Between Post- and Conflict: Ancestral Authority and Political Aggressions in Guatemala's Ixil Region

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the prolonged post-conflict dynamics in Guatemala's Ixil region, focusing on the 2022 assault on the Alcaldía Indígena of Nebaj. Through an ethnographic lens, it highlights how neoliberal decentralization, multicultural reforms, and the legacies of the civil war have reshaped local governance, intertwining historical and global dimensions. Anchored in the remnants of war, the post-conflict period emerges as a space of contestation and experimentation with new forms of autonomy and governance.

Keywords: Indigenous Authorities, Post-Conflict, Local Governance, Guatemala, Neoliberal Multiculturalism.

Este artículo examina las prolongadas dinámicas del período posconflicto en la región Ixil de Guatemala, centrándose en el ataque de 2022 contra la Alcaldía Indígena de Nebaj. Desde una perspectiva etnográfica, resalta cómo la descentralización neoliberal, las reformas multiculturales y las herencias de la guerra civil han transformado la gobernanza local, entrelazando dimensiones históricas y globales. Anclado en los vestigios de la guerra, el período posconflicto emerge como un espacio de disputa y experimentación con nuevas formas de autonomía y gobernanza.

Palabras clave: Autoridades Indígenas, Posconflicto, Gobernanza Local, Guatemala, Multiculturalismo Neoliberal.

Introduction

In 1996, the Peace Accords between the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) and the Guatemalan state formally ended a 36-year civil war (1960-1996) that had claimed approximately 200,000 lives, more than 80 percent of whom were Indigenous[1] (CEH 1999). Since then, Guatemala officially entered the post-conflict era (Koonings e Kruijt 1999). However, the peace established in 1996 was essentially a "failed peace" (Freddi e Grassi 2020), as it was unable to dismantle the entrenched powers of the historical elites (Brett 2010) or address the profound historical, political, social, economic, and racial roots of the conflict (Casaús Arzú 2002). Consequently, Guatemala's reconstruction has been shaped by neoliberal reforms, subsidized-imposed by international bodies[2], which have ultimately resulted in a prolonged post-war period – one suspended between the aspiration for a better future and the unresolved violence.

This article investigates the complex dynamics of this prolonged post-conflict era in Guatemala's Ixil region, centering on the 2022 attack against Nebaj's "ancestral authorities". Far from being an isolated event, this aggression encapsulates broader tensions, including land disputes, systemic violence, and the incursion of extractive projects. Internal conflicts within Indigenous communities provide a crucial lens for understanding the political and social dynamics of post-war Guatemala: these tensions – whether within communities or between communities and the state – are everyday practices through which power is contested and negotiated (Burrell 2013).

In the analysis of these dynamics, the ethnographic approach enables us to move beyond framing the war as merely a historical rupture (Vanthuyne 2004) or the post-conflict as a linear transition from a violent past to a stable present. Examining the causes, events, and outcomes of the 2022 incident, the article critically problematizes post-conflict rhetoric, examining how the "reorganization" of wartime violence (Beltrán and Peacock 2003) entangles with ongoing impunity and neoliberal policies, but also with the pursuit of autonomy by Indigenous communities. In this context, the "ruins" of the civil war – far from being inert remnants (Stoler 2013) – function as dynamic structures that simultaneously constrain and enable new forms of Indigenous governance,

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[1] According to the latest census (INE 2019), nearly half of Guatemala's population identifies as Indigenous. Specifically, 56% of the population self-identifies as Ladino (mestizo), 41.7% as Maya, 1.8% as Xinka, 0.2% as Afro-descendant/Creole/Afro-mestizo, 0.2% as Foreign, and 0.1% as Garifuna.

[2] Among others, the United Nations Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), NGOs, and international cooperation agencies (e.g., USAID) (Way 2021).

serving as focal points for new claims, driving emergent possibilities, demands for rights, and innovative political projects.

Drawing on eighteen non-consecutive months of fieldwork conducted between July 2021 and 2024 in the Ixil region, this study combines participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and extensive shared everyday life with interlocutors. It also incorporates digital resources from social networks and insights gathered from psychological support groups established in January 2024 following the assault[3].

