

Dismemberment: Cause of death in the Colombian armed conflict

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate major findings in the recovery and analysis of victims, where dismemberment is the cause of death, but also a manner of torture within the context of the armed conflict in Colombia. It is intended to provide useful analytical information and to contribute to the correct interpretation of forensic analyses in cases of dismemberment and/or in the examination of human remains within the context of the Colombian armed conflict. The importance of including dismemberment as an opinion in the forensic report by correlating the findings on the body, the grave and context of the information available, and the accounts on the facts is encouraged. Otherwise these cases will be recorded as undetermined cause of death, which does not reflect the brutality of the war.

Key words: Dismemberment, armed conflict, Colombia, torture

Introduction

Dismemberment in Colombia, as well as in other countries, is usually described as a rare and infrequent method used to conceal a dead body. Particularly, the intent is to cover up the crime and prevent identifica-

tion of the victim.¹⁻³ Occasionally it has been analyzed on the basis of its symbolic nature, in an attempt to interpret its motivation and message sent to the community by the handling and disposal of dead bodies.⁴⁻⁸ An example of this is detailed in the book “Matar, rematar y contramatar”, in English “Kill, kill again, and over-kill” where the author, anthropologist Maria Victoria Uribe, analyzes the symbolism of massacres and dismemberment of the bodies during the so-called “period of violence”^{8,9} in Colombia, a period of political violence between the two major political parties in Colombia in the mid 20th century.

The Colombian Justice and Peace Law that took effect in 2005, transitional justice, is a legal framework that offers benefits to members of illegal armed groups who surrender to law enforcement and provide information to help solve their crimes. Demobilized defendants are entitled to these benefits on two conditions: returning their illegal assets as a contribution to the victim reparation process and refraining from future criminal activities.

Some years ago, several people insisted that their loved ones were killed or had suffered amputation before their deaths. At the time it sounded impossible. But now is different. After five years, the implementation of the Justice and Peace Law has provided

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a number of sources of information such as victims' testimonies, confessions from paramilitaries in court and the opportunity of medico-legal investigation with the corresponding forensic evidence.^{10,11}

The atrocities committed during this conflict have been narrated by the victims' families for years. In relation to the testimonies, cases like this are found:¹¹

"I told him I was the father of the kid they had detained, that I wanted to know why my son was detained and why they wouldn't let him go. Then, he told me that they had already murdered my son. He said, 'We cut off one of his arms first with the chain saw, then one of his legs. Lastly we shot him.'"

On the other hand, demobilized defendants describe dismemberment as a widespread and recurrent method of torture and murder.¹⁰ Some have confessed to their involvement; others have admitted that they witnessed how live peasants had their limbs amputated with the intention of them to surrender, but killing them anyway. This is the case of Francisco Villalba Hernandez, who gave an account of his experience in the test of courage conducted at the so called schools of death:

"The instructions were to cut off an arm and the head, and to dismember them alive. They cried and begged us not to hurt them, they said they had families ... We opened them from the chest to the stomach. We removed their legs ... We were instructed to remove their intestines."

While referring to this training, he even declared the following:

"You can't spend too much time in chopping them up. You start to dry out, to lose weight, because people have an inner heat and when you

open their stomach, that heat comes out and you swallow it."

This shows that this was a widespread practice.

Testimonies from family members and artistic expressions of demobilized paramilitary members illustrate clearly this type of behavior. "La Guerra que no hemos visto", in English "The war we have not seen" is an exhibition that shows 90 drawings made by demobilized defendants, where they recreate scenes of the daily life of illegal armed groups.¹² These drawings represent activities such as fishing, parties, armed engagements, and even sexual violence, massacres, and dismemberments. (See figures 1 and 2.)

There have also been found, among their personal belongings or in abandoned campsites, drawings made by the criminals that turned themselves in, where they recreate scenes of the daily life of illegal armed groups. These drawings represent activities such as fishing, parties, armed engagements, and even rapes, massacres and dismemberments. Additionally, the atrocities committed during this conflict have also been narrated by the victims' families for years.

