

Guatemalan Mayan Women *Threatened Peace and*

BY EGLA J. MARTÍNEZ-SALAZAR

The combination of racism, patriarchal machismo, capitalism, and residual colonialism with state terrorism constitutes an explosive and deadly force.

Au Guatemala où la paix est en danger et où règne la terreur, des groupes hétérogènes de femmes Maya contestent la citoyenneté exclusive, les droits et la démocratie. Des exemples tirés de leur association prouvent qu'elles sont en train de se constituer depuis la base, une citoyenneté inclusive.

Peace was signed in Guatemala in December 29, 1996, however, peace in a society torn by four decades of state terrorism, torture, genocide—and deep-rooted racial, ethnic, gender, class, and sexual colonial hierarchies of power—is not only the absence of bullets.

Although state terror as a state policy has been banned and some political spaces have been gained by the re-emergent progressive civil society in which organized Mayan women are becoming active citizens, peace is threatened by the still militarized structures of power.

In the tense Guatemala post-state terror, neoliberal programs, imposed in the name of globalization, are increasing historical and structural poverty, unemployment, illness, and eroding the already fragile labour, women, Indigenous, and environmental rights. In this climate, organized and heterogeneous Mayan women are challenging exclusionary citizenship. As Mouffe points out,

citizenship is not just one identity among others—as in liberalism—or the dominant identity that overrides all others—as in civic republicanism. It is an articulating principle that effects the different subject positions of the social agent ... while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty. (35)

Guatemalan citizens are subjects located unequally in structural hierarchies of power accordingly to their race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability. The process through which different subjects are mediated by and understand structures of power differ. A social agent's negotiations between a subject orientation towards practice and the structural limits that she/he faces is

never a fully conscious process. (Smith and Mouffe 64). This distinction between structural positions and subject positions is important for it is social agents with similar/common political identity—and not merely individuals who share common structural positions—who engage in political action. This political identity, however, is not chosen freely. What often counts as an “available,” “intelligible,” or “compelling” subject position is shaped by the power relations that structure a given political terrain (Smith and Mouffe 64). In this article, I argue that in Guatemala, organized Mayan women have gone through different processes of subject making in a terrain where colonialism, racism, and gender oppressions have interacted in unspeakable ways with state terrorism and the militarization of everyday life, especially in the last four decades.

The agency of Mayan women and other social actors is situated within unequal economic, political, social, cultural and linguistic power relations and ideologies of domination. In other words, organized Mayan women, with more or less emphasis, recognize that active citizenship requires material conditions which support and enable the participation of social actors in community and national civil societies (Pettman). Another important element, repeatedly acknowledged by Mayan women, is the tense contradiction of living in a patriarchal society which organizes gender relations unequally, while at the same time forging relations of socio-cultural and political solidarity with other peoples and movements to build a better society. Thus, their struggles are not separate or isolated from other social movements, nor are they merely focused on engendering civil society. However, as Guatemalan history shows, and as all Mayan women know, the combination of racism, patriarchal machismo, capitalism, and residual colonialism with state terrorism constitutes an explosive and deadly force.

Demanding state accountability for crimes against humanity

Many representatives of Guatemalan hegemonic powers, including the mainstream media, demand the majority of Guatemalans, and particularly survivors of state terror, to forgive and forget the contemporary holocaust they have experienced. This is especially so for the Mayan peoples. Soon after peace was formally achieved, the

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Guatemalan Congress promulgated a “law of national reconciliation” even though the human rights movement lobbied to guarantee justice and to impede impunity (Menchú 20). Nonetheless, Guatemalan survivors and the re-emergent civil society have not given up their search for justice and for the right to historical memory. Rigoberta Menchú, the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and a Mayan human rights advocate, exercising her right to seek justice in an international jurisdiction, presented a legal demand against the Guatemalan military and police officers to the Spaniard National Audience on December 2, 1999. This demand has been accepted and preliminary hearings are taking place for the Spaniard national Audience to decide a further course of action.

The three representative cases on which Menchú is basing her accusation are: 1) the illegal detention, forced disappearance, and extra-judicial executions of several members of her family; 2) the assault and fire of the Spanish Embassy on January 31, 1980, where 37 Guatemalan citizens, were burnt to death by members of the National Police; and 3) the assassination of four Spaniard Catholic Priests who worked for many years with Mayan communities on different projects. Nobody knows what the results of Menchú’s demand will be. Nevertheless, this demand has brought to light the institutional and societal racism and sexism of the powerful male elitist *Ladinos*.