The Postwar in Guatemala

At the turn of the millennium, Guatemala seemed poised to transition – like many Latin American countries – toward multicultural constitutionalism (Van Cott 2000). By the close of the millennium, after a long gestational period, the Mayan Movement[4] (Warren, 1998) emerged as one of the most creative protagonists of "international indigenism" (Nienzen 2003), successfully embedding Indigenous demands in the peace negotiations. The signing of the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (AIDPI) in 1995 marked a watershed moment, recognizing for the first time the Maya, Xinca, and Garífuna populations as distinct civil sectors within the national framework. This agreement was accompanied by the ratification of the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Rights (1989) and ultimately culminated in the 1996 Peace Accords.

Nevertheless, Charles Hale (2004) uses the concept of "multicultural neoliberalism" to highlight how neoliberal reforms have a controversial impact on Indigenous movements, opening new spaces for struggle while simultaneously delimiting and defining their legitimacy. The postwar period did not lead to the erosion of the state but rather contributed to strengthening its sovereignty by providing the coercive means and minimal legitimacy for neoliberal development (Benson e Fischer 2009).

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[3] The groups were created in collaboration with Dr. Giulia Nora Pappalardo, a psychotherapist, and the women of the alcaldía indígena. In this context, I will exclusively use some excerpts from the initial phases of the presentation and discussion of the activities to be undertaken. For privacy and security reasons, the names of many individuals involved have been withheld.

[4] The Maya Movement encompasses associations, individuals, and projects that reclaim a pre-Columbian Maya macro-culture as a source of cultural and political identity. Since the 1980s, the term "Maya" has evolved into a dynamic identification for Guatemala's twenty-one ethnolinguistic groups, challenging labels such as Indigenous or Indians and enabling claims for rights and recognition (Nelson 1999). As Bastos (2017) notes, the term Indigenous is also ideologically charged, though it is widely used by the United Nations and international bodies.

As civilians returned to government (1985), pacification was subsidized by a flood of public and private funds (Beck 2017), following the military's "development-qua-security project" from the early 1980s (Schirmer 1998). In rural communities, the terror and silences imposed by impunity (Green 1999) combined with old and new forms of violence – gangs (Grassi 2015), paramilitary groups (Beltrán e Peacock 2003), drug trafficking (Paley 2015), and lynchings (Burrell e Weston 2007), but also widespread poverty and social exclusion, affecting large population segments (Bastos 2010).

The new mechanisms of democratic politics did not replace the old structures of power but instead repositioned them (Way 2021), allowing the economic élite to maintain control over extractive and repressive practices (Aguilar-Støen 2015) even in the framework of neoliberal globalization (Granovsky-Larsen 2020). Socioeconomic factors were overlooked, and inequalities were addressed in terms of "depoliticized" (Ferguson 1990) cultural differences and human rights (Bastos e Camus 2004). The Mayan Movement receded into sectorial struggles while NGOs, international bodies, and technical commissions absorbed its exponents (Cayzac 2010). This contributed to creating a "project society" (Sampson 2003) in which "maya policy" was no longer driven by organizations confronting the state but by the state itself (Sieder e Witchell 2001).

With the end of the conflict, rural populations have been integrated into the nation-state as a sort of corporate citizen (Oglesby, 2004), members of a territorial community authorized as a site of governance where citizen-subjects must position themselves to claim rights and recognition (Stepputat, 2001). Consequently, while the prolonged and internationalized Peace process failed to thoroughly address the economic and military sectors (Short 2016), the decentralization process – despite, or perhaps precisely because of, its substantial ambiguity–produced locally differentiated outcomes, nominally establishing the "community" as the basic unit of Guatemalan politics.

Decentralization

Although mayanism has generally overlooked the local dimension in favor of the state as the primary object of contention, the multicultural discourse was locally adapted into "local mayanisms" (Zamora 2003) that lack doctrinal coherence but gained significance in everyday practice, in addressing issues related to security, livelihood, education, and conflict management (Esquit 2009). Since 1993, most municipalities with an Indigenous majority have been governed by Indigenous mayors. However, this does not necessarily mean they govern "as Maya" or are immune to accusations of corruption and mismanagement (Bastos 2007).

In the new millennium, we thus observe the emergence of partially independent governance experiences, embodied in various institutions seeking to revitalize Maya systems of authority and justice (Willard 2021), in many cases eliminated during the war. Introduced as part of a decentralization package (Ekern 2010), the 2002 reform of the Municipal Code recognized these institutions at the local level. While the "statal" Alcaldías municipales[5] are state institutions elected through electoral competition responsible for administering public resources and implementing state policies, these "new", "ancestral" institutions – Alcaldías Indígenas and Comunitarias – are recognized as representatives of the communities in which they are established, based on their *costumbres*, traditions, and customary law, without specifying their functions.

