

THE MAYA OF GUATEMALA

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THE MAYA OF GUATEMALA

by Phillip Wearne

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MINORITY RIGHTS GROUP

is an international nongovernmental organization working to secure justice for minorities suffering discrimination and prejudice and to achieve the peaceful coexistence of majority and minority communities.

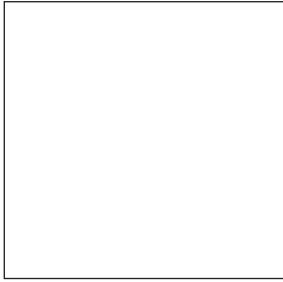
Founded in the 1960s, MRG informs and warns governments, the international community, nongovernmental organizations and the wider public about the situation of minorities around the world. This work is based on the publication of well-researched reports, books and papers; direct advocacy on behalf of minority rights in international fora; the development of a global network of like-minded organizations and minority communities to collaborate on these issues; and by the challenging of prejudice and promotion of public understanding through information and education activities.

MRG believes that the best hope for a peaceful world lies in identifying and monitoring conflict between communities, advocating preventive measures to avoid the escalation of conflict and encouraging positive action to build trust between majority and minority communities.

MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and has a linked international network of affiliates and partner organizations, as part of its channels for human rights advocacy. Its international headquarters are in London. Legally it is registered both as a charity and as a limited company under United Kingdom law with an International Governing Council.

THE PROCESS

As part of its methodology, MRG conducts regional research, identifies issues and commissions reports based on its findings. Each author is carefully chosen and all scripts are read by no less than eight independent experts who are knowledgeable about the subject matter. These experts are drawn from the minorities about whom the reports are written, and from journalists, academics, researchers and other human rights agencies. Authors are asked to incorporate comments made by these parties. In this way, MRG aims to publish accurate, authoritative, well-balanced reports.



Widow who lost her
husband, son and
daughters in massacres,
now living in poverty on
the outskirts of Rabinal,
Guatemala.

© SARA O'NEIL

THE MAYA OF GUATEMALA

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CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (1989)

Article 30

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

UNITED NATIONS COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS (1966)

Article 27

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.

ILO CONVENTION 169 (1989)

Article 7

1) The peoples concerned shall have the right to decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions and spiritual well-being] and the land they occupy of otherwise use, and to exercise control, to the extent possible], over their own economic, social and cultural development. In addition they shall participate in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of plans and programmes for national and regional development which may affect them directly.

Article 14

- 1) The rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands which they traditionally occupy shall be recognised. In addition, measures shall be taken in appropriate cases] to safeguard the right of the peoples concerned to use lands not exclusively occupied by them, but to which they have traditionally had access for their subsistence and traditional activities. (...)
- 2) Governments shall take steps as necessary to identify the lands which the peoples concerned traditionally occupy, and to guarantee effective protection of their rights of ownership and possession.
- 3) Adequate procedures shall be established (...) to resolve land claims by the peoples concerned.

Article 16

- 1) Subject to the following paragraphs of this Article, the peoples concerned shall not be removed from the lands which they occupy.
- 2) Where the relocation of these peoples is considered necessary as an exceptional measure, such relocation shall take place only with their free and informed consent. (...)
- 3) Whenever possible, these peoples shall have the right to return to their traditional lands, as soon as the

grounds for relocation cease to exist.

- 4) When such return is not possible (...), these peoples shall be provided (...) with lands of quality and legal status at least equal to that of the lands previously occupied by them, (...).

Article 28

- 1) Children belonging to the peoples concerned shall, wherever practicable, be taught to read and write in their own indigenous language or in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong]. When this is not practicable, the competent authorities shall undertake consultations with these peoples with a view to the adoption of measures to achieve this objective.
- 2) Adequate measures shall be taken to ensure that these peoples have the opportunity to attain fluency in the national language or in one of the official languages of the country.

CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION (1966)

Article 2

2. States parties shall, when the circumstances so warrant, take, in the social, economic, cultural and other fields, special and concrete measures to ensure the adequate development and protection of certain racial groups or individuals belonging to them, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. These measures shall in no case entail as a consequence the maintenance of unequal or separate rights for different racial groups after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved.

DRAFT UN DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (1993)

Article 2

Indigenous individuals and peoples are free and equal to all other individuals and peoples in dignity and rights, and have the right to be free from any kind of adverse discrimination, in particular that based on their indigenous origin or identity.

Article 3

Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Article 11

Indigenous peoples have the right to special protection and security in periods of armed conflict. States shall observe international standards, (...), and shall not:

- (a) Recruit indigenous individuals against their will into the armed forces, in particular, for use against other indigenous peoples; (...)

PREFACE

The 23 different peoples who refer to themselves as the Maya of Guatemala have been subjected to continual repression since the arrival of the Spanish conquerors. Their present leaders currently refer to the massacres of the present civil war as the 'third Holocaust' they have suffered since the Conquest. However, in the last few years, a new movement has appeared in Guatemala. The Maya, for so long the silent victims of genocide, are asserting themselves on national and international platforms. In Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Rigoberta Menchú, they have a powerful spokesperson, but that power rests on the growth of numerous social, political, academic and cultural organizations.

As this report goes to print, government and guerrilla delegations are discussing indigenous rights in the peace negotiations. A broad coalition of Maya organizations has presented a strong statement to both delegations containing a whole series of detailed demands which, if implemented, could create a new Guatemala. As this troubled land slowly emerges out of Latin America's longest civil war this century, the Maya are no longer content to accept an imposed solution to their problems. They have become actors in shaping their own destiny, a destiny which would include political representation, the return of expropriated communal lands, demilitarization of their communities (particularly the dissolution of the paramilitary civil patrols) and the introduction of Maya languages and culture into all levels of education.

It is in this context that MRG is publishing this new report on the Maya of Guatemala. It is intended to promote a greater understanding of the background to the current state of indigenous rights in the country. However, from the start of the project, those involved were concerned that it should also contribute to the strength of the newly found voice of the people themselves. For this reason, the report is based not only on research by its author and his numerous interviews with indigenous people over the last 12 years, it also draws on a seminar with a number of key Maya organizers. This is to allow these voices to speak for themselves and to help to promote the unity of Maya groups, which is so essential for effective action. The seminar was organized in collaboration with the Vicente Menchú Foundation, set up by Rigoberta Menchú. The ideas expressed at the seminar have influenced the whole publication and excerpts from the seminar's report are published as an appendix. In addition, the use of 'Maya' and 'Indigenous' rather than 'Indian' (which defines peoples in terms of Columbus' mistake), is a choice based on views expressed by Maya organizers.

There is a new urgency to resolving Maya demands for indigenous rights. Rigoberta Menchú has warned of the dangers of ignoring these demands on a number of occasions. She believes that the consequence would be an ethnic war in which the Maya would be fighting for their autonomy. The carefully developed peace plans of the last few years would lie in tatters. The current Vice-Minister of Defence has also pointed out that 'the guerrilla could surface in the next century as an indigenous guerrilla'. The experience of Mexican Maya groups across the border in Chiapas, where a guerrilla uprising emerged in early 1994, shows how little time there may be to avoid this scenario in Guatemala.

