

Rigoberta Menchu

Native Guatemala Defends the Earth

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Discussed in this article

I...Rigoberta Menchu. An Indian Woman in Guatemala, Edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, translated by Ann Wright, The Thetford Press, Thetford, Norfolk, England, 1984.



Indian women and U.S. military attache George Maynes, observing a demonstration (1982).

Although circumstance has forced Rigoberta Menchu, a twenty-three-year-old Quiche Indian woman, to tell her story in Spanish, the language of her oppressors, she speaks it from her Quiche heart with an honesty, a directness, and a simplicity of language characteristic only of one who is close to the earth.

This is a personalized account of Quiche village life—their rituals, their strong sense of community, their profound respect for the earth and its animals, their intense disdain for the modern world, their solid determination to maintain their traditions, to keep their secrets. But it is also an account of yet another genocide of native peoples, a story of horrible torture and overwhelming personal tragedy.

When Elisabeth Burgos-Debray began to write down Rigoberta's story, she started with a chronology of events, but was forced to discard her ordered scheme, realizing that Rigoberta speaks from her own

sense of time and talks circles around an academic's sequence of things. We are thus able to enter her world on her own terms, and, in spite of the distance between her experience and our own, to sense the weighty significance of her way of life and to feel, as directly as possible, the enormity of her people's suffering.

Maize Is the Center of Everything

Guatemala has a majority Indian population of twenty-two different indigenous groups. The minority and ruling group is made up of the mestizos or ladinos, as they are called in Guatemala, people of mixed Spanish and Indian ancestry. The Indians originally lived in the lowlands, the rich coastal areas where they cultivated maize which, as Rigoberta explains, has always been the focus of her people's culture. "Maize is the center of everything

for us. It is our culture...We believe (and this has been passed down to us by our ancestors) that our people are made of maize. We're made of white maize and yellow maize. We must remember this."

As the fertile lands were taken over by the Spanish conquerors, the surviving Indians were chased further and further into inland regions and finally into the mountains, the altiplano, where they have struggled for years to make the land fertile enough to sustain them with maize. The coastal regions are now the large ladino plantations, the fincas, of coffee, cane, bananas, and cotton. Here the Indians are forced to spend many months of the year trying to earn enough money to be able to return to their villages in the altiplano where they harbor their secret rituals and maintain their culture as best they can. "We Indians have always hidden our identity and kept our secrets to ourselves. This is why we are discriminated against. We often find it hard to talk about ourselves because we know we must hide so much in order to preserve our Indian culture and prevent it from being taken away from us."

The Quiche way of life in the altiplano is intrinsically tied to the earth; their daily lives are measured and planned by customs, rituals and ceremonies which show their respect for and dependence on nature, on their past, and their ancestors.

Children are not merely tied to their blood parents, they are considered daughters and sons of the community and of the earth. The oldest man and woman in the village are considered the "leaders" or spokespeople of the community and are called the grandparents of all the children. (Rigoberta's parents took on this role in her village.) These grandparents pledge their support and the community's to a young pregnant woman, and in this way the community's concern begins before the child is born. When the woman is in her seventh month, Rigoberta explains, "the mother introduces her baby to the natural world, as our customs tell her to. She goes out in the fields or walks over the hills. She also has to show her baby the kind of life she leads, so that if she gets up at three in the morning, does her chores and tends the animals, she does it all the more so when she's pregnant, conscious that the child is taking all this in. She talks to the child continuously."

The Protective Spirit

The day that a child is born determines his or her nahual, the protective spirit which will accompany him or her throughout life, the life shadow. "The nahual is the representative of the earth, the animal world, the sun and water, and in this way the child communicates with nature. The nahual is our double, something very important to us. We conjure up an image of what our nahual is like. It is usually an animal. The child is taught that if he kills an animal, that animal's human double will become very angry with him because he is killing his nahual. Every animal has its human counterpart and if you hurt him, you hurt the animal too." A child is not told what his nahual is until he is older, but he often finds that he has come to form a special love for that aspect of the natural world or that animal that has been his spirit double since birth.

There are feasts and ceremonies in which the people pray to the earth for good harvests, when they ask her permission to plant their seeds, when they ask the sun for warmth and strength, and promise to respect the purity of water, for example, and the life in all earth's creatures.

The customs associated with marriage take time and involve the entire community. They begin with the "open door." where the young man and his parents come to the home of the young woman to ask permission for the young man to visit. The father of the young woman usually does not open the door at this first attempt, and the young man and his parents often make several attempts over a long period of time. After the young woman convinces her family that she is interested, the door is opened, small gifts are exchanged and other visits ensue in which the families and neighbors discuss their children's likes and dislikes; strengths and weaknesses.