Some authors interpret decentralization processes as an attempt to "governmentalize" political autonomies (Gonzáles e Burguete 2010), while others note how Indigenous organizations seek their legitimacy within the state framework (Nelson 1999), emphasizing the tensions between the "use and refuse" components of their counter-hegemonic policies (Hale 2020). Despite these contradictions, it is important to underline that this new legislation marks a critical turning point for Indigenous rights.

Recreated or renewed at the height of efforts to strengthen community autonomies, these forms of authority draw on community-specific forms of organization that they consider "their own" (Tzul Tzul 2018). Often analyzed as "social movements" (Tapia 2020), they emerge as representative of native peoples and the struggles against the colonial conditions in which they live (Uk'u'x Be 2008). They claim to be heirs to ancestral authority systems that guided native peoples through colonial and republican periods (Barrios 2001). Grounded in the principle of service, alcaldías indígenas and comunitarias leverage the legitimacy of multicultural discourse to create spaces for concrete action, addressing challenges posed by the state (Yagenova 2012), political parties, dominant groups, and the structure of local society (Esquit 2003).

As in Nebaj, these institutions often arise in opposition to state mayors and extractive megaprojects, particularly in contexts where the Mayan Movement has lost much of its mobilizing capacity (Ochoa García 2013).

Nebaj, after the war

The Ixil region, located in the Guatemalan plateau, comprises the three municipalities of Nebaj, Chajul, and Cotzal in the Department of El Quiché. This

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[5] The term *Alcalde Municipal* refers to the mayor, the state official responsible for municipal administration and public resource management. This position is distinct from the *Alcalde Indígena*, which represents "ancestral" and community-based authorities.

area is recognized as the ancestral territory of the Maya Ixil people, who make up almost the entire population (INE 2019).

Between the end of the seventies and the early eighties, Nebaj gradually became a battlefield and as such rose internationally a symbol of the horrors of genocidal violence by the army (CEH 1999). By the early 1980s, the civilian population had become a direct target of the military operations, which engaged in systematic violence extended through sophisticated forms of control over Indigenous communities (Palencia Frener 2014). After 1982, the massacres that had razed and exterminated entire villages, burned fields and livestock, had given way to efforts to transform the region into a rational chain of "model villages" and "development poles" (Stoll 1999). Life in the communities, rebuilt around orthogonal roads bordered by military garrisons, had been reorganized into patrol shifts and "civic" work programs (Brett 2007).

Following the peace process, the region has been flooded with NGOs and international aid aimed at promoting pacification, democratization, human rights, and Mayan culture. With the formal end of the war, a slow process of demilitarization began. However, the "new gospel of microcredit" (Stoll 2013) largely failed to address the challenges of the post-conflict period. The return of displaced people, entangled in failed land reforms (Palma Murga 1997; Gauster & Isakson 2007), made land occupation and redistribution quite critical (Manz 1988).

Ironically dubbed "Nebaj York" by locals, the town has long served as the region's hub and distribution point for strategic, economic, ideological resources. It remains the center for essential public and private services, stores, and banks across the three municipalities. As the epicenter of rapid urbanization, this town has become a striking example of the Guatemala's Agrotropolis: an agro-urban landscape that encapsulates "a wide range of slippages and contradictions that manifest in the nation's-built environment, in ideas and discourses about it, and in its residents' changing subjectivities, identities, aspirations, and cultural expressions" (Way 2021, 4).

In this context, political competition intertwined with competition for "projects," fostering a dense network of institutions, associations, clientele, and brokers capable of reshaping the rhetoric of international organizations to fit community needs – or, in many cases, for private accumulation. Since the new millennium, this intricate web of entities has been further disrupted by the arrival of international energy projects, which have made the creation, control, and empowerment of communities central to both state and global economic policies (Way 2016).

Out of this growing fragmentation and friction, ancestral authority systems in Nebaj have been revitalized. Officially founded in February 2008, the B'oq'ol

Q'esal Tenam[6] (alcaldía indígena) has consolidated its presence by coordinating movements to oppose two hydroelectric power plants and other energy projects (Grandi 2021). However, its activities extend far beyond "land defense," to the resolution of inter- and intra-community conflicts through judicial functions recognized by both the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court of Justice. To fulfill these roles while securing funding, visibility, and strategic support, B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam has established relationships with state, international, and NGO actors, as well as with ancestral authorities in other regions of Guatemala[7], enabling its presence at both local and national levels – a process marked by ongoing tensions and conflicts.