However, as the UN decade of indigenous peoples begins, an unprecedented opportunity exists to create a state which responds to its majority population. The responsibility to ensure that this happens is not only a Guatemalan one. The International Community, which has historically played such a big role in the present armed conflict, needs to play its part in creating and supporting of a lasting peace. In MRG's experience of accompanying the Maya, it has become clear that no peace can be created or maintained without the active participation of the people who have suffered most from the war. This report is published now to enable more decision makers to listen to those voices.

Alan Phillips

Director

October 1994

WHO ARE THE MAYA? Attempting a Definition:

‘An historical definition of a Guatemala Indian is easy’, commented one anthropologist in the course of this study. ‘Deciding who is one today, is not.’

That’s the key to our whole struggle. We need to recover not only our identity but the right to define that identity ourselves. It should not be left to some European or North American academic’, claims Alberto Esquit, a Maya archivist.

European *conquistadores* (conquerors) labelled them ‘Indians’; in their own words they are the nation’s *indígena*, *indigenes* or indigenous people. Ask an *indígena* in Guatemala to define themselves today and they will most probably do so by village or community first, linguistic group second and only by western perceptions of nationality i.e. Guatemalan third. What they mean by that is that they see themselves belonging to a community that shares basic cultural values by which it differentiates itself from the rest of society.

Increasing numbers of Guatemala’s indigenous people will simply say they are Maya – perhaps adding their linguistic group to the term. As such they are part of a broader community, the eight or nine million people who speak a Maya language across four countries – Mexico, Belize, and Honduras as well as Guatemala – and the more than 40 million indigenous peoples of the Americas. A massive exodus of refugees from Guatemala into Mexico and Belize in the 1980s and a predominantly Maya insurrection in Mexico’s southernmost state of Chiapas in January 1994, have reinforced a growing sense of ethnic identity across the region’s borders.

Today the territory of the Maya is increasingly defined by its frontiers during Mesoamerica’s pre-Hispanic Classic period (AD 200-900). It stretches south from the lowland flat of Mexico’s Yucatán peninsular through the Petén jungle to the mountain highlands of Guatemala. Today’s Maya are the descendants of the architects of the ‘lost’ jungle cities that stud this landscape, builders of such a classic civilization that their achievements in art, writing, architecture, astronomy and mathematics rival those of ancient Egypt and Classical Europe.

Since the Spanish conquest of Guatemala in the 1520s the nation’s indigenous people have waged a determined struggle to defend themselves and their heritage against the oppression of the *ladinos* – Guatemala’s dominant group whose cultural affiliation is Hispanic. Although identity is the key, justice is the aim.

While Spanish is Guatemala’s official language, the indigenous people still speak primarily in the glottal stops of one of 21 Maya languages. Though conquered in the name of Christianity, many Maya still perform their own ritual worship at shrines in the mountains or revere Christian saints as incarnations of Maya deities.

Indigenous *shamans* (magicians, diviners and those with medicinal powers) still count 13 months of 20 days and 13 ‘*katuns*’ or 20-year periods on one of the three Maya cal-

endars as part of their cyclical rather than linear concept of time. And many indigenous people wear one of over 100 brightly coloured, home-woven outfits bearing designs related to the hieroglyphic symbols on the Maya stelae of their ancestors’ jungle cities.

Culture and values: the most inclusive criteria

Yet history alone does not define an *indígena* or *ladino* today. In the past, some anthropologists have argued that the essential criteria are biological and racial, but all now accept that culture and language are the most inclusive definitions. As such, classification is even more of a problem. While most of those defined today as indigenous are descendants of the Maya, so, given the very small numbers of Europeans who emigrated to Guatemala, are most of Guatemala’s *ladinos* or non-Indians.

According to anthropologist Carol Smith,

‘What has distinguished Indians and non-Indians over time has not been biological heritage but a changing system of social classification, based on ideologies of race, class, language and culture which have taken on different meanings over time.’¹

In the colonial period, ‘Indians’ were those who paid taxes or tribute; *ladinos* were those who did not have such obligations, spoke Spanish and did not live in Indian communities.

In the nineteenth century the use of the term *ladino* became more generalized as part of efforts to create a national identity after independence from Spain in 1821. Since then Guatemalan national identity has been as much about excluding indigenous people as about including *ladinos*. The Maya struggle for civil and political rights is ultimately an effort to redefine the Guatemalan state as a plural, multicultural nation in which the much older Maya nation or nations can take an equal place.

Smith notes that today most Guatemalans point to cultural differences when distinguishing social groups but at the same time believe that culture merely embodies race and class. The problem is that no one single cultural criterion is definitive and that the criteria themselves are changing – not least amongst the Maya themselves. Cultural criteria like culture itself are hardly static and classification today is complicated by several overlapping sets of divisions.

If race does not define an indigenous person neither does birthplace, livelihood, language or dress. Geographically, Guatemala’s indigenous people are not confined to the western *altiplano* (highlands) as is often generally assumed; a small proportion, particularly in the country’s largest department, the Petén, are lowland Maya, practising the slash and burn, semi-nomadic agriculture of their cultural cousins in Mexico’s Yucatán.

Although overwhelmingly rural, not all Maya are peasant farmers living in the smallest units of settlement – *aldeas* (villages) and *caserios* (hamlets). Increasing numbers live in Guatemala City – 487,873 in the 1981 census, a figure that may now have doubled as a result of rural violence, lack of access to arable land and the rapid diversification

of Maya economic activity. Dress and language throw up similar problems. Many Maya speak perfect Spanish, albeit as a second language, and only a minority of men, though not women, now wear indigenous dress. In short, there are broad areas of cultural overlap. As one anthropologist concluded about many customs of both *ladinos* and *indígenas* 'there are differences only of degree'.²

Yet the need for simple yardsticks has in the past placed too much emphasis on external indicators – dress, language etc. when dropping these as part of a process termed 'ladinization' can in fact be little more than an indigenous self-defence mechanism. 'The only real definition must be values', claims Dr Demetrio Cotjé, a leading Maya sociologist. 'That means it is almost impossible for a non-indigenous person to define a Maya.'

The classification of Maya by Maya is reflected in a phrase frequently used by indigenous representatives in a seminar organized by the Vicente Menchú Foundation for Minority Rights Group (MRG) in February 1994. '*No se identifican*' – 'They don't identify themselves' – Maya representatives would say when talking about others who may speak their language but ascribe to *ladino* culture and values.

If self-identification is accepted as the key, the problem becomes clearer – namely the fact that the Maya have had very little say in defining themselves since the Spanish conquest. Guatemalan censuses rely on the subjective judgement of poorly-trained *ladino* officials. 'We ask the subjects' neighbours if they're indigenous, then consider dress, language and general socio-economic condition', one census official told this writer.

Such concentration on external indicators and what many see as the Guatemalan state's interest in underestimating the Maya population, meant that only 41.8 per cent of the population was classified as indigenous in the country's last census in 1981 – just over half the 78 per cent figure of 1774. Most independent observers put the indigenous figure today at 50-60 per cent of Guatemala's estimated 10.2 million population. Thus, even if it is true that the overall proportion of indigenous people is falling, population growth means that the absolute number is increasing steadily.

Ladinization: a valid concept?

Much of the problem revolves around ladinization, the known and visible tendency of Maya people to acculturate by becoming *ladinos* and dropping indigenous cultural traits or traditions – language, dress, religion, customs. There may be a variety of reasons for doing this but the common denominator is usually fuller participation in Guatemalan society. It is not always a conscious process, sometimes happening by default, particularly when an individual ends up living outside his or her community.

