

In the House of the Killer Bats

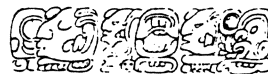
This interview took place in early 1983, during a period of extreme repression of the Guatemalan resistance. The massacres, mutilations, executions and torture, under the direction of Rios Montt, are so well known that even the European Parliament has taken a formal position against him and the military support the US government is supplying -- openly and covertly.

The Guatemalan resistance is frequently characterized as a new Reformation crisis pitting "liberation theology" Catholics against fundamentalist Protestants. At other times it is taken as the battle of the armed Left revolution against Right-wing reaction. But the entrance of the Mayan Indian population into the resistance recently has changed all this. It now must be seen in the tradition of the continent-wide, centuries-old struggle of Amerindians against capital.

The Mayan people's minds stretch back to the pre-Columbian world as Rigoberta's reference to the Popul Vuh, the "bible" of the Quiche Maya, implies. Indeed, she might have been thinking of the story of "The Two Heroes and the Rebellious Daughter" (told at the end of the interview). But they confront international capital, so she and the others reflect a contemporary, planetary sense that we would be wise to share. Can we remain spectators to the game capital plays in Guatemala given that the guns come from Reagan and the Congress, the money from Jerry Falwell and the electronic preachers, and the torturers from training camps located at such "All-American" addresses as S.W. 40th Street and 158th Ave or N.W. 58th Street and 102nd Ave in Dade County, Florida?



Guatemala, 1983



MN: Why don't you start by telling us who you are, where you come from, and why you are here in the U.S.

Rigoberta Menchu: I am from the northern part of the province of Quiche in Guatemala. I am a Quiche Indian and I speak the Quiche language. It is with great pain that I must also say that I was made an orphan by the repression in my country; that is, my parents were assassinated - burned alive along with the rest of my family. I am not sure whether or not any of my family is still alive, but they are part of the people that is suffering.

Efrain Rosales: I am from the village of La Estancia which is four kilometers from the town of Santa Cruz de Quiche. I too am an Indian: a campesino and a weaver. I also left Guatemala suffering persecution by the government, by death squads. I too suffered due to the assassinations, tortures and kidnappings of many of my people specifically: a member of my family, neighbors, relatives, friends, and leaders of the different organizations in my village. Many of my people of Quiche have been tortured and murdered. For these reasons and because I myself survived one of the massacres, I left Guatemala after the coup d'etat of Rios Montt.

Ricardo Falla: I am a Jesuit priest. I am a Guatemalan, born in Guatemala and an anthropologist. I have now been outside of Guatemala for three years.

The reason I left, together with other priests, was to help out in Nicaragua where

the people had just begun the process of insurrection leading to the final triumph. We believed it was important to help, in many ways. But since then the situation has become worse in Guatemala and I have not been able to return to my country.

Rigoberta: For your information, I also left Guatemala to fulfill a specific task. I am representing the Guatemalan Committee of Patriotic Unity. This is the political organization which represents the struggle of our people at all levels. We are working to establish relationships with governments and political parties. At the same time our task is to expose and denounce internationally what is happening in our country.

Efrain: I too am carrying out a specific task. In Guatemala the government has censored all of the media. Now this is not something new, for my people have never had access to the media. However, today things are worse with the censorship of the press/media by the Rios Mont government. We know perfectly well that here in the U.S. the people don't know what is happening in Guatemala. Human rights organizations and some journalists who are trying to expose what is going on in Guatemala are always trying to get news reports out. However, these reports do not reach the U.S. (in their original form). The international news organizations shorten, change and distort them.

Thus it is important, and our Christian duty, to expose and not be quiet about what is happening in Guatemala... there are massacres, tortures, and kidnappings occurring all the time. The

children suffer, the women suffer, the old people suffer. And now the government is carrying out their scorched earth policy as well as a policy of "strategic hamlets." To date approximately one hundred and fifty villages have been massacred in Guatemala. Thus we can't be quiet. We find it necessary to tell the world and at the same time request help from the American people. For in this trip we need to touch your hearts so you will come to realize what is happening in Guatemala: that people are starving and sick...that tears and blood are running in the streets of Guatemala. Given this we ask the North American people to pressure their government to stop/cut off all the military aid that is going to Guatemala - that is to say helicopter parts and military advisors which are being used to massacre my people.

MN: It is quite clear to us that your people (Guatemala Indians), have been able to defend your culture over many centuries in the face of enormous difficulties. Could you address this issue?

Rigoberta: To begin with, it's true that in Guatemala we have a rich history and there are rich elements in our culture today. However, since the beginning (the Spanish invasion), there has always been a struggle to destroy our culture, to impose on us a foreign system, so corrupt... so individualistic. However, we have resisted from the beginning. Our grandparents tell us that they were almost slaves, that the landowners did not pay them even a cent that they did the work of horses for the rich. When it was clear that we wouldn't do it anymore, we started organizing ourselves, they came in with demagoguery making many promises, especially concerning land. And my people love the land. It must be said we love the land, we live on it and it is important to understand that our culture is based on it.