September 1st

On September 1st, 2022, the municipal Alcalde[8] of Nebaj attempted to evict the alcaldía indígena from its offices under the pretext of renovating of the building that houses the two institutions. In the morning, workers surrounded the building with a metal sheet fence, and a few hours later, the *síndico*[9] and some officials of the municipality appeared at the door. Four women were present in the offices, and when they refused to leave – citing the lack of a legally valid notice – the door was broken down. Furniture, computers, and documents were searched and taken outside. During the operation, the barrier was closed, preventing the press and the Justice of the Peace – who had arrived to conduct the "exhibición personal[10]" – from entering.

Within hours, videos circulated on Facebook by local journalists – shot with cell phones mounted on selfie sticks – along with word of mouth drew a large crowd to Parque Central. The footage is chaotic, but they capture the moment when officials were compelled to open the barrier. As people surged in, they began retrieving some of the items that had been loaded onto unmarked pickups. Despite the tension, this initial phase concluded peacefully. The most violent aggression, however, unfolded a few hours later.

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[6] Ixil expression for alcaldía indígena, literally "head," guide, of the *tenam* (city).

[7] At the state level we can mention the Ministerio Publico, the Organismo Judicial and the Corte Suprema de Justicia, the Procurador de los Derechos Humanos, and the Ministero de Educación, at the international level the embassies, several United Nations agencies, the United Nations Development Program, and the United States Agency for International Development.

[8] The alcaldía indígena is de facto municipal, but, for convenience, by the expression municipal alcaldía I will refer to the "state" alcaldía.

[9] The síndico manages the municipal administration and legally represents the municipality.

[10] Legal process like "habeas corpus" that protects against unlawful detention: a judge can verify the legality of the arrest and order the immediate release of the person.

In the afternoon, the *síndico* returned, accompanied by supporters of the municipal mayor. Once again, social media clips captured the heated discussions, insults, and threats, as well as a group of assailants trying to climb over tables and chairs set up to block the entrance. The barrier was closed again, and the situation escalated, with slaps, stones, wooden poles, chili powder, and even chlorine bags being thrown. After three hours, by the time a temporary *amparo*[11] finally arrived, declaring the eviction unlawful, the attackers had quickly dispersed, retreating into minivans waiting in Parque Central and leaving at least eight people injured.

The prodromes

According to the B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam, the true person responsible for these actions was Virgilio Gerónimo Bernal Guzmán, one of the two mayors alternating in office since the end of the war. During his first term with the Christian Democracy (DC), Pap Xhel[12] attempted to maintain a degree of autonomy from the military; however, he was compelled to step down and was re-elected only in 2004 with the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) of Ríos Montt, a party closely associated with the military.

After an eight-year tenure, in 2011 he ran under the Patriot Party (PP) but was defeated, prompting his supporters to occupy the municipal alcaldía, leading to a repeat election.

Members of the alcaldía indígena asserted that this second election was orchestrated to position three PP mayors – the elected president's party – in the region's three municipalities, thereby facilitating the entry of energy multinationals[13]. It was also viewed as a "reward" for organizing demonstrations supporting former President Ríos Montt (1982– '83), who was facing charges of genocide. Bernal Guzmán denied these claims, openly expressing his support for the military: "They want to paint the military as monsters," he stated, "when they are Guatemalans like everyone else. There was no genocide. What there has been is armed conflict and excesses" (Escalón 2013).

The alcaldía indígena, already committed to supporting genocide survivors, openly opposed both the repeat election and the hydroelectric projects. Again, some of its members were assaulted by PP supporters (Escalón 2014). Nevertheless, the current mayor, in search of allies, signed an agreement granting the B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam indefinite use of office space (Acta 058-2013).

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[11] A legal remedy intended to protect constitutional rights.

[12] Pap is used for respectable men; the female counterpart is Nan. Xhel is the equivalent of Virgilio. In Nebaj, political leaders were often called by their names. Here, I will do the same.

[13] The construction of HydroXacbal hydroelectric power plants in the Ilom (Chajul) area and Palo Viejo in Cotzal by two foreign multinationals was producing a lot of tensions.