Given all the problems of definition, the trend is impossible to quantify or define and needs to be approached with extreme caution. In the first place it is not a one-way process as it might appear if too much emphasis is placed on external indicators. Traditionally, a Maya was considered most likely to ladinize after leaving his or her native community for the city or provincial capital. Yet there is now

some evidence that different ethnic groups in Guatemala City are participating in the recent growth in Maya consciousness by transplanting their village customs and traditions.

CONDEG, the National Council for the Displaced of Guatemala, is one example of a Guatemala City based organization which has a cultural as well as material agenda based on community organization in the Maya highlands. This sort of reverse ladinization – the Mayanizing of city life – could be seen as part of traditional resistance to racism and discrimination, as in some ways, could the whole process of acculturation or ladinization itself.

Secondly, whatever ladinization might amount to, its impact on the two sexes varies. In almost every situation, Maya women uphold their traditional culture – language, dress and spiritual customs – more vigorously than men. In the past this was assumed to be because they were unaffected by two of the most potent ladinizing forces: work in the cities or coastal plantations and service in the military or civil patrols. Over 60 per cent of indigenous women are monolingual and only 15 per cent literate.

Yet today, tens of thousands of Maya women work as live-in maids, assembly plant factory workers or as market traders outside their own communities. A trip to the main square of Guatemala City on a Sunday afternoon or an urban marketplace on any weekday will confirm how they continue to speak their own languages and wear their *traje* – indigenous dress. In their case, the external facets of their culture seem to have become vital defensive mechanisms against a doubly hostile world in which racism and sexism is the norm.

'When a Maya woman wears her indigenous dress she is stating where and to whom she belongs', observes Angela Pérez, a K'iche'²³ participant in Minority Rights Group's seminar. As such, indigenous dress has a custodial, ethereal quality. '*For me my traje is like a flag. It is not mine ... rather it belongs to a whole people. It contains so much, even mystical and spiritual value.*'²⁴

The problem with ladinization as a process is the same as cultural definition – both depend on definitive classifications of individuals. In reality, people can hold several identities at once or adopt different identities at different times. Such 'transcultural' groups are evident everywhere in Guatemala, particularly among the sons and daughters of first generation migrants to Guatemala City.

They include the university student or self-employed market trader who speaks Spanish and wears western dress in the city but switches to *traje* and a Maya language back in his or her village. It includes the migrant labourer who reverses the process to secure seasonal employment on coastal plantations. The key to this process is knowing how to be Maya or *ladino* when and where either is appropriate, whether for maximum advantage or mere survival.

Outlook: being someone rather than having something

Ultimately, perception and outlook on the world are probably the only criteria that allow 23 often widely differing groups to be classified together as Maya yet wholly apart

from *ladinos*. ‘Traditionally it has always been more important for an indigenous person to be somebody rather than have something’, is how one experienced Maya observer put it. ‘How a Maya is perceived by neighbours is vital.’

Indigenous thinking is undoubtedly marked by less materialistic, and to some extent less individualistic, qualities than the *ladino*’s western-oriented outlook. Jewellery, clothes, digital watches and cassette recorders, though highly desirable, are not deemed to be all important. Such desire as there is for economic success is usually linked to increasing prestige and respect in the community and must meet strict requirements.

*‘Approval is given only if the person’s activity is regarded as honourable and not exploitative. A person who uses his work position to take unfair advantage is severely criticized as “mala gente” (bad person), notes one writer.’*⁵

Respect, responsibility, honesty and hard work are the indigenous values that have been woven into a code from which there is, by tradition, little individual or communal deviation. Within this code striving and competition were unnecessary, simply because everyone who followed set patterns and precepts received status at some point.

Such respect and status have traditionally been won by community service in a system of religious brotherhoods known as *cofradías*. Originally established by the Spanish, *cofradías* vary widely but are always age-grade hierarchies that serve social and political functions as well as their patron saint. *Cofradías* involve *cargos* (literally burdens), namely responsibility for ritual customs and are usually accompanied by lavish entertainment.

As teenagers, members perform menial tasks like sweeping the market-place or running messages; *alguaciles* in their late teens or early twenties serve as village police officers. In their thirties, members might be expected to become a *regidor* (councillor), in their forties and fifties *cofrade* and finally *alcalde* (mayor) but only after serving the prescribed year at every level.

Women play a complementary but essential role in much of the ritual, being afforded the same status as their husbands or in some villages operating their own parallel, but separate, *cofradías*. *Principales*, older men who have graduated through the whole system, are the ultimate overseers, maintaining the vital links with the ancestors by virtue of their age and experience in the local *costumbres* (traditions) that govern the whole structure.

Land: defining identity

Land ownership, and attitudes towards land are another major facet of indigenous outlook. The vast majority of Guatemalan Maya are subsistence farmers, so their tiny plots of mountain land (*milpas*) are vital for the maize, beans and squash that are indigenous staples. But land means much more than mere subsistence.

Firstly it is identity. A *milpa* is a Maya family’s ‘symbol of their right to live’.⁶ For many, being a *milpero* (subsistence farmer) is an essential symbol of ‘*Mayanidad*’ or ‘Mayanness’. Farming is a traditional Maya activity and without land families or individuals often have to leave the

village and thus sever the ties that are the basis of their cultural identity. Inheritance from generation to generation means that land is a vital link with one’s ancestors and thus represents a Maya’s personal as well as cultural identity. Land is ‘who’, as well as ‘what’ he or she is.

Land also represents fertility and the ability to provide for children both as dependents (food) and adults (inheritance). Some indigenous communities also have a system of common land cultivation which reinforces the communal identity of individual towns, villages and linguistic groups. Land which may pass down from one family generation to another is often actually on a sort of indeterminate lease from the local authorities and can be redistributed as the need arises.

Secondly, land has religious significance. The land is the home of the most important Maya god, the omnipotent Tiox Mundo, World God or Holy Earth. A traditional Maya will consult a *shaman* on when to start any major part of the agricultural cycle, begin it with religious ceremonies in the *milpa* itself and apologize to the ground before breaking it in an effort to appease Tiox Mundo. Cultivating the land is the most profound communion with God the Maya can aspire to.

Thirdly, land produces the almost sacred ear of maize whose flour is patted into the *tortillas* (flat maize pancakes) that are the basis of every meal. Traditional indigenous belief maintains that if they do not eat maize flour they will somehow lose their *Mayanidad*. To Maya, you are quite literally what you eat.

The K’iche’ Maya’s sacred Popol Vul – sometimes referred to as the Bible of all the continent’s indigenous people and not just Guatemala’s largest Maya group – records how the first people were moulded of corn paste, an ideal substance after ‘The Makers’ had rejected mud as being too soft and wood as too hard. Traditional Maya do indeed see themselves literally and figuratively as ‘Men of Maize’ the title of one of the most famous works of Miguel Angel Asturias, Guatemala’s Nobel Prize winning novelist.

Perhaps more than any other attribute it is the Guatemalan Maya’s veneration of the land which remains intact today. It is amply illustrated by stories about a wealthy Maya businessman who returns to his village and *milpa* in a suit every planting season, and of the indigenous guerrilla fighters who deserted the revolution because it was harvest time. Many too, are the Maya economic refugees in Mexico and the United States whose sole aim is to return to Guatemala with sufficient funds to buy land.

