

*LOS LINCHAMIENTOS – THE MEANING OF MOB ACTION IN  
THE WAKE OF STATE TERROR IN GUATEMALA*  
*Daniel Rothenberg\**

PUBLISHED IN *NATIVE AMERICAS*, VOL. XV, No. 1, 1998.

1. *LOS LINCHAMIENTOS*

Smoke drifting up out of an empty shoe, a crowd of staring children, the twisted limbs of charred corpses laid out on the street, dried pools of blood, the frenzied look of a man carrying a two by four, a captured thief bound to a pole with rope wrapped tightly around his wrists, his shirt red with blood, his face swollen. For the last several years, Guatemalan newspapers have presented these images to the public with increasing frequency, documenting the rising tide in mob violence against suspected criminals. Almost weekly, there are articles and images of popular, public violence – the abandoned bodies of victims, milling anonymous crowds – signs of vengeful acts openly committed, demanding both explanation and reaction from a society struggling to understand its own future. The images are violent, brutal, almost pornographic in their leering, tantalizing gaze, drawing in an anxious, fearful public with a vision of a nation leaning towards chaos, in which mob violence represents both disease and cure.

2. *LOS LINCHAMIENTOS AS SOCIAL PRACTICE*

Over the last few years, with increasing frequency, crowds of enraged Guatemalan citizens have begun to take justice into their own hands. These incidents have become so commonplace that they are now recognized as a distinct mode of social practice known by a terrifying name borrowed from our own violent and troubled past: *los linchamientos* – the lynchings.

*Los linchamientos* take various forms and result in differing outcomes. In some communities, public lynchings are sudden, spontaneous acts, in others they occur after lengthy discussions or a long days' growing tensions. Some victims are murdered, others are only beaten. Some are rescued by the authorities, others are forcibly removed

---

\* Assistant Professor, University of Michigan, Fellow, Michigan Society of Fellows.

from police custody and brutally assaulted within meters of state offices. Some lynchings take place at night, where violence is obscured by darkness, while most occur during the day, often in town plazas, with literally thousands of witnesses. In some lynchings, only a handful of angry citizens actually commit the violence, other instances involve the direct participation of dozens of community members.

A review of lynchings reported in the nation's two highest circulation newspapers, *Prensa Libre* and *Siglo XXI* for a twelve month period between January 1996 and January 1997, reveals that 129 people were lynched, 25 of whom were murdered. Some lynchings made front page news, while others appear only as vague paragraphs hidden among what are seen as more significant news stories. Lynchings have become commonplace, and preliminary data indicates that even more people were lynched in 1997 than the previous year. In a country like Guatemala, it is difficult to know how many lynchings actually occur, since the nation is divided in all sorts of ways that hinder communication. No doubt, for every reported lynching, there are others, possibly many cases, that escape media attention.

Lynchings display several characteristics. They are directed against criminals or presumed criminals. They are public acts in that they take place in public places and involve public participation, both direct and indirect. As lynchings become more commonplace, they resemble each other with groups of citizens capturing a presumed criminal or group of criminals, beating them, tying them up, sometimes murdering them and then burning their corpses.

### 3. *LOS LINCHAMIENTOS* AND THE INDIGENOUS/*LADINO* DIVIDE

Guatemala is a deeply divided nation where a small minority of non-indigenous, urban residents, known as *ladinos*, wield political and economic power over a majority indigenous, rural population, the majority of whom belong to one of 21 Maya ethnicities. Indigenous Guatemalans are extremely poor and highly marginalized, with nearly 90 percent living in poverty, and 60 percent living in conditions of extreme poverty. Indigenous Guatemalans represent the vast majority of rural residents in the highlands.

Many aspects of Guatemalan society, including lynchings, are mapped onto the profound racial divide between indigenous people and *ladinos*. Public discussions of lynchings often assume that these acts of sudden mob violence are committed by indigenous people, who have historically been viewed by dominant *ladino* society as inscrutable, irrational, and even primitive. The cultural divide between indigenous Guatemalans and *ladinos* is tied to centuries of brutal domination and a tinged with a long-standing fear that one day the Indians will revolt in a

vicious, violent and uncontrollable manner. The sudden appearance of lynchings, their repetition and emergence as a new cultural phenomenon, is often seen as an expression of indigenous culture, and a dangerous sign of what the future might promise.