Findings from the mass graves

The discovery of over 4,000 graves where some of the victims are buried and the forensic examination of the remains have provided physical evidence that is consistent with witness and paramilitary accounts of the facts. After examining more than 1,400 of human remains exhumed, among the cases in which testimonies or confessions referring to dismemberment of living victims existed, the following characteristics are observed:

At the recovery stage, the graves are usually round, small, and shallow, with one to five individuals per grave, and bodies are



Figure 1 and 2. Representations of dismemberments. Figures from www.laguerraquenhemosvisto.com

found disarticulated, commingled and/or incomplete (see figure 3), as compared to single graves with complete articulated individuals.

During the autopsy it can be confirmed that the skeletal remains are completely skeletonized, commingled in some cases,

incomplete. In terms of injuries the remains show evidence of multiple linear, sharp-edge cut marks, with “V” shape kerf, single or with several cut marks associated. The cuts can be superficial, deep or with evidence of chopping, complete or incomplete. They are mainly located as indicated in the



Figure 3. Round grave with minimum four individuals, note the one in the left is complete and articulated, the other three next to it are disarticulated. Photo courtesy JA Franco.

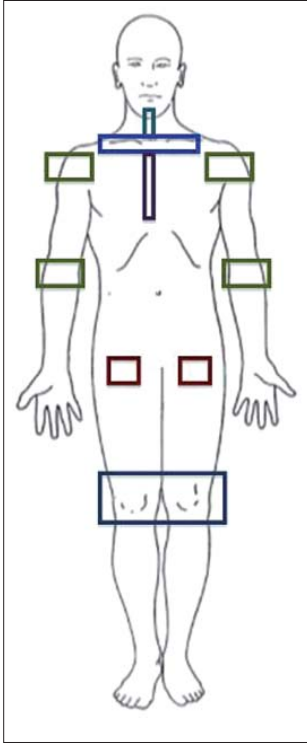


Figure 4. Cut marks are mainly observed in cervical vertebrae and scapular girdle, sternum and elbow joint, hip and knee joints.

following diagrammes. (See figures 4, 5, 6 and 7.)

They may have regular edges on one side and irregular jagged edges on the opposite side. The regular edges side is related to the cut and the irregular edge is related to the blunt force applied after that. This is a combination of sharp and blunt mecha-

nism in Spanish called *cortocontundente*. In terms of class characteristics of the weapon: the fractures are consistent with machete, some cases with an axe. In the majority of these cases, no other traumatic injuries are observed that could explain the death. (See figures 6 and 7.)

Other findings include blindfolds or gags covering the eyes and mouth, as well as ties or ligatures around ankles and wrists. (See figure 8.) In most cases there is no clothing, or only traces of underwear.

Despite the versions about using chain saws for dismemberment, findings do not correlate with that, and furthermore, paramilitary confessions have indicated that using chain saws was a waste of time for the perpetrators because they had to maintain the machines from damage caused by soft tissue and clothing. Even though in some cases because of the severe taphonomic damage to the bones, we cannot be certain the chain saw was not used.

Despite the evidence observed by the medical-anthropological teams, the determination of the cause of death is a challenge, because in the majority of the cases no other injuries are present.

In a series of 28 cases where evidence of dismemberment was observed during the forensic examination, 20 cases were male and eight cases female victims. In 13 cases the average age (determined by anthropologi-



Figure 5. Left clavicle. Note multiple cut marks in distal end.



Figure 6. Proximal left femur. Note superficial cuts together with incomplete deep chops.



Figure 7. Left humerus. Note cut marks to the distal end.



Figure 8. Findings show the use of blindfolds or gags.

cal and dental methods) was between 20 to 40 years old, in five cases between 40 to 60 years old, in four cases the age was determined to be less than 18 years old. In one case the age was determined to be between 11 and 14 years old. In 6 cases the age could not be determined but all of them were assessed to be more than 20 years old. All the victims observed had died five to 20 years previous to their discovery.

