asked her about specific people and organizations involved in the war, Ignacia gave me clear and correct explanations; however, at no point did she identify any specifics – be them people, groups, or events – without direct prompting. Unlike Gregorio, she did not at any point establish any relationship between ethnicity and the violence, and she said that the responsibility belongs to both the military and the guerrillas. Like other educators, she did make the connection between the violence of the war and current problems of gangs, juvenile delinquency, and social decomposition, even going so far as to say that “there is not peace. They signed the accords, but only on paper.” However, she did not go so far as Gregorio, and did not draw the less-obvious connections to poverty and wealth distribution that he did.

The statements of the teachers and principals are important, but also limited by the fact that what a teacher believes he or she is teaching does not always accurately reflect the reality in the classroom. For this reason, I attended a number of social studies classes in several years of _primario_, as well as many classes with every level at the _basico_. Lessons at
all levels were normally short – the standard period in basico is only 30 minutes – and lecture-based. Given the generally unruly nature of the students and the frequent tardiness of teachers, the amount of information covered in any given class period was not great.

Perhaps the most striking pattern which I observed in social studies classes was the great emphasis on values (as opposed to facts or skills) as the center of the lessons. For example, in one of Ignacia’s 9th grade course, she broke students into groups to define “solidarity” and “humanitarian act,” then spent the remainder of class lecturing on their importance. While she illustrated these terms using a variety of examples, such as the international response to the Hatian earthquake, the examples were not drawn from a single field or period of history, and none were developed into lessons beyond their relevance to the value in question. Of the classes which I visited, 10 were based entirely on values (that is, students were taught about the importance of solidarity, honesty, etc., with minimal factual content), 2 were organized around values but contained significant amounts of fact, while 6 were based around facts. Teachers at every grade level I visited, from 3rd to 9th, taught lessons centered on values, and it appeared to transcend the divisions which I observed in my interviews; Gregorio and Ignacia both taught values-oriented lessons that were virtually indistinguishable from those taught by other teachers who, based solely on their interviews, would have appeared to have dramatically different teaching methods.

With regards to those classes which were focused on facts, there are several peculiarities of their structure that merit comment. While facts were presented to the students, in none of the classes that I witnessed were these facts drawn together into a narrative structure. For instance, in Ignacia’s 7th grade class, students created maps of Guatemala at various points in history, illustrating the changes its borders have undergone over time. When presenting these maps, Ignacia did not place them in chronological order, nor did she provide explanations for the changes that were illustrated; rather, what students received was simply an oral version of the information visible on the map. The lesson concluded with Ignacia telling the students the date of independence, the total population, and the surface area of Guatemala. This style of teaching was consistent across nearly all the fact-based classes that I visited.

The emphasis on facts over narrative was also in evidence in the student homework assignments from 7th grade that I read. The assignments were reports on the history of San
Antonio – local history being a major focus of the school – and, of the three which I was able to obtain, two of them included near-identical discussions of the civil war. Lesbia wrote, “in the time of the violence, in the year 1980, the army of Guatemala kidnapped three people accused of being guerrillas: Juan Sicay, Pedro Cumes, and Ramos Perez. They never appeared again.” After this point, however, both papers take a curious turn. Immediately after the three kidnapped men, Lesbia continues “For the plantation owners, the government of Manuel Estada Cabrera solicited the departamental government for workers to harvest cotton and coffee… they [the workers] were treated as slaves.” She continues, in the next paragraph, to describe a violent land dispute between San Antonio and the nearby town of San Lucas Toliman in terms that seem to suggest that this conflict occurred within the living memory of elder community members. The reason that these statements are strange lies in the chronology: Cabrera ruled Guatemala in the early 1900s, decades before the beginning of the civil war, while the conflict with San Lucas took place in the colonial era. Yet Lesbia makes no indication that she is taking any sort of leap in time. The other paper which discusses the war gives the same information, in the same order, the only difference being that the latter student leaves out the part about San Lucas. The connections they made were not irrational. The parallels between the two armed conflicts (the civil war and the battle with San Lucas) are obvious enough, while an examination of the Cabrera regime reveals that he was essential in strengthening the land owning class and United Fruit Company at the expense of the peasantry, and was thus closely linked to the origins of the civil war. The fact that two students independently made such a seemingly-bizarre mistake in such similar ways suggests that this was not merely a matter of student confusion, but rather a reflection of the manner in which they were taught.

The final sources of information needed to create a picture of history education in San Antonio are, of course, the students themselves. I interviewed a large number of students in every grade in basico, and found that students have a very low level of knowledge about the civil war. I was unable to find a single student in either 7th or 8th grades who was capable of giving me even basic information regarding Rigoberta Menchu, Rios Montt, the massacre in Santiago Atitlan, or the three men kidnapped in San Antonio, and no student in 7th, 8th, or 9th grades seemed to have ever heard of a PAC – this in spite of the focus on local history and the fact that there was a PAC in San Antonio during the war.
Where information did exist, it was generally incomplete. Those students who had heard of Menchu knew her, not for her Nobel Peace Prize or her role in ending the war, but for her recent failed presidential run. A number of students had heard of Montt and were aware that he had been president, but only one told me about the dictator’s role in the war and blamed Montt for presiding over massacres; by in large, students had no idea what he had done in office, or even praised him as a good president for fighting crime. Answers varied wildly as to whether or not they had studied the war in primario, and, if they had, in which year. Responses were not apparently affected by the students’ attitudes towards me as a researcher; several of the most helpful students, including one who offered to read up on the war online and return and tell me more the next day, offered some of the most patently untrue answers I received, while other students who clearly were not pleased to be speaking to me provided accurate information on the war.