The land takes on male and female identities at different times of the growing season and this general complementarity of Maya cosmology is reflected in the sexual division of labour. Women can and do inherit land but will generally tend only secondary crops – beans, squash, vegetables – and livestock. The division extends to other spheres – back-strap weaving is women’s work, foot-loom weaving men’s.

The cultural ideal is for Maya women to be supported throughout life by a succession of men – father, husband, sons – a macho conception adopted partially at least from

ladino society. With their responsibilities centred on the home, Maya women have traditionally suffered what Elena, an Ixil woman described as ‘a triple exploitation by virtue of being a woman, being indigenous and being poor’.⁷ Maya women are less educated, have less access to health care, work opportunities and the *ladino* world than their male counterparts.

However, all this gives women a vital role in the maintenance of traditional Maya culture. Usually monolingual and the primary socializers of young children, women ensure children are brought up speaking a Maya language as their first language. Women are also more likely to follow traditional Maya health practices related to pregnancy, childbirth and children’s illnesses.

The spirit world: religious, magical, supernatural

A third facet of indigenous outlook is an all-pervading sense of the religious, magical and supernatural.

‘Animals talk, plants have emotions, it is possible for a hoe to work alone; ... ghosts are always abroad; the soul of a person leaves his body for hours or days while he still lives. These are not simply superstitions, they are part of the life of the community and are normally taken into consideration in determining courses of action.’⁸

Central to these beliefs are the *shamans* or *Aj K’ijs* who divine, cure, interpret and advise, operating with much ritual by means of pieces of jadeite or obsidian, beans, seeds and copal – a Maya incense.

Most significantly, these *shamans* have inherited the 260-day religious calendar called the Sacred Round of Tzolkin. Each day in the thirteen 20-day months is given a name, deity, such as ‘Jaguar’ (in K’iche’ ‘Ix’) or ‘Monkey’ (‘Batz’), and a number from one to 13. The combination of these decides the day’s power for good or evil. ‘The day is the only way to decide what sickness the patient has’, a *shaman* confided to this writer. God is everywhere in nature in traditional Maya belief and is thus worshipped in rituals at shrines, on rivers, up mountains and in caves.

Animals and nature command love and respect as personifications of God – the sun and the earth being the most powerful. Many Maya pay their respects to the sun by genuflecting to it at dawn, and ‘Don’t Fall!’, the literal goodbye of several Maya languages, reflects the hope that you will not offend the Earth Spirit by tumbling, as much as the perils of walking the mountain trails that criss-cross the *altiplano*.

This all-pervading spirituality applies to medicine, the other main concern of the *shaman*. While health to a *ladino* can be just the absence of disease, health to an indigenous person is a sense of fulfilment or wellbeing. According to several doctors who have worked with the Maya, their routine, established codes of behaviour and task-simple culture play a crucial role in generating this sense of fulfilment.

‘The *indígena* is less violent and less prone to anger’, says one. ‘Their emotional balance is reflected in the almost total lack of accidents that they have, even when using

dangerous tools like machetes and axes.’ This ‘total’, relative concept of health leads to a shock being equated to a ‘loss of soul’ when a Maya feels ‘spiritually’ sick. Physical illness itself is often attributed to an imbalance of hot and cold forces in the body.

Survival and resistance: changing to stay the same

Such perceptions and values are apparently fundamentally irreconcilable with those of *ladino* society. Yet somehow both *indígena* and *ladinos* have coexisted for centuries, if not always peacefully, at least as separate cultural identities. How?

Historically, potential culture shock was cushioned by the fact that the society the Spanish *conquistadores* introduced had many structural similarities to that already in place. For the vast majority of indigenous people, the Spanish hierarchy just took the place of the Maya lords and priests, whose burdens and demands had been almost as onerous. The saints the new priests introduced became personifications of the deities already worshipped, while the cross had always represented eternal life and the four cardinal or compass points in Maya religion.

Ultimately, invasion, conquest and at least some degree of absorption was nothing new to the Maya. Since the zenith of the classical Maya period, 600 years before the Spanish arrived, the divided city states and kingdoms that made up Maya society had withstood countless invasions from Mexico and even neighbouring Maya groups.

Having survived previous conquests, the Maya, armed with their cyclical sense of time, convinced themselves that they would survive again. Once the invaders’ superior force had been demonstrated, they refined the old tactics, choosing to adapt and survive rather than confront a superior force directly. To the outsider, it looked like submission and subjugation. The very facts of Maya survival as culturally distinct entities tell another story – the power and effectiveness of the resistance.

Guatemala’s indigenous people sought to limit the powers of the state by economic and cultural evolution and diversification. What had been a weakness during the invasion, the disunity and enmity of different ethnic groups, now became a strength. Conquering Guatemala village by village was impossible. If we see Maya culture as plural and localized rather than generic and monolithic and the *ladino* state as weak and coercive rather than strong and hegemonic, we have the key to Maya survival.

Thus, as in so many other respects, appearance is not reality in Guatemala. From the conquest onwards Guatemala’s indigenous people have changed to stay the same, retaining a very adaptable, but still essentially Maya way of life. If today’s indigenous dress was imposed by the Spanish, as many maintain, it is now a symbol of ethnic pride, not submission. The *cofradías* and individual land ownership, both originally imposed, are now pillars of indigenous society.

The adaptation and evolution continue apace, perhaps faster today than ever before. Economic diversification away from agriculture, crop diversification away from the

traditional staples, mass migration away from ancestral lands, conversions to Protestantism, military repression and the enforced organization of civilian militias ... These are just some of the trends that will mould and adapt the traditional perceptions and beliefs listed above in the twenty first century and into the next *xu'tun* on the Maya calendar (beyond about 2008).



DISCRIMINATION AND RESISTANCE: The Maya in Society

Guatemala City is full of government officials who, when asked about the nation's indigenous people, will relate how during the colonial period the country's 'Indians' were parcelled out with *encomiendas* (royal land grants) as virtual slaves, herded into *congregaciones* (settlements) as a means of control, stripped of their lands and forcibly 'civilized'.

But although the same officials might admit to a little discrimination today, none will acknowledge that the structure of Guatemalan society is essentially the same now as when the country won independence from Spain in 1821. Certainly many *criollos* (Spanish descendants) saw independence as 'the only way of eliminating impediments such as regulations on the treatment of Indian labour'.⁹

Independence marked the beginning of efforts to create a national identity that specifically excluded the country's indigenous population. Their sheer numbers and the effectiveness of their resistance excluded the possibility of *mestizaje* (mixing), the cultural reclassification that went on in neighbouring Mexico as part of the development of the nation state in the early twentieth century.

One observer has stratified Guatemala's ethnic hierarchy thus: a small elite of whites of European descent at the top, followed by a group of mixed bloods known as *Guatemaltecos*, then urban *ladinos*, followed by rural *ladinos* with the Maya firmly at the bottom.¹⁰ Carib blacks, centred around Livingstone on the Atlantic Coast, and a sizeable Chinese community have to be fitted into this hierarchy somewhere – but certainly not below indigenous people. 'It's better to be black than Indian', as one foreign aid worker told this writer.

The ethnic pecking order almost exactly matches the socio-economic pyramid. Whites tend to be wealthy industrialists and agro-export businesspeople with big ranches to their names. *Guatemaltecos* tend to be professionals, military officers, lesser industrialists and farm owners, with urban *ladinos* being petty bourgeois businesspeople or white collar employees, and their rural counterparts subsistence farmers or small businesspeople. Maya are sub-subsistence farmers, small-time merchants, migratory farm workers and, in the cities, servants, maids, labourers and factory workers in the foreign assembly plants that have proliferated around Guatemala City in recent years.