The most openly racist and sexist response has come from the Ladino lawyer Julio Cintrón who is representing the military although he claims to act as a concerned citizen. In a six-page document, Cintrón denounces Menchú and states she is subjecting the Guatemalan nation to foreign domination. Cintrón is not alone. Menchú, in the eyes of many *Ladino*, especially the most powerful, does not belong to “their nation.” She is still the “other” — a member of “those people” responsible for the “backwardness” of Guatemalans. (The “No” vote on the referendum to recognize the Agreement on Indigenous Rights held in 1999 is example of this kind of ideology.) Moreover, the fact that Rigoberta is a woman who has refused to fulfil the submissive destiny that the patriarchal nation has assigned to her is, for the male representatives of the Guatemalan elites, unbearable. Mainstream *Ladino* journalists have also accused Menchú of dividing the nation and bringing memories that should remain in the past. (see *Prensa Libre* 1999; Marroquín). These journalists conveniently ignore the fact that Guatemala has been

divided for centuries and that Mayan peoples have been excluded from all decision-making powers.

From an active citizenship, rights, and democracy perspective, however, Menchú’s demand can be seen as a first step towards ending a culture of terror, and as a universal action against silencing crimes against humanity. Menchú, strongly supported by the Guatemalan human rights movement, is displacing the criminalization of grassroots socio-political and cultural citizenship, and is resisting the imposition of state terrorism’s legacy as the only valid discourse. Menchú’s action interrupts hegemonic racism as it creates and strengthens intercultural solidarity between Mayans and progressive *Ladinos*. It is also showing Mayan women that they are entitled full citizenship in a society that has denied them their basic human rights. After the genocide perpetrated against them, the Mayans should have been annihilated, politically and spiritually. The state thought that by forbidding people to remember they could kill the desire for radical freedom and equality. Menchú’s struggle is vivid proof of the contrary.

Democratizing the streets as valid places for constructing active citizenship

In the winter of 1999, while I was doing field research in Guatemala, I often heard it said that “these are times of proposing and not of protesting on the streets.” This was a sentiment popular among those leaders who patiently believed that the Peace Accords needed time to be implemented. However, peasants, the unemployed, Mayan widows and their children, *maquila* workers, and in general, those who had less practical faith in the “political will” of state agents and other elitist sectors, were feeling the pressing everyday conditions of an economy that has responded to hegemonic internal and external interests and is plagued with corruption and inefficiency. For Mayan and *Ladina* women peasants, their families and communities, there cannot be a grounded participatory democracy without social justice.

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On May 24, 2000, approximately 3,000 peasant women, Mayans and *Ladinas*, marched the Guatemala City downtown streets to demand the implementation of development programs that will allow them to break the vicious and structural cycle of poverty (Ramírez). This demonstration was organized by the National Coordination of Indigenous and Peasants whose basic premise is that "a culture cannot be developed and fully practiced when it does not have a solid base, because a culture does not exist

in the air. It is not an imagined thing, it has roots and those roots come from the earth" (Borrel *et al.*: 14). The Mayan and *Ladinas* marched to demand their basic human and collective rights as well as to challenge the discourse of the "new Guatemala of the Peace Accords" —highly publicized internally and externally as one of the "best models to achieve peace." This discourse has made many believe, especially in international circles, that marginalized people in Guatemala do not need more support as the Peace Accord has been signed. However, as Maya-Tzutuhil peoples of Santiago Atitlán rightly note:

There is not a long-lasting peace because it was signed in a contract. A contract can be dismissed or broken when it is convenient. There cannot be peace if we are hungry, unemployed, and sick and illiterate, after we have been at the hands of the military and now when we have countless widows, orphans and destroyed communities. We do not want to live what we lived but we cannot be condemned to passivity and fear forever. We want peace but peace is more than a signature. (Field notes)

Active Mayan and *Ladina* women and other social actors from below, are facing a renovated climate of harassment and threats in their communities and at the national level. The culture of terror is being revived from the shadows in which the repressive establishment acted with impunity. It is being revived through the "Local Committees of Security," the new name of the horrific civil patrols of the recent past.