Despite the generally low familiarity with terms and people relating to the war, a prevailing inability to describe the war’s course and causes, and a lack of knowledge as to who the victims of the war were, it was nevertheless apparent from my interviews that students are exposed to information on the war during their time in basico. Students in 9th grade were significantly less likely to respond to my questions with a blank stare and significantly more likely to have some sort of information to offer than were students in 7th grade, who almost universally denied any knowledge at all on any subject. By the later grades, it became apparent by the answers of several standout students that significant amounts of information had been made available to the students, at least in certain areas, and even in cases where older students said they knew nothing about the war, they frequently would tell me that they had learned about it, and simply forgotten what they had learned. Many students were aware that three men had been kidnapped from San Antonio, and several of them were able to recount the names of some or all of those men; those who couldn’t often apologized for having forgotten their names. These same students often agreed that they had been to meet the men’s widows, yet none of them could tell me anything of the kidnappings beyond the names of the victims. Students also remembered having seen the film Hijia del Puma, and on several instances were able to recount it in considerable detail. Many students told me that the army killed and kidnapped many people, yet only a lone 9th grader said that indigenous people in particular had been victims
of the conflict; otherwise, students told me that the violence had been indiscriminant and every sort of person had been killed. One student, Nixon, had heard of the massacre in Santiago Atitlan, and was even aware that 13 people had died: “they were killed because they wanted to defend their town, for this they fought the soldiers, and so they were killed,” he told me.

However, if we are to form an accurate impression of history education in San Antonio, we must place alongside those students who could produce correct answers the ones whose answers were incomplete, confused, and, in some cases, egregiously false. Directly following my interview with Nixon, I spoke to Alexander, who informed me that the massacre in Santiago Atitlan had killed some 5000 people. Several students told me that the civil war was fought against the Spanish, and one went so far as to explain to me that it was a conflict between Pedro de Alvarado (in fact the conquistador who brought Spanish rule to Guatemala in the 1500s) and Tecun Uman (a colonial-era hero of Maya resistance). When I clarified that I was asking about the civil war in the 1980s, she did not retract the previous story, and simply added the names of two of the men kidnapped from San Antonio to her previous account. Yet another student told me that the civil war was fought in 1821 (the year of Guatemalan independence) against San Lucas (the town with which San Antonio fought a battle several centuries earlier).

Conclusions:

Having spoken to a large proportion of the students in basico, it is tempting to conclude that the teachers are simply not telling the truth when they say that they teach about the war. Certainly I believe, in light of these results, it is reasonable to see San Antonio’s history education as seriously flawed. However, rather than simply-condemning the town’s educational system, it is far more fruitful to look for connections between what the teachers say they teach, the ways in which the textbooks and curriculums are designed, and what the students actually learn.

Perhaps the most important thread tying together all the different pieces of the San Antonio school system is the importance of values in social sciences education. Among both principals and teachers, the teaching of values was very frequently placed at the forefront of their aims for class. Even teachers, such as Gregorio, who were critical of what
they perceived as the official line on history education, frequently linked the history of the
war to present political or social realities. History was not spoken of as something of
practical value, nor did I encounter strong sentiments as to the importance of remembering
the victims as an end in itself, a concept that “those who fail to learn from history are
doomed to repeat it,” or any sense that the experience of the civil war contributes to a sense
of Maya or Guatemalan identity. Rather, like the textbooks, which generally present the
war as a preamble to the more-important peace treaties and declarations of human rights,
teachers generally see the social sciences as a tool for instilling morals. This understanding
of the social sciences is reflected in the classes I observed, the majority of which were
focused on teaching morality, with facts serving as supporting details but in no way
structuring the lessons. If this understanding of what teaching history means in San Antonio
is applied to the teachers’ responses, then it becomes possible to begin to reconcile the
teachers’ insistence that they discuss the war with the students’ lack of knowledge on the
subject. The questions I asked the students were, generally speaking, factual questions; in
interviewing students, my questions were targeted to find knowledge of the sort that one
would expect to glean from a history class in the United States. However, if the war is
taught in San Antonio with a moral rather than factual focus, it is possible that students
have indeed studied the war and yet remain generally unable to answer my questions.