Indigenous communities in rural areas have long been abandoned by the state, denied social services, such as education and health care, and prevented from wielding political power. In response, these communities have created their own mechanisms for resolving conflicts, which are rooted in traditional visions of social order that are communitarian in nature and linked to the power and influence of community leaders, generally respected elders.

In the wake of a 36-year long armed insurgency which disproportionately affected indigenous communities, the nation is experiencing the rise of a potentially powerful pan-Maya movement. The current Maya movement has grown out of a disillusionment with the possibility that *ladinos* can adequately address the needs of indigenous people and has served as a catalyst for the creation of literally hundreds of Maya organizations, on local, regional and national levels. As the Guatemalan state begins to seriously consider the rights of indigenous people – having signed the “Accord on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples” as part of the peace process and ratified the international convention 169 on indigenous rights – there is a growing interest in defining and possibly formally legitimizing indigenous modes of law and conflict resolution. At the same time, increased indigenous participation in politics and the possibility of an identity based political movement in a majority indigenous nation raises new fears among traditionally dominant *ladino* community. Within this context, the appearance of lynchings raises complex questions not only about the maintenance of social order, but also about the negotiation of indigenous identity and tradition.

#### 4. THE CASE OF MOMOSTENANGO

To understand the phenomenon of *los linchamientos*, it makes sense to review a particular case. About a year and a half ago, on November 13th, 1996, four men were captured by police outside of Momostenango in the Department of Totonicapan. The men were taken by police to a small jail a block from the main plaza. The men were accused of being part of a band of criminals who assaulted buses at *la cumbre*, the top of a small mountain on the main road connecting Momostenango with the main highway and rest of the country. Many buses had been robbed there by a band who carried guns, wore masks and stole money, jewelry and goods from passengers, sometimes raping young women. Everyone in Momostenango knew of these assaults and

even casual conversations in town turned up victims – poor men and women who had been robbed at *la cumbre*.

Whether or not the four men were guilty and what type of evidence the police actually found remains an open issue. The men were from a different town about an hour's drive from Momostenango. They were armed with a single rifle and drove a pick-up truck. Were they innocent hunters, as they claimed? Or, vicious *asaltantes* as many in town believed? In capturing these four men, had the police done their job? Or, were they simply holding them in jail in an effort to extract a sizeable bribe?

It was market day in town and thousands of people – men, women, children – from different *aldeas* were passing in and out of town, bringing down produce and animals to sell, and buying things to bring home, socializing, gossiping and visiting with friends and relatives. News spread quickly through the crowd that four members of the famous criminal band had been captured by the police. Their pick-up was parked in front of the municipality and they were inside, in police custody. The word on the street was that the thieves were going to pay a large sum of money to the police (or the judge depending on who was telling the story) and that they would soon be released. Gradually more and more people appeared outside the jail. The crowd wanted to see the men. Were they still inside, or had they been freed? What did they look like? Did any of the victims recognize the men as the ones who terrorized the community and harmed so many lives? Some in the crowd were drinking. Some were angry, shouting, "show us the thieves," "Lynch them," "the police are corrupt" Many in the crowd were simply curious. Tensions mounted.

The police called for reinforcements. A few additional police arrived, but the crowd grew larger and more impatient. The pick-up was overturned and burned. The crowd shouted for justice. They broke through the outer gate and stormed inside. They pulled the four men out of their cell and into a courtyard where they were severely beaten. The bodies were then dragged through the street and deposited in front of the municipality, facing the beautiful main plaza, not far from a colonial era cathedral, a central gazebo, shops, the open air market, the space of all local commerce and public activity. The bodies were doused with gasoline and burned. Hundreds participated in the act. Thousands witnessed it, including many children. That is, the community as a whole witnessed over a hundred of its own neighbors commit murder.

Half a year later, the last time I visited the town, the people of Momostenango confront the event with mixed emotions. Virtually everyone believes that if the men were guilty then they met a much deserved fate. Some sprinkle their talk with tid-bits of evidence, some

publicly known facts others little more than gossip, which "prove" the men's guilt. Others shrug their shoulders and remark that, regardless of the men's guilt, there were no more assaults at *la cumbre* after the lynching. Momostenango gained a frightening reputation, seen as both savage and tough, a new reputation for the community that was both demeaning and empowering.