Twelve of the victims were found in graves containing more than one victim whereas sixteen were found in individual graves. None of the graves showed signs

of alteration, and in all cases the remains were complete (considering large bones). (See table 1.) In five cases, the body was observed to be articulated, in 23 cases was observed to be disarticulated. Evidence of cut marks was described in all the cases except in one case, where cut marks could not be observed. This was explained because of the large deteriorated remains due to severe taphonomic changes. All the other sites and lab findings as well as history of the facts correlated with dismemberment. In 10 cases other injuries were observed; in eight cases gunshot wound to the head was described

and in two cases blunt force trauma to the head was described. Among these 10 cases, despite other lethal injuries observed in five case histories of dismemberment was referred by the family members as being present during the events. In 18 cases, no other injuries were observed that could explain the death in these victims other than

the cuts marks with a dismemberment pattern. (See table 1.)

Regarding the anatomical location of the cut marks, in 16 cases marks were observed to the scapular girdle; of these, in all 16 cases cuts were observed to the clavicles, in 13 cases to the proximal end of the humerus, in four cases to the scapulae. In four

Table 1. *Cases with cut marks observed associated with dismemberment*

Case Nr	Sex	Single/ Multiple Grave	Articulated/ Desarticulated	Cut Marks	Other Trauma	History Available
1	M	Sing	Art	Yes	GSW Head	Yes
2	M	Sing	Art	Yes	Bf Head	Yes
3	M	Sing	Art	Yes	Bf Head	Yes
4	M	Sing	Desart	Yes	No	No
5	M	Sing	Desart	Yes	No	No
6	F	Sing	Art	Yes	No	No
7	M	Sing	Desart	Yes	No	No
8	M	Sing	Desart	Yes	No	Yes
9	M	Mult	Desart	Yes	GSW Head	Yes
10	M	Sing	Desart	No	GSW Head	Yes
11	M	Sing	Desart	Yes	No	No
12	M	Sing	Desart	Yes	No	Yes
13	F	Mult	Desart	Yes	GSW Head	No
14	M	Mult	Desart	Yes	GSW Head	No
15	M	Mult	Desart	Yes	No	No
16	M	Mult	Desart	Yes	No	No
17	M	Sing	Desart	Yes	GSW Head	No
18	M	Mult	Desart	Yes	No	No
19	M	Mult	Desart	Yes	GSW Head	No
20	F	Sing	Desart	Yes	No	No
21	M	Mult	Desart	Yes	No	No
22	M	Mult	Desart	Yes	No	No
23	M	Sing	Art	Yes	No	No
24	M	Sing	Desart	Yes	GSW Head	No
25	M	Sing	Desart	Yes	No	No
26	F	Mult	Desart	Yes	No	Yes
27	F	Mult	Desart	Yes	No	Yes
28	F	Mult	Desart	Yes	No	Yes

cases cuts were described in the proximal ends of ulna and radius, in three cases to the maxilla, in five cases to the base of the skull, in nine cases to the cervical vertebrae, in one case to thoracic vertebrae, in two cases to the coxal bone, in 20 cases to the proximal end of femurs and in four cases to the proximal end of the tibia and fibula.

In one case evidence of blindfold was observed and of ligatures to the wrist in another case. In 10 cases information regarding dismemberment maneuvers, including testimonies from the family victims was available, and in 18 cases only information regarding the disappearance and murder was available but no information specifically about the events was available for the expert when examining the remains. In two cases, the remains had been autopsied when the events took place and an autopsy report was available for these two cases in which the medical doctor described the section of the limbs and neck, including section of the main vessels and these locations, and determined that death was due to hypovolemic shock due to stab wounds with a pattern of decapitation and dismemberment. (See table 2.)

Dismemberment as a cause of death

When sectioning either of the limbs, cutting of main vessels takes place. There is a severe blood loss that renders the heart incapable of pumping enough blood to the body, which keeps the organs from functioning. The body must lose approximately 20% or more of its total blood volume in order to suffer hypovolemic shock. If this is not controlled right away, it leads to immediate death of the individual. There are other causes for hypovolemic shock, but in this case we refer to the massive bleeding that produces this shock, which is the cause of death of these individuals.