A month before to the peasant women's march, Mayra Gutiérrez, a university female professor, "forcibly disappeared;" hundreds of protests have been ignored by authorities. A trade union leader was also assassinated. On July 21, two cooperative workers and community leaders were brutally killed by ten hooded men armed with Israeli-made Galil assault rifles (commonly used by army officers during the civil war). José Alfredo Quino and María Elena Mejía were director and secretary of CORCI, an organiza-

tion that deals with land disputes within Indigenous communities in the Sololá region. They also belonged to the Altiplano Farmers' Committee (AI 2000). "Local human rights groups fear that this may be represent a deliberate strategy intended to intimidate those who campaign for the defence of human rights in Guatemala into giving up their work" (AI 2000).

Mayan and *Ladina* peasants marching in a city where they are marginal actors, show once again that streets can be democratized in an era where street demonstrations are demonized. Through their agency, in a dangerous environment, these women are forging a culture of an active citizenship from below.

Against social amnesia— the right to memory, spirituality and social healing

State terrorism, torture, and genocide in Guatemala resulted in the destruction of thousands of families, affecting in particular the Mayan peoples, and specifically, Mayan women. These counter-insurgent policies also denied the right of Indigenous and *Ladino* peoples, "to live in a family context" (Das Gupta qtd. in Dua 242), and/or to form and keep a family, which in a racialized social formation is an important, if often tense and unequal space. By deliberately assassinating women, men, children and the elders, the militarized Guatemalan state forever altered the social fabric at all levels. Through the culture of terror and silence, this state also prohibited the right to mourn and to have a public cemetery, a sacred space where the memory of the dead can rest in peace. Funeral ceremonies are highly regarded in every culture, and when life is truncated violently through an orchestrated plan, the normal process of healing and having a funeral, is cruelly interrupted. This has happened in Guatemala, especially in Mayan communities, where many survivors could not identify the graves of their loved ones publicly because their remains were buried collectively or in clandestine cemeteries. On other occasions survivors buried their relatives' remains in haste in order to avoid further destruction of the corpses. In thousands of cases, however, survivors did and do not know where their loved ones' remains are as many were kidnapped and "disappeared forever." The painful search to reclaim the right to mourn as well as the right to sacred spaces and social healing, has been lead by Mayan women survivors, widows, orphans, sisters, and male community Mayan leaders supported by national and international human rights organizations. These partnerships are another small step towards inter-cultural formation of democracy.

Mayan women, mostly widows, who continue to demand exhumations of mass graves face an ongoing harassment. For instance, the Maya Achí Coordination of Widows, Orphans and Displaced People in Baja Verapaz (*Coordinadora Maya Achí de Viudas, Huérfanos y Desplazados de Baja Verapaz*), which among other things,

files complaints of clandestine graves and campaigns for their exhumation, has received threats. It has been reported that an ex-military commissioner "warned people in surrounding villages that another massacre would take place if they attended a ceremony organized by the Coordination for 15 September 1996 on behalf of the victims of a massacre in the town of Rabinal in 1982" (AI 1997: 1). They, however, continue their struggle.

The search for clandestine cemeteries is helping, I think, to defeat fear. Inspired by women such as those from the Maya Achí Coordination of Widows, Orphans and Displaced People as well as from the National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA), Mayan men and women survivors of the Rio Negro massacre—where 177 women and children were assassinated—worked together with forensic anthropologists to localize and excavate the remains of more than 143 human bones. They are demanding reparation for the physical, environmental, and psychological damages that the building of a World Bank funded dam project caused them.

The demand for the exhumation of mass graves, the march of Mayan and *Ladina* female peasants, and the calls for justice by Rigoberta Menchú, are only few examples of how Mayan women are contributing to forge a culture of a multi-dimensional citizenship from below. They are expanding in practice the notion of human rights, therefore socializing them, and building a grassroots radical democracy in the middle of a revival of the culture of terror. Mayan women are exercising their right to transform exclusionary citizenship, rights, and democracy which have been based on the construction of anti-democratic, racist, sexist, economically unequal and colonialist private-public spaces.

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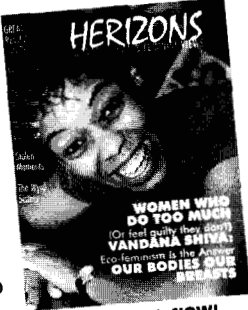
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