#### 5. THE MEANING OF MOB ACTION

How are we to understand *los linchamientos*? People taking justice into their own hands is hardly an odd occurrence. The thought that one might want to beat up someone who seeks to steal from you is neither difficult to understand, nor unjustified, particularly in a society with a dysfunctional legal system. Guatemalans present many explanations for the lynchings. The police are corrupt. Or as they say, "criminals enter through the front door of the station and leave by the back," paying bribes and avoiding punishment. In some cases, the police themselves are criminals. The judicial system is worse than simply inefficient and is profoundly corrupt as well. Still, this situation is actually typical throughout Latin America. Where, in fact, does one find an efficient, honest judiciary, and a fair, professional police force? So, why aren't lynchings commonplace everywhere in the region where people live in conditions so painfully contradictory and obviously unfair. What holds people back?

One possible explanation for Guatemala's lynchings is that they are an expression of indigenous justice. In fact, within the ethnographic literature and anecdotally, today's lynchings seem appear to have some historical precedent among indigenous communities. In addition, there are elements of indigenous law that resonate with lynchings – the public nature of the punishment, the rapidity of the judgement, and its larger symbolic role within the community. Nevertheless, the lynchings are not indigenous. In fact, lynchings have occurred throughout the country, in indigenous and *ladino* communities, in both rural and urban settings in the Departments of Huehuetenango, Quiche, Totonicapan, Solola, Escuintla, Peten, Chimaltenango, Alta Verapaz, Quetzaltenango, San Marcos and Santa Rosa. Fully one-half of the lynchings studies occurred in Guatemala City, often at the hands of *ladinos* and certainly not linked to traditional indigenous systems of justice.

To understand *los linchamientos* it is necessary to look at the rage being expressed. Crowds in towns throughout Guatemala are not simply beating suspected criminals to teach them a lesson and deter future actions, they are beating people to death, in front of their neighbors. They are engaging in popular mass action, brutally assaulting suspected criminals who are accused of everything from serious crimes

such as murder, to obviously minor offenses such as stealing chickens or pick- pocketing. And, as if murder weren't enough, enraged crowds then douse the bloodied corpses with gasoline and burn them, violating a victim already killed, publicly acting against a corpse, seeking some further annihilation.

#### 6. *LOS LINCHAMIENTOS* AND THE OPEN PROMISES OF PEACE

Guatemala is now at peace. After thirty-six years of armed conflict a formal peace accord was signed last December. *Los linchamientos* must be understood in this context, as a cultural act defined by new possibilities stretching out towards an uncertain future. It is common these days to hear that things in Guatemala are worse now than ever before. What does this mean? How can things be worse now than in the early 1980s when mass "disappearances" were common and whole villages massacred? How is it possible that the present feels more insecure and more violent than the recent past? The current political mood is best understood as a reflection upon the legacy of terror. For this reason, it is especially important not to see *los linchamientos* as an expression of indigenous culture, which was formed in relationship to centuries of domination, but rather as linked to something far more contemporary. Now, the lid has been taken off. Extraordinary tensions are brewing. For decades even the simplest acts of protest, the most idle talk about the harsh nature of social reality, was dangerous. What does it mean to loosen the bonds of a repressive state?

Guatemala has entered a new era, that of peace. The peace is celebrated by the international community and by political forces within the nation. Yet, the culture of violence lingers. Perhaps more than simply lingers, it now cries out for recognition. Today, in Guatemala, rage is ever-present. Any discourse or act linked to justice is shot through with an irrepressible impatience. *Los linchamientos* are repeatedly described by Guatemalans with both shock and surprise. "But this has never happened before they say" - or at least they used to say this.

*Los linchamientos* are about contemporary Guatemalan social reality, where a hunger for justice is enunciated within an environment of enormous systemic mistrust. People want order desperately, and it is this desperation, not poverty, a corrupt judicial system, an incompetent police force, or the claims of indigenous law which motivate mob action. Mob action is a public claim, even if the clarity of its demand is lost or apparently inarticulate. *Los linchamientos* describe what Guatemala needs, they interpret the past through a violent present seeking a new future which cannot yet be named because its logic remains unformed. The promises of peace are only that.

Half a year after the event, the bent metal gate and broken doors bear testimony to the violence of Momostenango's residents. For some reason no one quite understands the blood stains have only faded and will not wash away.