It is this socio-economic pyramid that allows Guatemalans to define social groups by culture, believing that for the most part the latter embodies both race and class. There is however one important proviso. Many *ladinos* are as poor, landless and unemployed as their indigenous counterparts – in other words they are socially as well as racially, de-ethnicized Maya.

Ethnic discrimination is pervasive in Guatemalan society, as a few questions to almost any *ladino* will testify. Maya are more likely to be ignored at government hospitals,

overcharged in *ladino* shops and buses, sent to the back of any queue. But it's *ladino* comments that say most about the nation's racial discrimination. 'Indians' are dirty, lazy, indolent and, above all, primitive or backward. They need 'civilizing', in short, *ladinizing*. 'You can't teach the Indians anything. How many times have we tried to improve their way of life? They just won't change', is one typical *ladino* comment.¹¹

But the attitude runs deeper. Not content with labelling indigenous people '*inditos*' (little Indians) – itself an insult – *ladinos* often equate them with animals, a reflection of early Spanish colonists' doubts about the humanity of indigenous peoples. 'If you're not careful you will be ruled by the mules', one *ladino* warned some younger colleagues in reference to a group of Maya.¹² 'They're not children, they're Indians', one ranch owner's daughter recalls being told by her father, when worrying about an outbreak of disease among Maya labourers' children.¹³

Culture of resistance

In the light of such conditions it would be all too easy to see indigenous society in Guatemala today as defeated and oppressed. Yet given that modern Maya culture is, for all its adaptation and evolution, based on that of the ancient Maya, what might be termed a culture of conquest should more accurately be seen as a culture of resistance. After six centuries, indigenous people are still by most calculations, in the majority within Guatemala.

The main embodiment of cultural resistance remains the indigenous community, based on a rural *municipio* – the smallest administrative division. Such entities, described by one anthropologist as 'a closed, corporate, peasant community', may actually include a minority of *ladinos* who are not considered part of the community.¹⁴ But in terms of resistance, the indigenous community has served as an effective protection against state power – diffusing, counterbalancing and even co-opting any efforts at incorporation into a racist, nation state.

Co-option is certainly very evident. In highland Guatemala, western technology, education or practice is constantly being adapted by Maya communities to better protect their culture rather than undermine it. Close study of this process has led historian Jim Handy to conclude that Maya communities in Guatemala are not completely closed but are more akin to valves that can open and close to let in or expel the outside world and its technology as required.¹⁵

In the 1930s, Maya from Nahualá petitioned President Jorge Ubico to remove the 'corrupting influence' of *ladino* post and telegraph officials. When Ubico refused, community leaders suggested sending their own most intelligent youths to Guatemala City to be trained for the posts. The President agreed.

A more recent parallel is the growth of Maya language community radio stations throughout the highlands in the past 20 years. The advent of radio was initially expected to change Maya society for good by speeding up the process of *ladinization* in bringing the outside world into isolated communities. Radio did bring change but in some ways the reverse of that anticipated. It has in fact served to

reinforce Maya culture by broadcasting news, literacy classes and items like traditional health care tips to a largely illiterate audience in their own language.

Much of this success is attributable to the sense of identity of Guatemala's Maya. While Maya communities have traditionally acted as separate, corporate units in struggles with the state, the Guatemalan government has almost always acted against all Maya as a class. The result, as Carol Smith has pointed out, is that Guatemalan governments have rarely been able to persuade or coerce indigenous people to follow any general state policy, least of all those perceived to be against their interests.¹⁶

Smith and others have argued forcefully that far from being mere creations of the state and economic order, corporate indigenous communities have through their resistance, been a key player in shaping the very nature of the state. Thus the Guatemalan state is weak in so many respects simply because it enjoys so little control over those groups whose apparent weakness should make them the most easily governed.

Equality: a thin veneer

Guatemala's racism is made particularly insidious by the thin veneer of equality traditionally proclaimed by the state. The 1985 constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of race, colour, economic or social condition, while four articles on the subject of indigenous communities (66-70) recognize every form of indigenous right and even commit the state to providing the land considered necessary for indigenous communities to 'develop'.

Such concessions have since 1985 provided Maya communities with new forms of resistance. Political pressure through popular organizations, local mayors and new cultural rights groups has begun to expose the gap between appearance and reality, increasing the cultural consciousness of many Maya in the process. 'Constitutional articles on land, human rights, language rights or anything else provide the legal opportunity to campaigns for laws to give them effect', notes one Kaqchikel activist. 'It enables us to expose the Guatemalan state for what it is.'

Part of the facade is the Guatemalan state's cynical exploitation and co-option of elements of indigenous culture. The government's National Indigenous Institute's slogan refers to Maya culture as 'the base of our nationality'. In 1976 Guatemala won the Miss Universe native costume competition, the government having entered a white-skinned model to display the Ixil women's ceremonial *huipil* (embroidered overblouse).

The Maya numbering system and Tecún Umán, the K'iche' chief killed fighting off the first Spanish invaders, appear on national bank notes while in recent years hundreds of indigenous people have been killed by the Kaibiles – a Guatemalan army corps named after a Maya chief from the Yucatán in Mexico. Maya decorate tourist posters, postcards, and even advertisements. In short, they are used whenever there's some advantage in terms of international recognition or financial profit.

The basis of Guatemalan racism appears to be fear and greed – a classic complex of a rich exploitative group that has grown paranoid as a result of its traditional numerical

inferiority. As in other minority ruled societies this fear has justified itself by creating prejudices about 'the natives', the trepidation being compounded in Guatemala by the stubborn pride and determination of the Maya not to be incorporated into a *ladino* state which offers them nothing but abuse and second class citizenship.

Measuring discrimination: health and education

Measuring discrimination is intensely complicated. Health care is one area often cited, the discrimination being both economic, with rural – and thus principally indigenous – areas receiving virtually no attention, and cultural in that indigenous ways and medical thinking are not considered. Despite their concept of total health, Maya are far from healthy physically.

Life expectancy among indigenous people is 17 years lower than that of *ladinos* – 47 and 48 years for men and women compared to 64 and 65.¹⁷ Although child mortality rates in the 10 years to 1990 dropped from 128 per 1,000 children under five to 102 per 1,000 between 1980 and 1990, regional breakdowns make it clear that most improvement has been in urban, predominantly *ladino*, areas. Among those births registered in rural areas it is clear that the rate remains well over 100.¹⁸

While national malnutrition rates in children run at 37 per cent, medical workers running a vaccination campaign in rural areas in 1991 found that 76 per cent of children were malnourished, 41 per cent severely.¹⁹ The figures are hardly surprising when compared to those for basic services. In urban areas 91.8 per cent of the population has access to running water, in rural areas 42.6 per cent.²⁰

There is some truth in the government's current claim that there are now health posts and medical centres throughout the indigenous highlands. The real problem is an almost total lack of materials and staff combined with the Maya belief that whatever is offered does not meet their needs. In 1980, the Ministry of Public Health received 12.5 per cent of the total budget; 10 years later that was down to just 9.4 per cent.²¹

Such cuts, just as need soared as a result of the violence, economic austerity, displacement and the flight and murder of trained medical personnel from the *altiplano*, meant that in the late 1980s Guatemala had the world's fifth lowest rate of expenditure on social programmes in relation to gross national product.²²

Though more than 60 per cent of the population (overwhelmingly indigenous) live in rural areas, nearly 70 per cent of the country's total health resources are spent in Guatemala City, 80 per cent of that total on hospitals. Some 80 per cent of doctors and 56 per cent of nurses work in the metropolitan area.²³ In Alta and Baja Verapaz, two of the departments with the highest concentration of indigenous people in the country, there are 1.1 doctors per 10,000 people. In Guatemala City there are 28 doctors for the same number.²⁴

The lack of investment in primary health care – the cheapest form of health care – is illustrated by the main causes of infant mortality – diarrhoea (30 per cent), respiratory

infections (23 per cent) and childbirth problems (20 per cent).²⁵ 'Most indigenous kids die for want of five cents worth of medicine or the most elementary medical care', concludes one foreign doctor working in the *altiplano*.