There are a myriad of significant details associated with the first of several marriage feasts. For example, different family members are responsible for specific dishes, and the order in which people arrive, kneel, sit, or speak has special meaning. The mother of the young woman has a central role in this, initiating the ceremony by greeting the mother and grandmother of the young man. The grandparents then speak of the suffering and joy of their lives and of their ancestors' lives.

The young couple then prays to the earth and to the sun, the "heart of the sky." They pledge to defend their Indian ways against the incursions of the white man and the ladinos. They drink guaro, the homemade corn liquor,

at certain times throughout the feast, and they vow to defend this drink which the government has tried to outlaw. The ceremony lasts half a day, and afterwards the young man goes to live with the young woman's family for several months.

Modern, Store-Bought Products

Another ceremony takes place when the young couple make their vows before the elders of the community. They vow to have children so that their race may continue, acknowledging the difficulty and suffering of their present circumstance, but promising that they will not give up, that they will continue to follow their Indian ways.

A curious demonstration then takes place. Modern, store-bought products are displayed and contrasted with the things made and used by the people themselves. "The modern things that are shown are the fizzy drinks, bought guaro, eggs, chocolate, bread, coffee. According to them, coffee didn't exist before. Everyone gets together and gives their opinion of these things. For example, our grandparents say of Coca-cola: 'Never let your children drink this dreadful stuff because it is something which threatens our culture.' They say: 'These things are made by machines; our forefathers never used machines. The fincas mean an early death for our people. They provide the food for white people, and white people get rich from them.' We never let our children eat or drink these horrible things. This is what the ceremony is about."

A separate celebration takes place in the home of the young woman, where her family thanks her for all she's done for them. The father acknowledges that his responsibility for her is changed now, and the mother gives her the earthenware pots and mats she has made for her.

A Silly Piece of Paper

The final ceremony is the despedida, the farewell, when the woman is given presents of animals and pots of flowers, and she says goodbye to her family and to the community if she is going to live in another village. The women relatives again have a special role. The mother gives presents to the young man's family, and the grandmother speaks of the importance of the couple's bond.

According to Rigoberta, the grandmother also contrasts the flexibility of the Quiche ways with the rigidity of the white man's and the ladino's ways: "My children, these days to get married you have to sign a silly piece of paper. They say there is a mayor, files and papers even for our people. We didn't have this before. We got married the way our customs, our ceremonies laid down for us. We didn't have to sign any bits of paper. Under our ancestors' laws, men and women didn't separate, but if a woman was suffering, she could leave her husband. Now, she can't leave her husband because she's signed a paper. The church's laws and the ladinos' laws are the same in this—you cannot separate. But the Indian feels responsible for every member of his community, and it's hard for him to accept that, if a woman is suffering, the community can do nothing for her because the law says she cannot leave her husband."

The emphasis is always on the support that the community gives to the individual. There is a pervasive sense of interconnectedness in all the rituals and in all the ideas expressed: "The community gives as much support as they can to the young girl who goes away. The whole village is present when she leaves, and expresses its feelings. They say: 'Whatever happens, we are always here. You must lead your own life but if things go wrong, we will help you.'"

Throughout Rigoberta's explanation of Quiche customs, one is impressed with the amount of time and concern needed to fulfill certain rituals and maintain the strong sense of security and cohesiveness of the village. This, of course, is not separate time set apart from work schedules by the white man's clock, but time that is fully integrated into all aspects of their daily life. But as the government and the ladino world become more and more obtrusive, there is less and less time for certain customs. The people must arise in the middle of the night to complete a certain ceremony so as not to interfere with a trip to the finca, or Rigoberta will tell us that one of the marriage ceremonies traditionally was held on a specific day, but now "whenever there's time." And that, because of lack of time, they were unable to have one of the marriage feasts for her sister. With a foreign overwhelming sense of urgency, and their rituals amputated, the violent process of deculturation begins.

A Life of Degradation

Rigoberta tells us that the routine of going down to the finca starts for an infant within two months of birth, when the mother wraps her child in a shawl and carries it on her back. At the age of eight, Rigoberta was herself a wage-earning worker. The journey to the fincas is itself arduous and tortuous, a painful introduction to a life of degradation. Entire families would pile into covered trucks with their animals which they refused to leave unattended in the mountains. The journey from the village to the coast often lasted a day and two nights. Rigoberta remembers the endless hours, the inability to see out of the truck, the stench of animals and sick children.