So it must be said that the rebellion of the Indians did not begin today or in the 1970's or 60's. History tells us that there have been many rebellions by the Indians. We have had to struggle together. However the enemy with his sophisticated apparatus has tried to smother these struggles, to choke them. And so it is important to realize that once again we are being threatened with extermination. The hatred of the Guatemalan regime for the Indian is very serious, very great. Why? Because this is another period of direct war between government and Indian. The rebellion now is not only of protest but of concrete struggle.

The Popul Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiche Maya speaks of struggle and resistance to oppression. Now we are practicing this philosophy in our struggle, which terrifies our enemy, leaving them no other alternative than to raise arms against my people who are in the majority.

We know very well that the struggle of our people will never be extinguished even with threats, bullets and blood.

Efrain: Yes, death is a danger for us. Cur
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culture is threatened. It is most important to stress this to the peoples of the world, the governments, the political parties, and the humanitarian institutions. Often we hear in the mass media that a species of animal is going extinct. People are very concerned. Yet, when a culture and a people are in danger, it is difficult to get governments and political parties to do anything. In our situation it is also difficult for the mass media to say what is happening.

This struggle is not only the struggle of the Indian or of the Ladino who speaks Spanish. It is everyone's struggle (in Guatemala). Why? Because we understand very well that if we are divided...the enemy is better able to defeat us. However, as an Indian I have to say that we have the political consciousness and the determination to struggle and we have clear objectives. Someday soon it will be our responsibility to take positions of power in our country and we will be ready.

Rigoberta: And so we reaffirm that we respect our identity as Indian people and are struggling to force others to do the same. It doesn't help me if people like my necklace and my dress but they don't respect me, my identity. Our culture must be respected and not used as the object for tourism...an object of exploitation. However, I'm not only talking of defending our culture, as we and our ancestors have done, but also developing it. We want to grow as people as well as keep what we have.

MN: Why are your people now learning Spanish?

Rigoberta: We have found it necessary to learn Spanish at this time so that we can communicate with each other. There are twenty different Indian languages. Spanish is a common language inside Guatemala and internationally. So it is a question of learning twenty two languages plus Spanish in order to effectively coordinate our struggles or learn Spanish. Without Spanish I could not be speaking with you now. And so each *campanero* has the responsibility of learning Spanish in order to communicate.

However, we are not learning Spanish to substitute it in place of our own languages. On the contrary, today more than ever we understand the value of our culture and we have the responsibility to save it.

MN: At what moment did this become clear?

Rigoberta: The first revolutionaries were the ones who began the process as the struggles became more popularized (massified) as they had to find ways of communicating to each other and others. Some could understand Quiche but not Quichi or Nichil or some other language which created some big problems. To communicate they had to learn. Later on at all levels of the revolutionary struggle, our *companeros*

learned to read and speak Spanish, as a beginning step. We also studied the conditions of our country. How many of us are there? To what point have we been exploited? How are we discriminated against? Why do they discriminate against us? All this we learned.

MN: What is the relationship between the Left and others involved in the struggle in Guatemala?

Ricardo: The relationship of who with the Left???...in Guatemala we do not see our revolutionaries as Left or of the Left. In Guatemala the people call us los muchachos (the boys). This is really a movement of the people, it does not come from some other place. These are the best sons of our people...like Efrain. Our goal is really to break the old social structure that has kept us subjugated for centuries. However, the regime calls us communists, subversives and guerillas...this is an old song of theirs.

Efrain: I would like to add several points that need to be made. The first is that the struggle is well integrated. It is sometimes said that only the Ladino people are fighting, that the Indigenous people, as always, are not involved. No, that is not so. The indigenous people of Guatemala, approximately 70% of the population, is also deeply involved. The second is that, for example take me, I am Guatemalan, I am from Quiche, I am an Indigenous person...don't tell me that I am a Cuban here trying to tell you about "the problem" in Guatemala. We are Guatemalans and we are the ones who are fighting. Like my companera said, we are the ones who are fighting, it is the Quiche, it is the Indigenous people, the Ladino, the Guatemalans that are fighting...not the Cubans or Nicaraguans or Russians.

MN: How do the people organize in the face of this repression? What are the different levels of resistance?

Rigoberta: The main form of resistance is the armed resistance...for a very special reason...because our enemies are armed and we know very well that they will not put down their arms unless we organize in the same manner. Since the enemy has all types of military equipment we need an armed revolutionary force, too.

Within this context, one finds many levels of struggles/participation/organization. There are many different types of participation or organization...as campesinos, as christians, as workers, as journalists, as students...all against the repression of the government. However, the mass struggle is truly the people's armed struggle because the enemy has closed off so much space for us to do things.

However, our people also fight back in various ways without using arms. For example, one wakes up in the morning to find the road covered with fallen trees because when people know that the army is coming they chop the trees down to block the road. Towns have developed emergency plans

to defend themselves...for example so that they can evacuate the town very quickly and quietly as soon as danger gets close. It is in those ways that our people have also shown their ability to use popular arms in order to defend themselves against the army: machetes, stones, spears. In order to protect themselves the people have to organize.

