

## Kutisqa Putisman (the Return to Putis). Epilogue to an Unfinished Story.<sup>1</sup>

José P. Baraybar | Equipo Peruano de Antropología Forense

The return to Putis is but a symbol, because there was never a departure. It is more about a transition from anonymity to recognition; a path between being—or more so from having been to existing again, to identity and belonging; in order to part from being void and from being forgotten. It is a transition from being just the symbol of the wickedness that can lead human interests at times, which, in this particular case, was reduced to a few coins received for stolen cattle.

This return has, however, other connotations. I think the most important one is having to admit that we are still a society that is divided and that does not know what to do with the different official stories that are presented. I remember that in the middle of the wake at the Plaza de Armas in Ayacucho, the governor refused to hand over the flag to be flown at half-mast because he "would not give support to terrorist ceremonies". But, who exactly are the terrorists in this case? Perhaps the 42 children buried in the mass grave of Putis, or the 44 women, or maybe the elders? The sad fact is that in the country we live, the notion of the "other" is the tool with which barbarian actions are justified. The idea of the "other" is used in daily life to promote and perpetuate mechanisms of inequality.

But the leading slogan of the current government is "Peru moves forward", (el Perú avanza), and I ask myself, is part of moving forward an effort to dignify the memory of 92 victims from Putis, when in reality there were a total of 400 assassinated in this area, be it by the state or by the Shining Path? I wonder if "moving forward" also refers to the fact that people of Putis had to build, with their own resources, a cemetery which is, by the way, probably the most important public works project undertaken in the area. On the day of the massacre in Putis, those assassinated were thrown in a hole they had dug themselves having been told that they were digging a fishpond, when in reality what they were asked to dig was their own grave. I ask myself, why would a government that is "moving forward" build a fish farm as a form of collective reparation in a place like this? Why would anyone think that a comprehensive way of honoring the memory of the victims could possibly be the same symbol that led them to the massacre in the first place? Today, Putis is classified as a "Minor Populated Center" (Centro Poblado Menor), the lowest level in the scheme of the State and also the title validating the existence of people that continue to be as invisible as they were when their family members were exterminated because it was easier to steal their cattle that way.

When you arrive in Rodeo, now the capital of CPM Putis, you see the new cemetery, a cement construction with well-distributed niche tombs along the creek. This place is always battered by the ice cold wind, with a few flowers here and there resisting being torn out from their place, as

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living witnesses of the desolation. People carry on with their regular life, their cattle, their misery, on the hills, in their scrawny farms. Death still reigns in Putis even if some of the victims rest in peace now; justice has not yet arrived. What happened here was a perfect crime, commanding officers, under the protection of the Ministry of Defense, have more rights than the rest of us, and can hide behind absurd answers and excuses, behind war names and files that supposedly do not exist.

We have to ask ourselves what exactly do we understand as the basis for progress? How can the horrible damage be repaired? Monuments, cemeteries, and fish farms will not help people migrate closer to citizenship, to being a part of the collective national identity and not just that repugnant and preferably forgotten "other"; so as not to be as Arguedas would say, "like a big bull that is impertinent because its throat is being slit open" ("como un toro grande al que se degüella, que por eso es impertinente").<sup>2</sup>

It is crucial not to lose our capacity to feel indignity, but it is yet more important to know that our ability to theorize about the different ways in which reparations can be done is, sometimes, far too optimistic and can even promote that same "otherness" we are trying to combat. The process needs to start with a search, identification, restitution, and as the last step, reparations. The family of a person who has disappeared will never be able to recover the person they loved, nor can they erase the horribly damaging absence, the moments of hunger or cold or guilt, but they might be able to attain a significant and well-deserved inclusion into society. Traditional forms of reparations are insufficient. A reparation committee will not return the body to the families; it will not repair the lack of information that makes a crime permanent.

My favorite photograph is that of the endless procession of people and coffins on their way to the cemetery, on the "rural penetration road" ("camino rural de penetracion"). That procession is the true return to Putis, and, in a way, it also represents the endless path of those who search for their loved ones. These are disjointed paths, deprived of answers, of coffins, under the incandescent sun and the skin cracking cold; an endless road where people hope to reach someplace, as invisible as that place may be.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Rebeca Blackwell.

<sup>2</sup> José María Arguedas, "Llamado a algunos doctores", 1966.