Education provides a similar illustration of the central government's discriminatory integration strategy and resource allocation. Even when schools are available in the locality, Maya often do not attend because from the earliest age they are needed to help work the *milpa*, wash, weave or care for younger children. School hours do not match their needs; in some secondary schools uniforms are compulsory and indigenous dress is not permitted, and – above all – teaching has traditionally been in Spanish; a 'Castilianization' process that could be culturally brutal. In addition, few see the point of what was taught in the urban-orientated curriculum. As a result a mere 23 per cent of indigenous people over seven are literate, compared to more than 50 per cent of the population as a whole.²⁶

Land distribution: root of poverty

Poverty is the root cause of this plight. In 1991, the Guatemalan government's own planning agency, SEGEPLAN, estimated that 89 per cent of the population lived in poverty – unable to meet basic material needs, e.g. housing, transportation, medical and food costs.²⁷ But SEGEPLAN also estimated that 67 per cent of the population lived in extreme poverty – i.e. unable to meet even food costs. The World Bank's own estimates echo these figures and illustrate how they have been swollen by the neo-liberal economic policies and budget cuts of the last decade. According to the World Bank, the proportion of Guatemalans living in poverty rose from 63 per cent in the early 1980s to 83 per cent by 1987; the proportion living in extreme poverty doubled from 32 per cent to 64 per cent in the same period.²⁸

Real wages have been falling in Guatemala since the 1970s but the rate of decline accelerated rapidly through the 1980s. During that decade, wages plunged 35 per cent in real terms with the real minimum wage reduced by nearly 50 per cent.²⁹ Even the Ministry of Labour estimates that compliance with minimum wage levels by employers is only about 60 per cent in urban areas and 15 per cent in the countryside.³⁰

At the heart of Maya poverty lies land distribution. A report by the United States' Agency for International Development (USAID) showed that in 1979 – the last year in which a comprehensive agrarian survey was completed – Guatemala had the worst land distribution ratio in Latin America.³¹ There is every reason to believe the situation has deteriorated further. Two main tendencies in land distribution have been clear since 1950.

Firstly, land is becoming concentrated into bigger units as agro-industrial mechanization for export crops, unrestrained by any form of government intervention, exerts an ever tighter grip. In 1979, 65.4 per cent of the country's farmed land was made up of plots of 45 hectares and over.³² This was more than double the percentage recorded 15 years earlier.

However, such figures did not mean that this land was

actually being used. The continuing slump in the price of Guatemala's traditional cash crop exports – coffee, cotton, sugar – during the 1980s meant that more land than ever was lying fallow, reducing even the seasonal labour opportunities for the landless. In 1991, the Guatemalan government itself calculated that 52 per cent of cultivable land was lying fallow or being under-utilized.³³

Secondly, the smallest farms are getting smaller, their overwhelmingly Maya occupants being forced to become subsistence farmers or landless labourers. In 1950, there were 74,269 plots under 0.7 ha. By 1964 this number had climbed to 85,083 and by 1975 the figure had virtually doubled to 166,732. The acceleration in this trend continued, with the number reaching 250,918 in 1979 when these micro plots accounted for 41.1 per cent of the country's farms yet only 1.5 per cent of the country's cultivated area.³⁴

By 1979, 89.8 per cent of Guatemala's farms were smaller than the 7 ha considered the minimum necessary to support the average rural family.³⁵ It was estimated that by 1988 some 98 per cent of indigenous families were landless or did not own sufficient land to support themselves. No wonder then that the Guatemalan Bishops Conference started their Joint Pastoral Letter *The Cry for Land* (published February 1988) with: 'The cry for land is without any doubt the loudest, most insistent and most desperate cry to be heard in Guatemala.'

Controlling land, controlling labour

The Spanish colonists' basic formula had been to control labour by controlling land. Expropriation of indigenous land was designed to create a landless workforce which, deprived of its livelihood, would have to work on colonial plantations. This basic equation has become more pronounced since independence. When coffee, still the country's most important agricultural crop, was introduced in the late 1870s, it needed both intensive labour to harvest the crop and the higher mountain land onto which the Maya had retreated to escape Spanish and *ladino* colonization.

Orders were issued by President Justo Barrios requiring magistrates and departmental governors to surrender 'the number of hands to the planters that they asked for'. Vagrancy laws were passed requiring 'Indians' not working on plantations to work 40 days a year on government projects such as roads and railways. Simultaneously, over 100,000 acres of indigenous communal land were expropriated on the grounds that they were not being productively employed.

Communal lands were simply made illegal – a cultural assault of the first order given that the communal land system was a cornerstone of indigenous society. The law not only forced families to own land individually, it obliged them to divide already small plots among all their offspring and increasingly swell the pool of migrant labour the policies of the agro-export dominated government demanded.

Today, as many as 650,000 highland Maya – men, women and children – make the annual migration to plantations, either on the coast or closer to home. Whole families are transported in open trucks to coffee, cotton or sugar cane

fincas (plantations). Many are housed in *galeras* (open sleeping barns) where privacy and sanitation were recently described by the International Labour Organisation as 'totally unacceptable with regard to hygiene, health, education and morality'.³⁶

Many Maya return home no better off financially, while sickness – both on the *fincas* and on return home – is rampant. Highland people are particularly susceptible to the malaria of the coast and the pesticides – many of which are banned in developed countries – sprayed from aeroplanes while they are working. Once again, official legislation means next to nothing. Work code regulations on dismissal, days off and minimal health care are not enforced and few *fincas* pay the legal minimum wage.

Although there are no definitive figures, wages have undoubtedly been pushed down by an oversupply of labour throughout the 1980s. Land concentration, the social dislocation brought on by the war, the virtual elimination of key cash crops like cotton as a result of a prolonged price depression and increased mechanization, have all played their part.

Avoiding land reform

Today the Maya are losing their land to *ladino* landowners by only slightly more subtle derivatives of the direct expropriation of colonial times. The minimal availability of credit has been made worse by the government budget cuts of the 1980s, meaning that more Maya have to pledge their land as security and often lose it as a result of crop failure or other expenses. The fact that many Maya are either too poor or too unaware of their rights to go to the provincial capital to pay a lawyer to draw up a land title means that judicial claims by big landowners are often upheld.

Although there is a government agency and law to rectify the problem, the National Institute of Agrarian Transformation (INTA), the agency is chiefly dedicated to distributing state lands or title to the one-third of the national territory opened up by the Northern Transfer Strip road and other highways in the Petén.