Final considerations

There are particular characteristics from the recovery of the remains, at the burial and during the forensic laboratory analysis that correlate with dismemberment of victims as a cruel and widespread practice in the Colombian armed conflict over the past 20 years.

These characteristics include in the majority of the cases reviewed, individual burials where completely skeletonized and disarticulated bodies were recovered. During the autopsy, cut marks were almost always present in lower limbs, followed by cut marks in the scapular girdle (clavicles, scapulae, head of the humerus), and neck.

In the cases where information regarding dismemberment maneuvers was available, the forensic evidence was consistent in all cases with the information provided, including two cases where exhumation and postmortem examination findings could be correlated with fresh body autopsy findings.

The judgment of all findings is also consistent with dismemberment as being the cause of death in the majority of the victims where a pattern of dismemberment has been observed. It is important to note that the determination of dismemberment as the cause of death must be carefully supported with detailed descriptions of field and laboratory findings, analyzed within the context of the information available in the area where the events took place and based on the witnesses' accounts of the facts. In the cases where other traumatic injuries are observed such as gunshot wounds, it should be considered that injuries could have occurred surrounding death where dismemberment would not be only a way to conceal the body, but a form of torture.

Multiple stories from eye witnesses indicate that this practice is also consistent with

Table 2. *Bone structures affected with cut marks.*

Case Nr	Claviculae/ Scapulae	Humeri	Ulnae/Radii	Maxillae	Skull	Cervical Vertebrae	Other Vertebrae	Coxae	Femora	Tibiae/ Fibulae	Blindfolds/ gags/ligatures
1	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	X	-	No
2	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	X	-	No
3	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	X	-	No
4	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Yes
5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	No
6	-	-	-	X	-	X	-	-	-	-	No
7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	No
8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	Yes
9	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	No
10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	No
11	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	No
12	X	X	X	-	-	X	X	-	X	-	No
13	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	No
14	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	No
15	X	X	-	-	X	X	-	-	X	-	Yes
16	X	X	-	-	X	X	-	-	X	-	No
17	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	No
18	X	X	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	No
19	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	No
20	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	No
21	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	No
22	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	No
23	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	No
24	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	No
25	X	X	X	-	-	X	-	-	X	-	No
26	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	No
27	X	-	-	-	-	X	-	X	X	-	No
28	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	No

a form of torturing victims and their relatives before murdering them.

We encourage considering dismemberment as a brutal practice within the armed conflict in Colombia, as a form of torture

and homicide and in many cases being the direct cause of death. Interpreting these findings by themselves or in an isolated manner will lead to the conclusion of undetermined causes and manners of death, and

this, of course, does not reflect the actual statistics and epidemiology of our internal war. It is necessary then, that this cause of death is included as such in the forensic reports in order to contribute to the real understanding of violent practices during the war.

The expert opinion is critical in order to avoid disparity and inconclusive results, therefore it is necessary that dismemberment as a cause of death is included as such in the forensic reports in order to contribute to the real understanding of violent practices during the war. Forensic pathologists must be advised of the negative implications that concluding simply “undetermined” will bring to the investigation process in such cases. An expert opinion of this type results in inadequate, insufficient conclusions aside from the context, and it contributes to keeping the case archived or closed. It will not be considered as conceptual poverty, but as a scientific proven fact signed by the forensic expert.¹³ This medico-legal evidence supports the history that relates testimonies of torture and dismemberment as real characteristics of over 60 years of armed conflict in Colombia. This is essential, not only for the judicial system, but also for the expected process of truth and reparation.

Forensic analyses corroborate the violent characteristics of the Colombian armed conflict. Determination of torture in postmortem examinations in these victims will certainly also contribute to the investigation of torture practices still taking place in Colombia, but not denounced by the victims. This will not only be the basis of on-going and future prosecutions, but will also contribute to establish the truth and the reconciliation in the peace process.

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