Ultimately, the 2014 elections reaffirmed the prior results, and Pap Xhel returned to office only in 2018. His terms had consistently been marked by significant tensions, but in the final four-year period, the divisions stemming from his attempts to impose community authorities were exacerbated by the devastation of two hurricanes in late 2019 and the onset of COVID-19. Pandemic containment measures and rising prices triggered widespread protests, and amid this tension, Bernal Guzmán declared the seats of opposition municipal councilors vacant, expelling a quarter of them despite opposition from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE).

Following a formal complaint, he lost his immunity in November 2021 and was brought to trial. In response, the alcaldía indígena convened a public assembly to address the city's "ungovernability," ultimately calling for the mayor's resignation and filing charges against him for thirteen crimes – among others, the misuse of funds allocated for the pandemic and environmental emergency, the signing of illegal agreements with energy companies, and abuse of power. These accusations led to a new trial but did not prevent Bernal Guzmán from completing his term, governing with a group of close collaborators.

Considering these facts, the aggression of September ceases to be an isolated incident. Instead, it reveals a web of interconnected and overlapping conflicts that offer a more nuanced understanding of Guatemala's post-war decades. As Jennifer Burrell (2013) observes, community governance in Guatemala is deeply intertwined with state and neoliberal processes. The conflicts surrounding the entry of energy companies into the Ixil region, intersected with the struggle for historical memory and justice for the genocide, exemplify how community institutions negotiate power at both local and national levels, especially as post-war dynamics reshape the relationship between community structures and the state. These mechanisms, however, are far from uniform or stable; they emerge through ongoing negotiation, contestation, and conflict. These dynamics are vividly illustrated in the activities of Bernal Guzmán and the disputes in Xonq'a, where past and present struggles intersect.

Grupos de choque

According to his detractors, Bernal Guzmán's power was rooted in a dense network of clientelism and familyism, which made him the point of connection between national power groups and local interests. However, the approval and allocating of public contracts through opaque tenders were not unique to him (El Observador GT 2023). In many communities, one could observe sewers, roads, water treatment systems, and sports centers that, after seeing construction costs soar, were never completed (Albani and Coronado 2019).

As Ann Stoler (2013, 13) argues, "asking how people live with and in ruins redirects the engagement […] to the politics animated, to the common sense such habitations disturb, to the critiques condensed or disallowed, and to the social relations avidly coalesced or shattered around them". Stoler's concept of "ruination" highlights how the remnants of empire actively shape the present, not as inert symbols of failure but as active structures that influence ongoing political and social dynamics. In this case, the "ruins" that animated the conflict were not only the incomplete projects, which stand as evidence of the "development machine" (Ferguson 1990) failures, nor the concrete symbols of corruption that fueled the struggles and the protests of the alcaldía indígena. They were older – invisible – debris that sparked a long-standing land issue that began at the end of the civil war, but with much deeper roots.

If the morning eviction attempt had been conducted by the municipal police forces, the afternoon raid was carried out by some people recognized as Pap Xhel's "grupo de choque" (confrontation group). Most of the attackers came, in fact, from Antiguo Xonq'a.

In 1996, several people occupied part of the Samayoa's Finca San Miguelito[14], which is now part of Antiguo Xonq'a. After suffering many eviction attempts, the community organized into a committee that, after years of negotiations, reached an agreement, between 2017 and 2018, to buy land from the company. Some of the two hundred and fifty families involved refused and appealed to the alcaldía indígena, which interposed an amparo, deeming Samayoa's acquisition of communal lands from the ejido illegal[15]. In 2019, the community assembly of Xonq'a, fearing the invalidation of the agreement, issued an expulsion order against those who refused to pay, resulting in the burning of their homes. Simultaneously, a group of citizens and community authorities began a demonstration outside the offices of the B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam, accusing them of being an illegitimate, self-appointed association of "guerrillas".

According to many accounts, Xonq'a was a stronghold of Pap Xhel, who had facilitated its urbanization by approving numerous projects. In return – some argued under the threat of displacement – he secured the support of many inhabitants, some of whom joined his confrontation group[16]. The practice of

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[14] An agricultural enterprise, in this case a plantation. With the end of the conflict, the return of displaced people made the occupation of land a rather frequent occurrence (Batres 2011).

[15] Municipal ejido implies possession, but not ownership of lands. In this case, the document is inscribed in the names of municipality and "neighbors", and it implies that any dismemberment must be submitted to the consultation of all the communities in its territory.