INTA is left to grossly overestimate the effects of its work to retain any credibility at all. In 1978 the agency boasted the handout of 4,962 land titles, covering 41,130 ha.³⁷ The real figure, according to a subsequent study, was 1,960 titles covering only 14,549 ha. In 1992, the agency claimed to have handed out 7,619 titles to 41,905 ha, most of which were in fact provisional titles to individuals already occupying the plots concerned.³⁸

INTA officials are the first to admit that at best they are only skimming the surface of the problem. 'It's acute and getting worse. There's really very little land for distribution and land invasions are adding to our problems', Victor Hugo Juárez, INTA's public relations chief told this writer in 1994.

As stocks of available state lands have declined and popular pressure for land reform increased, successive governments have been forced to look for other solutions. The most notable new development has been the purchase of minimal amounts of land by state agencies, CONATIERRA under the Vinicio Cerezo government and FONATIERRA under Jorge Serrano.

In 1992, the government claimed that 4,462 ha were purchased for redistribution.³⁹ The move imitated the approach adopted by the Penny Foundation, a private sector organization funded by USAID which since 1984 has been trying to deflect the growing clamour for land reform by demonstrating how market mechanisms can address the problem.

Although most of the new acreage in the north of the country in the 1970s and 1980s was handed out to government officials and military officers, there were attempts to settle landless Maya in cooperatives in three specific colonization areas. The project, however, ran into both cultural and economic problems. Since land is so integral to their identity, many Maya were reluctant to relocate.

Those who did relocate usually found themselves abandoned without the most basic necessities, settled on poor limestone soil that was, even in the government's opinion, useless for regular crop production. Disappearances and killings in the area intensified as the land, much of it suitable for big cattle ranching, increased in value. Many Maya settlers simply became the cheap labour force beef production and construction projects in the area demanded.

Resistance in practice

Land seizures, preventable disease, illiteracy ... the main means of resistance to such oppression have been the closed, or semi-closed, communities that are Maya villages. It would be a huge error to underestimate the scale, diversity or success of indigenous resistance through such cultural enclaves. In education, Maya have set up their own schools, pressed for bilingual education, and pushed sons and daughters into universities.

In health care, primary promoters have been trained with help from outside agencies and there has been a massive upsurge in interest in traditional Maya medicine, with clinics established and young *shamans* trained. The land issue has been diffused through the diversification of the economic base with commerce, tourism, non-traditional crops, artisan production, factory and informal sector jobs in the cities all now important new sources of income for indigenous people.

All these self-help efforts by Maya people to alleviate the worst effects of their marginalization must be seen as different means of resistance. So must the quest. It is the demand for education, health care and work that has helped fuel the massive surge in Maya migration to the cities in the past 15 years. The few surveys done on what are now termed the urban indigenous have shown how often words like *superar* or *mejorar* (to improve oneself) are used when asked the reasons for their migration.⁴⁰

It is just one of the many ironies of Guatemala that *ladino* racism has contributed enormously to the preservation of indigenous culture, its insults and discrimination leading Maya to seek refuge in their own, known world. Given the nature of the state, it is easy to see why Maya see *ladinos* as '*sin vergüenza*' (without shame), associating all dishonourable, exploitative qualities with them. Such feelings are usually hidden, especially from foreigners, but, as one writer noted, in the security of his/her own home, a Maya will often reveal more.

*'The same man who didn't seem to understand that he was being insulted and laughed at during the day will carry on for half an hour about the uncultured brutes who have never learnt to keep their mouths shut.'*⁴¹

The passive, stoic Maya is as much a myth as the all-powerful *ladino* state; by the middle of the twentieth century, both were undergoing some examination.

1944-76 GROWING AWARENESS: The Political Spring

On 30 June 1944, buffeted by the changes that had hit Guatemala during the Second World War, the 13-year old dictatorship of Jorge Ubico collapsed. Elections were scheduled for December but General Federico Ponce Vaides who had replaced Ubico threatened to cancel them and tried to force congress to declare him President.

Indigenous communities had been promised at least some of the extensive German-owned coffee farms that had been confiscated during the war, and Ponce Vaides' threats sparked a series of uprisings in Maya towns against *ladinos*. The most notable was in Patzicía, Chimaltenango where an indigenous rebellion was put down at the cost of scores of lives. The massacre had a lasting impact, according to Alberto Esquit, a Patzicía resident and participant in the Minority Rights Group seminar. 'People concluded that there was no point in organizing or getting involved with political parties.'

Despite such sentiments the uprisings had an immediate impact, helping to ensure that elections took place. In early 1945, a Guatemalan university professor, newly returned from exile in Argentina, was inaugurated as President. Juan José Arévalo had stood on a platform he described as 'spiritual socialism' – the repeal of obligatory labour laws, democratic organization of municipal governments and political pluralism.

Arévalo was a reformist who placed great emphasis on the importance of dignity and 'the psychological liberation of man'. His government began what became known as '10 years of spring' that marked the transition from a form of feudalism to modern capitalism.

Under Arévalo, and more particularly his successor, Jacobo Arbenz, national political parties spread to indigenous *municipios* and *aldeas*, a rural labour movement sprang up and finally in 1952, an agrarian reform law was passed. One hundred thousand families received land, many Maya won control of their own towns and villages for the first time, and labour organization brought enhanced bargaining power.

Culturally, the reformists' motives were dubious. The constitution still referred to the 'integration' of indigenous people. The prevailing philosophy was what had become known as *indigenismo* – a humanitarian perspective that had emerged in Latin America in the late nineteenth century and made some inroads into intellectual circles in Mexico and Guatemala by the 1930s. Richard Adams described it thus:

*'A mestizo ideology that presented Indians as having been long exploited but of intrinsic individual worth, in need of education and of being raised to their proper place in civilization.'*⁴²

Paternalistic though it was, a new generation of indigenous leaders blossomed in this political spring, a generation that would be nurtured by the Guatemalan Christian

Democrat party (DCG) – founded in 1954 – and a new breed of Catholic missionaries. The Arévalo and more particularly Arbenz reforms convinced many Maya that broader social change was possible. In doing so they became the foundation of the new national Maya consciousness that is so evident today.

Catholic Action and the Christian Democrats

In the mid 1950s, in response to such 'communist' threats as Jacobo Arbenz, Guatemala's then Archbishop, Monsignor Rossell y Arellano, secured government permission to launch *Acción Católica* (Catholic Action), a lay catechist movement designed to re-establish Catholic orthodoxy by wresting control of local religion from the *cofradías* as well as acting as a buttress against revolutionary activity. Highland Guatemala was carved up among foreign missionary orders.

Spanish Sacred Heart priests went to El Quiché, American Maryknollers to Huehuetenango, Carmelite Spaniards and Italian Franciscans to Sololá. The 119 foreign clergy in Guatemala in 1944 soared to 434 by July 1966. By 1969 the missionaries boasted an estimated 4,100 Catholic Action *catequistas* (catechism teachers) in the three towns of the Ixil area of El Quiché alone.⁴³ By 1981, over 50 per cent of the adult population of the capital of El Quiché, Santa Cruz, were members of Catholic Action.⁴⁴

Catholic Action certainly changed indigenous communities but not in the way Guatemala's church hierarchy had intended. Many of the new missionaries won favour and acceptance by showing a keen interest and deep respect for indigenous culture. They lived in Maya villages and learned their languages. Catholic Action was presented more as a correction of previous practices than a significant break with the past, but in any case many Maya welcomed the chance of escape from the *cofradía* system and its burdensome financial obligations.