On the finca, Rigoberta witnessed the death of her younger brother due to malnutrition, and the poisoning death of a young woman as a result of chemical spraying of the cotton fields. Another friend, a young mother who refused to have sex with a landowner's son, was hacked to death with a machete by his bodyguard.

The Indians grew to expect all manner of degradation on the fincas, but the memory of their mountain haven would sustain them. But finally the greed of the landowners reached even to the altiplano. Now that the Indians had made the land somewhat fertile, and now that the coastal regions had been developed, the potential profitability of formerly undesirable mountainous regions became apparent.

The same bureaucratic tricks played on the North American Indians by the U.S. and Canadian governments were (and continue to be) played here. Government officials took advantage of the Indians' ignorance of Spanish and of their laws. Rigoberta's father, Vicente Menchu, initiated the struggle against the government to protect his village. The Indians learned, after a myriad of bureaucratic hassles, that the governmental agrarian agency to which they had appealed for protection was in the pay of the landowners, that they had tricked them into signing a paper which gave the landowners access to their land, and that the lawyers they had hired were either corrupt or totally powerless.

The landowners' henchmen then began to raid the villages. They threw the people out of their homes, destroyed their belongings, stole their keepsakes, and killed their animals. ("To us killing an animal is like killing a person. We care for all the things of the natural world very much and killing our dogs wounded us very deeply.") The landowners told the Indians that they could stay on the land, but that it would not be their land, rather they would be working as peones on a large finca. Rigoberta tells us that her grandfather would "cry bitterly and say: 'In the past, no one person owned the land. The land belonged to everyone. There were no boundaries.'" And the old man vowed that if the landowners killed their animals that they must in turn kill the landowners. The Indians refused to accept the landowners' proposition, and the raids continued.

White Man's Religion

As the violence perpetrated against the Indians became more and more flagrant, Rigoberta and her family and community were forced to ignore their customs and traditional concerns and to succumb to the overriding obsession with their basic day-to-day survival. Rigoberta became a "catechist." She feels that she is able to use the white man's religion to her own ends, to adapt it to her own understanding of the world. "By accepting the Catholic religion, we didn't accept a condition, or abandon our culture. It was more like another way of expressing ourselves." Yet their desires could of course be negated by reality, and their dire circumstances could force just such a condition on them.

The inadequacies of Catholicism seem very apparent to her; she is able to involve herself and yet attempts to maintain a critical stance. "I- must say, however, that I think even religions are manipulated by the system, by those same governments you find everywhere. They use them through their ideas or through their methods. I mean, it's clear that a priest never works in the fincas, picking coffee or cotton...we don't need a Church imposed from outside that knows nothing of hunger. We recognize that the system has wanted to impose on us: to divide us and keep the poor dormant. So we take some things and not others."

Under constant threat of attack from the army and the landowners' men, the village began to organize itself. Rigoberta, acknowledging the contradictions involved in an Indian people converting to Christianity, says that her people identified with the spirit of revolt in the Bible. The community would gather together and discuss ways to

fight back. “We didn’t have firearms, we had only our people’s weapons. We’d invented a sort of molotov cocktail by putting petrol in a lemonade bottle. We had catapults too, or rather, they were the ones we’d always used to protect the maize fields from the birds which would come into the fields and eat the cobs when they were growing...We had machetes, stones, sticks, chile and salt.”

Schemes of Self-Defense

They planned an ambush using a young girl as bait for a soldier, and they captured him. They captured other soldiers in traps, ditches dug at the entrances of their huts. They found that they did not know how to use the soldiers’ weapons, and they did not know what to do with their prisoners. Rigoberta explains what happened with the first soldier: “We blindfolded him so that he wouldn’t recognize the house he was going to. We got lost...I found it really funny because we didn’t know how to use the gun. We were very happy, the whole community was happy. When we arrived with our captured soldier, the whole community was waiting for us. We reached my house. He stayed there for a long time. We took off his uniform and gave him an old pair of trousers and an old shirt so that if his fellow soldiers came back—we tried to keep him tied up—they wouldn’t know he was a soldier.

“... Then came a very beautiful part when all the mothers in the village begged the soldier to take a message back to the army, telling all the soldiers there to think of our ancestors. The soldier was an Indian from a different ethnic group. The women asked him how he could possibly have become a soldier, an enemy of his own race, his own people...Then the men came and asked him to recount his experience when he got back to the army...” The village decided to free the soldier, hoping that he could convince others not to take part in the destruction of their people, but they found out later that the army was convinced he was an informer and shot him when he returned.