Perhaps surprisingly, in light of the moral purpose of history, teachers in interviews
rarely brought up the details of specific crimes in the war. Likewise, they were reluctant to
dwell on the concept of guilt or to assign blame to historical figures. Although they
generally referred to those killing and kidnapping civilians as the military, when I asked
who was responsible, the guerrillas were generally apportioned a share as well. This
attitude was reflected in the students’ knowledge base; only one student held Montt
responsible for his crimes, and none was aware of the role of the PACs. Teachers and
students alike also generally ignored the issue of impunity, and none ever called for the
prosecution of war criminals who are still at liberty and in positions of prominence in
Guatemala. This tendency is difficult to reconcile with the majority of the social science
education which I observed, but it is perhaps helpful to recall the fears Jorge expressed with
respect to teaching about the Santiago Atitlan massacre. On several occasions, teachers
worried that students were failing to take seriously their lessons on the war, while other
teachers expressed fears that teaching about specific war crimes could even inspire delinquents. Perhaps, given the level of violent crime in Guatemala today, these concerns are not unreasonable. It is, perhaps, possible to attribute the reluctance of educators in San Antonio to discuss guilt to this sort of fear, to a reluctance to discuss the negatives of the war and instead focus on positive lessons which can be drawn from it. If the primary educational purpose of discussing the war is to impart moral lessons, then dwelling on the actual culprits may be beside the point. It may not be necessary, if the primary objective is to teach that violence is immoral, to mention that community members in a PAC killed their neighbors – a fact which may, after all, give troubled students dangerous ideas – when it would suffice simply to say that people were killed, and that such crimes should never be repeated. Bringing the specifics into the discussion may simply cloud the issues and distract students from the fundamental point, which is the moral to be learned.

The second fundamental conceptual key to understanding the way in which students in San Antonio learn about the war lies in another facet of teachers’ understandings of history education in general. Leaving aside those classes that were principally values-oriented, history classes in San Antonio were focused on raw facts rather than narrative or causation. Unlike the Ministry of Education textbooks, which generally followed a relatively clear chronology, teachers and students alike frequently referred to events in the past with a blanket “before,” used to refer from any time from 20 years ago to the Neolithic. As they are referred to, events in history largely exist in an undifferentiated past. This view of history is reflected in the fact that, while I asked every teacher what they say about the war, and every student what they learn, not a single person replied to me with even the most summary recounting of the course of the war. I was given themes, generalized descriptions, and isolated facts, but never were these woven together into a story. This trend was repeated in students’ answers to my questions on the men kidnapped from San Antonio; although many students were clearly familiar with this event, no student ever told it to me as a story, but rather simply listen the men’s names. Perhaps the most fascinating clue to this treatment of history is the 7th graders’ essays on the history of San Antonio, in which thematically related but temporally distant events (the civil war, the Cabrera regime, and the colonial battle with San Lucas) are placed together in what appears to an outsider to be a hopelessly incorrect jumble. However, we must realize that, to the
teachers of San Antonio, chronology and causality are apparently not fundamental points in
teaching history. This cannot be a simple matter of laziness or ignorance; the textbooks
they use are ordered chronologically, and thus deviating from this pre-made lesson plan
must represent an intentional decision.

It has long been understood that the Maya concept of time, often described as
cyclical, is different from that of the western world. Carmack, Gasco, and Gossen write that
“it is a spiral that cannot move forward without contemplating and retracing its past
positions and prior forms” (2007: 528). Although the schools of San Antonio appear to
have little relation to traditional Maya visions of the universe, it would appear from the
history lessons taught there that these ancient forms continue to exert a likely unconscious
influence on teachers’ conceptions of the past, leading them to categorize history in terms
of kinds of events rather than strict chronology. Realizing that teachers in San Antonio treat
time differently than North American history teachers enables us to understand the sense in
many student responses that otherwise seem to reflect the gravest misinformation.
Explanations of the civil war that take in heroes of the Spanish Conquest, colonial-era
scuffles over land, and turn-of-the-century Liberals seem far more rational when it is
understood that the past is spoken of as a unified body rather than as a chain of causal
events. In this understanding, confusions in time no longer necessarily represent a loss of
meaning or a lack of information, but could even be seen to represent a heightened
historical awareness as thematically related events are drawn together and links are
established between points of history that are regarded as comparable. If the content of a
historical moment, rather than the period in which it occurred, is viewed as its primary
feature for the purposes of categorization, then the “mistakes” made by the students could
be, in fact, completely legitimate and sensible historical conclusions.

The possibilities which I have explored regarding the way in which teachers in San
Antonio perceive the history they teach do not, of course, entirely account for the gaps in
students’ educations. While certain apparent errors are clarified and explained away by
these new understandings, others remain. And the fact remains that students have a minimal
awareness of events that happened just on the other side of the lake, that many students
believe that Montt was an admirable president, and that few of them are aware that the
military’s crimes disproportionately targeted indigenous Guatemalans. However, these gaps
and omissions reflect a choice on the part of the educators of San Antonio, a reflection not of ignorance, but of their own cultural understanding of the nature and meaning of history, and, although this understanding may be uncomfortable for those accustomed to a North American vision of history, it is a sign that the people of San Antonio Palopo are taking control of their own history and choosing for themselves the ways in which they wish to understand their past.

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(Note: many Guatemalan textbooks do not carry copyright or authorship information.)

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