[16] These groups were generally composed of women, as was the case in September. According to one of the injured authorities, the instrumental use of gender violence regulations for political purposes was not new and was aimed at provoking a violent reaction, followed by accusations of "violence against women." This had occurred a few months earlier during protests by mototaxi

managing territory and conflict through these groups was also not attributed solely to Pap Xhel and was described as a legacy of the conflict. A former guerrilla member, now part of the alcaldía indígena, claimed that this practice was the actualization of a tactic initially used by the guerrillas and later by the army, involving the activation of *células* (cells): small groups of people employed as informants, recruiters, or for propaganda and military actions, now exploited to create unrest or as pressure agents during electoral campaigns. The accusation was rejected by the municipal síndico, who asserted that the violence was the responsibility of free citizens from an Indigenous community.

The Resistance

Already in the late 1980s, Carol Smith wondered if we were at the beginning of a new epoch (1990). Nevertheless, the events described appear as the continuation of a war that, while losing the ferocity and brutality of the genocide, has been re-tuned to new frequencies, at a "low intensity" (Nelson 2015). Land disputes, rooted in the conflict, seem to follow the same patterns inherited from the 19th and 20th-century dispossession. The ghosts of war continue to haunt daily life, evoked not only by whispers, rumors, and violence but also by endless legal processes that seem to keep the wounds of the Guatemalan political body open and exposed rather than healing them (Nelson 1999).

From the night of September 1st onward, members of the alcaldía indígena organized 24-hour shifts to guard the office. Meetings with lawyers and human rights associations were convened to devise a legal and political strategy. Within hours, social networks were flooded with messages of support from activists, human rights organizations, and even emigrants in the United States. A delegation of ancestral authorities from various regions of Guatemala arrived the next night to hold a joint press conference, and some members of Congress were invited to submit a parliamentary inquiry. Simultaneously, international organizations and embassies were contacted to exert political pressure, while local support was sought to cover legal expenses and logistics. The days passed in an atmosphere fluctuating between pride and apprehension. On the streets or at the market, fear of encountering aggressors lingered, while solitude at home magnified anxieties.

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drivers. While this strategy heightened feelings of vulnerability and distrust toward the law, in the case of the attack on the alcaldía indígena, it failed because it was the women who defended the offices. As we can infer, gender played a crucial role, but this is not the space for an in-depth analysis of the topic, which deserves much greater attention. It will be addressed in more appropriate contexts for adequate discussion.

Still, overcoming fear by going to "resist" in the office and receiving support from the population helped them cope in some way, even creating moments of laughter. What emerged was not merely a passive, non-violent defense of the office. The *Resistencia*, as members of B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam began to call it, became an active construction and reactivation of connections, alliances, and relationships. This collective effort underscored the connections that bridged local, national, and international levels, transforming the office into a symbolic site of resistance.

In this context, social networks became the primary source of information. Memes mocking Pap Xhel and his collaborators sparked widespread irony but the experience of the war, either lived or recounted, provided a lens through which to interpret the present, fueling a "culture of terror" that circulated through rumors, gossip, and stories (Taussig 2005), in fear of being surrounded by spies. As one of the victims, a genocide trial witness, told me, the arrival of the aggressors reminded her of the soldiers. Since the war, she had struggled with illness, and the threats and rumors now weakened her further. People with whom she had previously had good relations had stopped greeting her, and the danger that "blood will flow" echoed in her thoughts, fueled by whispered news of assault groups ready to attack. This contributed to integrating violence into everyday life, creating a sense of normalcy around the suffering endured and inflicted (Das 2007).

On September 6th, a video of Pap Xhel requesting an audience with President Giammattei stirred mixed reactions, ranging from irony to anxiety. Meanwhile, threats emerged from associations of army veterans, who disseminated a video proposing the forced removal of ancestral authorities, labeling them as "self-appointed" and "guerrillas" – terms the municipal alcalde had himself used during his inauguration.

Under the table

Despite the persistent atmosphere of tension, the events of September 1st did not repeat. Meanwhile, the 2023 election campaign began. Members of the alcaldía indígena were repeatedly summoned to expand their statements. The victims of the assault were asked to present scant medical certificates, and new meetings and assemblies were convened, often yielding limited results. After a year of legal proceedings, political actions, and threats, the charges were downgraded and resolved through a conciliation process, which included the return of a table broken during the aggression.

