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**POLITICAL UNEARTHING: A COMPARISON OF POST-CONFLICT  
MASS GRAVE EXHUMATIONS IN MODERN HISTORY**

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**Abstract**

The roles of forensic anthropologists in exhuming mass graves have grown significantly, due to their contributions in identifying deceased individuals, an emphasis on global human rights issues, and scientific advancements in forensic studies. Exhumations are used as tools of truth-seeking evidence in the transitional justice framework, and not only do they represent the remnants of violent conflicts, but also traumatic national memory. This project proposes a holistic anthropological approach in human rights studies by critically comparing forensic interventions on mass graves and the motivations behind these exhumations from post-conflict regions in modern history, including well-researched cases in Latin America, Africa, and Europe, along with the more recent exhumation and repatriation efforts in postwar South Korea.

From background research and literature analysis, the results demonstrate that the motivations behind mass grave exhumations are politically motivated in South Korea, specifically controlled by the South Korean state throughout the decades and with the later use of forensic anthropology as a method of transitional justice within a politicized memoryscape. I analyzed the history of South Korea post-Korean War and observed potential political motivations of recent exhumation and repatriation efforts, as a part of its peacebuilding agendas, including their foreign relations with the U.S. and North Korea. Although the cases described in this paper examine various mass grave exhumations projects from post-conflict regions with differing pasts, political powers, and memory landscapes, exhumed remains were often used for judicial accountability and as emotional messages conveyed to or by the affected communities. There are contrasts when comparing to exhumations in South Korea, but there are common goals of reconciliation, allowing them to be critically analyzed with other casework research. Furthermore, the similarities are often vital in understanding the motivations behind interring skeletal remains, their use as materials to evoke emotion, and as objects of political and national operations to establish specific collective memories of past trauma.

Keywords: Political violence, forensic anthropology, transitional justice, traumatic collective memory, human rights, South Korea