The other villages organized different schemes of self-defense, and people from one village would go to another to share with others the tactics they’d found successful. As Rigoberta’s parents were considered the “grandparents” of the community, they had always been its spokespeople. They and their children truly became activists, traveling and spreading a political message to other communities and meeting with other Indians and Ladinos who had come to share a similar critique of the government.

As a result, their focus shifted from the detailed diversity of their village life to the universal generalities of political struggles between rich and poor, landowners and peasants, the educated and the uneducated. Certainly something profound, something primal, is lost in this process of organization, but there are few choices for native peoples who are caught in a grandiose machine of annihilation. Rigoberta and her family eventually became tied-in with a larger political organization, the clandestine CUC (The United Peasant Committee).

A Family Tortured

Her father’s early attempts to protect his village from the government and the landowners made him a wanted man long before his association with the CUC, but as he and his family became more organized, more vocal, and openly affiliated with larger groups, they lived with the constant threat of imprisonment or death.

In 1979, Rigoberta’s sixteen-year-old brother was captured, horribly tortured, and killed with a group of other Indians (twenty men and one woman) who were all accused of being communist guerrillas. Rigoberta describes the sordid details of her brother’s torture with simple, graphic, heart-wrenching words. He was imprisoned and tortured for thirteen days. The villagers, which included the families of the prisoners, were then ordered to attend a public exhibition of these victims where they were further tortured and later burned alive before the horrified gaping faces of their families and friends.

Rigoberta’s father, Vicente Menchu, was imprisoned several times before he was killed on January 31, 1980, with other Quiche peasants who had occupied the Spanish embassy in an effort to bring international attention to the repression of the Indians. They were peacefully protesting the kidnapping and torture of their family members and neighbors when the army opened fire on the embassy and bombarded it with grenades. All twenty-nine Indians were killed. One who had survived was kidnapped from his hospital bed that night and murdered.

Four months after the death of her father, Rigoberta's mother was kidnapped while secretly away buying supplies for the village. Her mother had been living an incredibly active life, traveling to other villages and talking about her experiences and the importance of women's role in the struggle against the government. This time the family members did not attempt to bargain with the military, for now they knew that it would be totally useless and that they would certainly be captured and tortured as well. Rigoberta's mother was raped by army officers, tortured, and suffered incredible agony; her body, covered with worms, was finally ravaged and eaten by dogs.

Rigoberta went into exile with her sisters for a period of time, but felt compelled to return to Guatemala and to work within the organizations fighting the government. There are many contradictions involved here—in the church's role, in adopting the language and the organizational skills of the world which is ultimately responsible for the annihilation of her people. But Rigoberta has so far managed to reconcile these contradictions in her own mind and to choose carefully from the options that have presented themselves to her.

The Process of Deculturation

Clearly, many religious and political organizations have the potential of saving Indian lives, of protecting vulnerable villages from the large scale, genocidal war tactics of the Guatemalan government; but they also, perhaps unwittingly, are the catalyst of a very dangerous process of deculturation. When the modern world is the monopoly of rich whites and ladinos who are the obvious enemy of tribal peoples, it is very simple to reject their ways; it is grossly apparent that their lifestyle threatens the earth-based traditions, and Indians are then steadfast in their desire to maintain their old ways. But when the modern world is served piecemeal to a people broken by torture and oppression, and offered by well-intentioned religious missionaries and political activists who only desire to help them, then the supposed advantages of that world are not so easy to reject; and the process of modernization is well underway.

It is hoped that the people of Guatemala can survive and not at the cost of their tribal diversity, their many rich languages and earth-centered traditions, that they can survive without being forced to define themselves according to the deleterious allegiances to modern religious institutions and political parties.

Keeping Secrets

Rigoberta Menchu seems highly cognizant of the dangers involved here, of the profound ramifications that even the smallest of choices may have. Her father mistrusted the education that the ladino world offered his children, and Rigoberta too is suspicious of all the "good" things the modern world makes available. She continues to wear her native dress, to rise early to make tortillas, and to refuse to use a mill to grind her maize, knowing full well that by holding on to that stone (which Quiche women have always used to grind maize), she is holding on to her Past, her traditions, the life-line of her people.

It is such resolve, such careful determination which will help Quiche culture to endure not only the horrendous governmental oppression, but the benevolent intentions of its modern saviors.

"...they've killed the people dearest to me...therefore my commitment to our struggle knows no boundaries nor limits. This is why I've traveled to many places where I've had the opportunity to talk about my people. Of course, I'd need a lot of time to tell you all about my people, because it's not easy to understand just like that. And I think I've given some idea of that in my account. Nevertheless, I'm still keeping secret my Indian identity. I'm still keeping secret what I think no one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets."

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