"I don't know why the judge decided this way," remarked one of the women locked inside that morning. "Because he himself had been left outside that day." For some members of the alcaldía, the outcome was a glaring example of a

judicial system mired in co-optation and corruption. Others lamented that their experiences had no voice in the legal process, trapped instead in a labyrinth of strategies and procedural delays. Initially rejected, the conciliation fostered widespread frustration and distrust. As one of the injured women confided, "I didn't even want to go to the hospital. Why should I have? When I arrived, instead of treating me, they scolded me as if I were a criminal." While some members wished to pursue legal action, others questioned the purpose of wasting time and reliving moments they sought to forget. Suspicion further eroded trust, with some believing that clandestine deals – referred to as *bajo el agua* (under the table) – had been struck.

Within this context, the returned table emerged as a further insult. Framed as compensation for an assault whose psychological, political, and social dimensions remained unacknowledged, it became a symbol of an elusive legal system that buried victims' experiences beneath procedural delays and technicalities. Rather than obscuring the events, the table underscored the ruins left by the aggression: its historical roots, the ghosts of contemporary suspicions. Similarly, the annual funds that Pap Xhel had allocated to the alcaldía indígena before completing his term – funds included in the budget but rejected by the incoming administration – added to the sense of mockery.

As this episode reveals, violence operates as a "non-linear slippery concept," "productive, destructive, and re-productive" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004, 4). It manifests in multifaceted forms, often embedded within institutions and daily life rather than overtly visible. These forms of structural violence frequently produce effects more enduring and traumatic than the injuries inflicted by direct physical aggression (Menjívar 2011) and are often documented only in sparse court records or hurried hospital visits, their broader implications obscured. As Burrell (2016) argues, a radical rehistorization is essential to view "incidents of violence as the outcome of particular cultural, political, and economic struggles" (Donham 2006, 18-19). Despite these setbacks, the ability of the alcaldía indígena to act and respond merits recognition.

Far from being mere instrumental resources or passive victims, its members asserted themselves as active agents capable of redefining local power dynamics. Moreover, the assault extended beyond the physical damages and theft of documents. According to some, it was a desperate attempt to block ongoing complaints and amparo proceedings; others saw it as a show of strength against those considered political opponents before 2023 elections. Still, for others, it was merely about a trivial sense of humiliation and revenge. However, the general consensus was that the goal was to symbolically and formally dismantle the B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam, if not to replace it with a new corporation more willing to

accept compromises and perpetuate the existing governance system[17]. A hypothesis was supported by the fact that the eviction occurred before other municipal offices were vacated and by the contradictory statements of the municipal secretary, who claimed that his notices were neither definitive nor coercive.

Outcomes

The events of September 1st encapsulated many of the dynamics that had characterized the last three decades, seemingly marking the end of an era. The June 2023 elections broke the political alternation that had persisted since 1996, paving the way for a new candidate's victory. Shortly afterward, the Alcaldía indígena of Nebaj demonstrated its capacity for national mobilization during the 106 days of protests – from October 2023 to January 2024 – that secured Bernardo Arévalo's presidency. On March 13, 2024, during a visit to Nebaj, President Arévalo signed a historic development agreement with the Maya Ixil ancestral authorities, addressing environmental justice, education, food security, healthcare, and infrastructure. For Feliciana Herrera Ceto, Nebaj's Indigenous mayor, this marked a milestone in the Ixil people's long struggle for equity (Barrientos 2024), sanctioning recognition of ancestral authority at both local and national levels.

Despite the optimism generated by these successes, dark clouds continued to loom over the horizon. The 106 days of protests, while significant, failed to remove Attorney General Consuelo Porras, widely regarded as a major obstacle to the fight against corruption and to the president's inauguration. In March 2024, during President Arévalo's visit, the alcaldía indígena faced renewed threats, evoking a sense of continuity with the past rather than a decisive break from it. Around the same time, hearings resumed in the trial of Manuel Benedicto Lucas García, the former chief of staff accused of crimes against humanity between 1978 and 1982 against the Maya Ixil population.

From a certain perspective, these events may appear to mark the end of an era, but they do not necessarily herald the beginning of a new one. Clientelist networks, power groups, and political factions continue to operate in a context where the battle for historical memory is still ongoing (Way 2021). This struggle is animated, on one hand, by the ways in which the mechanisms of war itself – such as cells and veterans – remain active or are invoked, and on the other, by narratives centered on exhumations, victimization, and human rights violations. These

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[17] This happened in other pueblos, such as Chichicastenango, but even in Nebaj, over the years, associations of "ancestral authorities" had arisen that were not recognized by the *principales*. In 2023, the community of Cipresales also founded its own alcaldía indígena.

narratives risk overshadowing the creativity and resilience of communities (Grandin 2004).