This also includes some manifestations of struggle at the trade union level, although this is usually organized on a clandestine level. In this case workers are organized in a factory but the boss doesn't know who or how.

And then we are here (on an international level) trying to tell the world of the sufferings of my people, of our people's plans and position...we have the armed struggle, the popular struggle and the international struggle.

Ricardo: When Rigoberta spoke of popular struggles she said that trees are knocked down, holes dug and sticks and stones used. Also that communities had emergency plans...these emergency plans are very important. In a community of 60-70 homes, where the weapons are sticks and stones and trees, the people will be massacred when the army arrives with its helicopter, or tank. And so it is very important for us to have an emergency plan so that when the army enters the village the people disappear...the earth eats them up...we hide in the forests or perhaps come out behind the army and give them trouble. During the first period of this type of repression, the people didn't have this type of experience and they just had to learn how to deal with the army to survive. Those that have survived have had to develop these emergency plans. I was told the other day that there is this small town where the army had entered several times... The first couple of times, they caught and killed people. But the people quickly learned to watch for them and when they arrived the town had disappeared...everyone had disappeared...there were even some who climbed trees and yelled at them, swore at them, telling them to come this way...when the soldiers came looking for them they had disappeared...they no longer feared the soldiers.



However, one must remember that when the villages have a lot of little children, it is much harder to move quickly and defend themselves.

MN: We hear in the U.S. that a lot of people are being killed and that it is not just the army doing the killing.

Efrain: Well, all I have to say is that one identifies a bird by its feathers. We know perfectly well that it is the army that enters the communities and villages to massacre our people...by the foot prints they leave (army boots) and by what everyone says.

Ricardo: If anyone doubts us, tell them to go to the frontier between Guatemala and Mexico and speak to the people...they'll tell you...it is the army.

MN: What role do women play?

Rigoberta: Obviously we are participating. I am here. Women, men, children, we are all in the struggle. To begin with, positions of leadership, however, are not given out like diplomas...one has to earn them through revolutionary struggle, suffering, collective suffering, and collective struggle. People in positions of leadership are not put there if people don't know them, trust them, know what they think, and aren't clear in their thinking. This also applies to us, women. Although of course, it is true that it has cost women a lot to get actively involved in the struggle; due to a series of characteristics of our culture, customs, beliefs...We have never been given the opportunity to talk, to express our thoughts about the system in an open way...so it has cost us a lot to become actively integrated in these struggles. However, today, we have seen heroic examples of companeras who have died, who have dedicated their lives to the survival of our people, just as there are women that have taken on different tasks in our struggle.

MN: How can we support you in your struggles...more specifically?

Rigoberta: As the compañero was emphasizing, we need solidarity at all levels: moral support, political aid, economic aid... precisely because a large number of communities are in danger of being exterminated. We are fighting to change this situation, but we need the help of others.

Concretely, we need the North American people to put pressure on their government so that it stops making war on our continent...not just Guatemala...but our continent. We want to be alone so that we can determine our own futures. We hope that North American people will tell their government that the poor here in the U.S. need jobs and decent wages - things that are denied them because their government spends so much money supporting repressive governments and foreign wars. Let the U.S.

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government leave us in peace - we are prepared, determined and willing to choose our own destiny. We are worried that much more blood will be shed. If they don't stop, we know that this will be another Viet Nam in Central America...a lot of blood will be spilled, is being spilled.

MN: Do you have anything to say to the Native Americans in this country?

Efrain: I would like to say that, I too am a native American. Not only here in North America, but in Central and South America, it is time that we unite as Native Americans to struggle for our liberation... along with other peoples in the Americas.

Rigoberta: I would like to say to them that it is time that the voice of the Indian be heard again, that we break our divisions/boundaries and that other peoples recognize and respect us. We are here today to bring down these boundaries. It is time we talk, understand each other, understand our common struggles, and support each other...we ask their support.

MN: And to the Hispanics in this country?

Rigoberta: As Latinos, as poor people, I understand that a great part of those who immigrated to this country from Latin America left from necessity, both economic and political. In their struggles they have ended up in this country...and with other problems. I also understand that they also have high aspirations and that they identify themselves as Hispanics. I believe that it is their responsibility to support us... struggle to support us...we are their brothers and sisters...they are also brothers and sisters of the poor people of all parts of the world.



THE TWO HERCES AND THE REBELLIOUS DAUGHTER

Twin brothers, expert in the sacred ball game, arouse the envy of the two gods of death who challenge them to a match in the Underworld. The mortals play, lose and are killed. By a miracle, the maiden daughter of the death god Blood Chief bears the brothers' successors, the Hero Twins. They grow to manhood -- and mastery of the ritual game as well as of the blow gun -- in the world. Again the death gods send their challenge, and the Hero Twins begin their journey into the realm of dread and horror. They beat the lords in the ball game but then they pass through many ordeals in the Underworld, including a night they must spend in the House of the Killer Bats, where they sleep in their blow guns. Later, they become magicians, slashing each other apart and becoming whole again. Asked to perform the same trick on the two gods of death, they leave them dismembered and ascend from the Underworld to become transformed into the first benign gods, the Sun and Moon.