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Liberia's Tombs Shelter Much More Than the Dead

Cemetery Is Now a Refuge For Kids, Robbers and Poor; 'I'm Expecting Death'

By MICHAEL M. PHILLIPS

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MONROVIA, Liberia -- Joseph Memmeh weaves his way through Palm Grove Cemetery, leaping expertly from grave to grave, before settling on top of his usual tomb.

It's a concrete box, covered in white, faux-marble bathroom tiles and containing the earthly remains of someone's dear wife whose name the boy cannot read, though he is 12 years old. Joseph is there every day, lying on his stomach in rubber flip-flops, his head up and eyes wary, like a guilty dog who expects to be rousted from the sofa.


There are hundreds of tombs in Palm Grove, almost 13 acres of them. Fourteen years of death-by-machete civil war left no shortage of bodies to bury in Liberia. The white marble plaque "in evergreen memory" of Macy F. Dogbeh. The baby-blue slab of Robert B. Doe, on top of which several grubby T-shirts are drying slowly in the moist tropical heat. The blue angel, painted as if by a child, on a grave of a mother or brother or other; the weeds have obscured the first letters of the inscription.

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reveal its unhealed wounds.

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But Joseph always picks the same white, tiled tomb to while away his days. "This place," he explains, "is clean."

Liberia's largest graveyard has become a refuge for the poor and the bored, the criminal and the incontinent, the young and, of course, the dead. The country is at peace. But, in Palm Grove Cemetery, one need not dig at all to

The tombs there are mostly above-ground concrete boxes, providing convenient cover for drug dealing, sleeping, or any activity where privacy is desirable. Some lie cracked open, leg bones, craniums and teeth visible in a sliver of sunlight. The grass between them is chest-high. And everywhere are pungent piles of human excrement.

"If you have the money, you go to the latrine," says Cynthia Garway, emerging with two girlfriends from the weeds behind a green-and-white tomb. "If you don't, you come here."

Most of the city has been without electric lights or running water for 15 years. It costs five Liberian dollars -- about eight cents -- to use the public outhouse a block away, on Center Street. Cynthia, 16, doesn't have that kind of money. She dropped out of school after fifth grade because she couldn't afford the fees.

The old-timers say that most people here used to have a respectful fear of the dead. But the war left 100,000 corpses on the country's streets, beaches and jungles, shot, blown up or hacked to death. Now small children frolic and pose on Palm Grove's tombs, pretending to be ninjas or rap singers.

"I'm expecting death," says Cynthia. "I'm not scared of the dead."

She is scared of the living, though. At night she won't enter the cemetery for fear of being raped. If it's urgent, she'll use a plastic bag and throw it in the street when nobody's looking.

The cemetery is an infamous haven for thieves, thugs and drug addicts. One of the guards, 38-year-old Johnson Kollie, says that on the night shift he and his colleagues carry machetes. During the day, sticks will do. Still, everyone knows that criminals run into the cemetery to escape, confident the police won't follow.

Some do their stealing inside the cemetery. Strolling through the graveyard, Mr. Kollie points out where thieves have broken open the concrete slabs that cover tombs and pried out the steel bars to resell. "Don't step in the center," he advises as he jumps from tomb-top to tomb-top. He stops to look at the large box that contains the remains of Jallah K. Prall Sr., his name hand-painted outside in dripping black paint.

The Journal's Michael M. Phillips reports from Liberia's national cemetery on how it's become a haven for everyone from children to thieves and drug dealers.

Thieves have chiseled away the marble facing and, along with it, any inscription that may once have summarized the family's feelings about the departed.

Not far away stands a crypt the size of a small garage, built of concrete blocks molded in geometric patterns that allow the light to pass inside, where Rufus Dennis sleeps on top of the tomb. Mr.

Dennis and his friend Junior David have lived in this crypt for the past two years.

Both men fought for Charles Taylor, the U.S.-educated rebel-turned-president who is now on trial in the Hague for war crimes. Once they were done with Liberia, Mr. Taylor's men raped, pillaged and slaughtered their way across neighboring Sierra Leone, as well.