As an Indigenous mayor from Nebaj once told me, the "left" sectors and parties viewed the failure to implement the Peace Accords as a kind of original sin in the ongoing situation. Much of their electoral campaigning still focused on these issues. In his view, however, the accords themselves had been a trap –the first step in integrating the Indigenous population into the neoliberal state. From that moment, he noted, new land conflicts arose, transnational companies arrived, migration processes began, and even associations and NGOs – of which he himself had been a part, harboring illusions – contributed to dividing the population, often bending to private interests. At the same time, he continued, "We are no longer at war; we need to understand that. We must start questioning what the state is and what legitimacy means. Sometimes, I hear people talk about the state as if it were something distant. Is the state just the army, CACIF[18], or Virgilio? I don't think so."

This perspective warns us against interpreting the present through the lens of the 1980s war and the easy oppositions between "Maya" and "state" based on ethnic or class conflicts (Little 2009). Similarly, it invites us to observe the intricate lines of continuity that shape the neoliberal and post-conflict state, where the logic of strengthening civil societies promoted by NGOs seem to align with the dictates of international finance (Freddi e Grassi 2020), privatizing services and deregulating a market that offers human and natural resources to foreign capital (Segovia 2004). Moreover, it prompts us to reflect on how the state – despite the co-optation of the legal system, the persistence of corruption, and ongoing violence – is brought "back into play," not as an abstract entity external to society but as something embodied in everyday social relation (Mitchell 1991). It exemplifies the complexity of the relationship between the state and Indigenous communities, which Diane Nelson (2004) conceptualizes through the metaphors of the "two-faced state" and the "two-faced Indian." On one hand, the state appears both legitimate and representative, yet also violent and corrupt; on the other, Indigenous communities negotiate shifting positions, re-engaging with a state that has historically oppressed them. This mutual duality blurs the boundaries between rationality and irrationality, threat and guarantee, revealing an ambivalent space where transformation and the perpetuation of dominant logics coexist.

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[18] Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras is one of the leading organizations representing Guatemala's private and conservative sectors.

Conclusion

When approaching the definition of post-conflict, the temptation is to evoke "an exceptional moment wherein the political body leaves behind the violence and arbitrariness of the past and enters into a newly inaugurated present" (Rojas-Perez 2008, 254). However, in Guatemala, this "exceptional" period has now stretched on for nearly thirty years, where this "failed peace" (Freddi e Grassi 2020) seems to have betrayed the promises and hopes for the future. As Green (1999) highlights, fear and terrorr seems to remain as major mechanisms of sociopolitical control in post-conflict, and war state apparatus has been reincarnated as "democracy" (Schirmer 1998).

As some authors have noted, this extended and prolonged period appears to be a continuation of the war through subtler but no less pervasive forms (Nelson 2015). On one hand, the case of Nebaj exemplifies how the current violence and its historical roots confine Guatemala to a suspended period – like the hyphen, crushed between *post-* and war, perpetually dragging the country into an endless transition. On the other hand, this reality offers an opportunity to move beyond reductive trauma narratives or totalizing interpretations of war.

As Sanchez Parra (2018) warns, the risk lies in reducing identities to mere representations of victimhood. As seen during the Resistance in the offices of the alcaldía indígena, the climate of suspension and anticipation – marked by fear of threats from veterans or new attacks – coexisted with the creation of new reactions at local, national, and international levels. It also translated into the experimentation with forms of solidarity and community. From this perspective, it is precisely among the "ruins" (Stoler 2013) inherited from pre-war dispossession, civil war violence, and post-war neoliberal reforms that dynamic forces of change can be found.

These dynamics intersect with daily conflicts, operating within broader mechanisms of power that weave together local, national, and global dimensions (Burrell 2013). Neoliberal decentralization processes, while fostering political competition for resource access (Celigueta 2007), have also enabled the emergence of independent governance systems that critically engage with neoliberal multiculturalism (McNeish 2008). These systems, (re-)born out of the fragmentation of state authority, challenge static notions of sovereignty and legitimacy, continuously renegotiating what the state is, what it should be, and what constitutes ethical and legitimate governance (Sieder 2011). Within this framework, ancestral authorities do not merely engage in nostalgic reconstructions of the past (Bastos 2022). Instead, they transcend the constraints of the "indio permitido" (Hale 2004), actively contributing to the redefinition of local and national legal, political, and institutional frameworks.

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