Mr. Dennis joined Mr. Taylor when he was 16 years old; now he's 26 and has deep scars where a bullet tore through his right thigh. He's unsure whose body lies beneath his bed.

"It's a woman," suggests Mr. David, who is 28 years old.

It doesn't much matter to Mr. Dennis. "The dead won't do no harm to nobody," he shrugs. Messrs. Dennis and David own next to nothing: a shirt, some shorts and a pair of flip-flops each. Some days they haul sand from the beach for local concrete-brick makers, earning 150 Liberian dollars, or about \$2.50, on a good day.

It's hard to see the future from inside the grave.

Mr. Dennis: "We want to achieve something, but there's no way."

Mr. David: "No school, no job."

Mr. Dennis: "No home."

The United Nations sent 15,000 blue-helmeted peacekeepers to Liberia in 2003 and put an end to the wars. In 2005 Liberians elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a grandmotherly technocrat, to be president, an obvious rejection of the boys and their guns. She became a dinner partner of Laura Bush, billionaire financier George Soros, Chinese President Hu Jintao and Jordan's Queen Noor.

Wealthy nations and eager charities lined up to build roads, stock clinics and staff schools. The World Bank offered tens of millions of dollars in grants to rebuild Monrovia, a decayed seaside city. Mrs. Johnson Sirleaf put near the top of her wish list a high wall around Palm Grove Cemetery, and the World Bank wrote a check for \$179,000. Construction is well under way. Workers are plastering over the concrete blocks, and in the coming weeks will add gates and coils of razor wire to complete the enclosure.

The impending encirclement already forced a 36-year-old former militiaman called Jack the Witch to move his drug gang, the Sicilian Boys, out of the graveyard and a block down Center Street, where young men hawk limp, hopeless baby crocodiles to passersby.

Jack claims he rose to the rank of general in Mr. Taylor's army. Nobody around seems willing to dispute that. "I've got men all over Monrovia," he says. "I can call, and 25 armed men come."



Jack's new lair is in a derelict, metal-roofed house down a narrow passage flooded by rainy-season downpours. Someone has placed broken pieces of concrete in the puddles, like lily pads in a pond, allowing Jack to pass dry. Inside, his men use razor blades to cut up \$5 rocks of Nigerian crack cocaine, a drug their commanders once supplied to make them brave and cruel.



Michael Phillips

Joseph Memmeh lies on his favorite tomb.

Joseph Memmeh worries that he, too, will be squeezed out of his cemetery once the wall is completed and the gates are locked.

Joseph's mother died when he was a small boy. His father's new wife wasn't interested in caring for a stepson. In 2003, when Liberia erupted in that final, stuttering, three-month spasm of violence that locals call World Wars I, II and III, Joseph's grandparents took him from his home village and fled to Monrovia. They walked when they had to and rode when they could, in the backs of trucks amid plantains and palm oil.

At school, the other students tease him for being a 12-year-old first grader. It doesn't help that he has six fingers on each hand. Now he sleeps with three other boys on one foam mattress in the unlighted shed his older cousin rents across the street from the graveyard.

It's a path he beats every day, and his friends Muhammed Kamara and Archieboy Gaye know where to find him.

Muhammed and Archieboy are scrounging buddies, and they have spent the morning sifting through the trash heap outside the cemetery. Muhammed, who is 8 years old, collected several rubber bands. When he gets 20, he plans to sell them for five Liberian dollars, or about eight cents, and buy some bread. Twelve-year-old Archieboy, whose single front tooth stands out like a domino, has been looking for toys. He found a bright-blue, broken computer mouse that advertises the shipping company Maersk Sealand, a yellow cylinder that was once a pen, and a can of Raid insect killer with just a little bit left inside.

They bring their booty and join Joseph on his tomb. Joseph craves the routine.

"I go to the toilet, I sit and relax, my friends come," Joseph says later, recounting his graveyard days.

"I don't like to be alone."

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