Catholic Action gave many villagers the chance of the respectable withdrawal they had been looking for, requiring no expenditure and only a few hours a week. But the conflict between Catholic Action and the *costumbrista* (tradition following) *cofrades* produced what has been termed the first qualitative alteration of world view in many indigenous communities.

The *principales* (elders) represented the ancestors who, in turn, embodied the community's history. Eroding their power opened the way for a redefinition of the community, in particular its relationship to ancestral lands. All this happened as the land base began to erode more rapidly than ever before and communities and individuals sought other means of earning a living – sometimes partially or wholly outside the community. Agriculture alone could no longer define community or ethnicity which increasingly had to be seen in relation to the outside, *ladino* world.

Being a member of Catholic Action was also about much more than religion. Co-op membership, literacy class participation and health education often went hand in hand with the movement in communities where the priest or sister was usually an agriculturalist, basic doctor and

teacher all rolled into one. Finally, Catholic Action offered further educational opportunities at the movement's schools, usually in the nearest provincial town.

As its name suggests, the development of Christian Democracy to some extent mirrored that of Catholic Action. The DCG also started out as an anti-communist 'buttress'. In 1954 Arbenz was overthrown in a CIA-backed military coup after confronting US multinationals over landholdings. The DCG sought a 'third way' between the rabid right-wing fanaticism of the party that legitimized the 1954 coup, the National Democratic Movement (MDN, later MLN) and the communist Guatemalan Workers Party (PGT) founded a few years before.⁴⁵

Aided by the defection of a faction of its more recalcitrant anti-communists in 1964, the DCG began to adopt more progressive 'developmentalist' positions and gradually built up support in indigenous areas. Like Catholic Action, it encouraged subsistence farmers to form cooperatives or Christian-orientated trade unions with funds secured from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Also like Catholic Action, the DCG found that co-ops and trade unions caused serious conflicts with local powers and vested interests.

This in itself spurred the radicalization of individual members, and in 1965 Catholic Action organizers formed a *campesino* (peasant) league, the *Liga Campesina*, as a defence mechanism. The Christian Democrats tried something similar with the indigenous-dominated *Federación Guatemalteca de Campesinos* (FGC), a peasant union which by the late 1960s had become an important focal point for campaigners.

Land pressure spurs changes

Both the Christian Democrats and Catholic Action benefited from a new openness to change brought about by basic changes in Maya communities. Land was again the key. A population explosion that saw the number of Guatemalans rise from 2.8 million in 1950 to 7.5 million in 1981 produced intense pressure on land – most particularly indigenous land. As families divided smaller plots amongst larger families, the departments with the highest proportion of indigenous residents became the areas with the highest percentage of smallest farms.

A boom in commodity prices fuelled a boom in land prices as the commercial farming sector looked for the new territory that fertilizers, new crops and technology made viable. As peasant farmers found it harder to make any real living from agriculture, more and more highland plots fell into big landowners' hands. Peasant farms lost 25 per cent of their acreage during the 1970s while the area devoted to export crops soared 45 per cent.⁴⁶

Wage labour became more common and, as the 1964 and 1973 censuses show, thousands of Maya men and women became a cheap labour supply for the plantations or burgeoning industries of Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City. Ties to community and culture were strained but, at the same time, this more mobile, fluid group was particularly receptive to new ideas in what was, effectively, a new world.⁴⁷

As Maya began to work with poor *ladinos*, racial barriers began to break down. Maya who stayed at home found it

essential to diversify into cash crops or develop other paying work. Fertilizers raised expectations and yields as vegetables and other non-traditional crops caught on. Whole villages developed specialized rural industries and something of a small entrepreneurial class developed in many Maya communities.

The vagrancy laws, which as late as 1935 had decreed that those working less than 1.6 *manzanas* (1 *manzana* = 1.73 acres) must work 150 days on the plantation, became unnecessary as an annual or even biannual 30, 60, or 90-day migration to the plantations became an essential part of subsistence living. Yet harvest-time migrations to the *fincas* could not solve the real problem – poverty. While Guatemala enjoyed economic growth rates averaging 5.5 per cent in the 1960s, and even 7.8 per cent in 1977, the daily wage rate of a rural family averaged 1.15 quetzales in 1975, just over a quarter of the minimum considered necessary to subsist.⁴⁸

Maya turned increasingly to the DCG and Catholic Action-sponsored cooperatives as a way out. In the latter half of the 1960s and early 1970s aid workers from the Peace Corps and USAID were on hand to give the process even more impetus. By 1967 there were 145 agricultural consumer and credit cooperatives in the country. Within nine years the number had grown to 510, with a membership of 132,000 people. Some 57 per cent of them were located in the *altiplano*.⁴⁹

Cooperatives introduced major changes. First and foremost they got groups of individuals, though rarely the whole community, working together in a cooperative way that up until then was being increasingly lost. Secondly, they broke down traditional social taboos, such as men and women not being permitted to work together. Finally, they taught new skills and techniques. Buying, marketing and farming were nothing less than revolutionized in some villages, the new skills adding to members' sense of their own capabilities and expectations.

Outside influences

Increased economic and social contact with the outside world was intensified by the coming of radio and roads. Both took the Maya 'out' into another world, while giving the outside world greater access to the communities. Developing a relationship with that world and redefining their own in the process became a necessary part of survival, both cultural and material.

'Twenty five years ago there was no transport for people or produce', recalled a former mayor of San Antonio Palopó, a Kaqchikel village on Lake Atitlán. 'Today there's a road, four boats and daily buses direct to Guatemala City.' New roads and transport brought a rising tide of tourists. By the 1970s, almost every Maya they met on the mountain trails was carrying a transistor radio to listen to the new church-sponsored Maya language stations or commercial channels from as far away as Mexico and Nicaragua.

This social and economic change transformed indigenous thinking. There was a growing awareness of Maya society and values as part of a much wider world. *Cofradía* service or being a subsistence farmer were clearly no longer

definitive criteria for being Maya, now that many who were obviously indigenous did neither. The psychological perception of ethnicity had to be broadened, along with the perception of the Maya world.

The clearly defined indigenous concept of 'role' was being eroded. The Maya concept of 'destiny', a conviction that a person's station in life is preordained and that he/she must remain in the role into which they are born, was disappearing. Maya began to believe they could demand equality with *ladinos* – a concept reinforced by the missionaries' basic tenet that all men and women were equal in the eyes of God.

Such thinking was reinforced by individuals who had received secondary education and returned to their villages as teachers or government officials. They were doing what had always been considered *ladino* jobs. From this sprang the most revolutionary concept of all – indigenous people had rights. The whole process was known as *concientización* – consciousness-raising.

All these changes revolutionized village life. Although the outlook of many changed, others clung to the old as the best defence against the new. This breakup in the previously unanimous outlook caused a rapid fragmentation in once homogenous communities. Some joined co-ops, others did not. Some became small time traders, others did not. Above all, some joined Catholic Action or even became Protestants as evangelical churches moved into the highlands during the 1970s, while others did not. 'Every community experienced a holy war of sorts between *catequistas* (progressives) and *costumbristas* (traditionalists).'⁵⁰

Catholic Action's village *directivas* (councils) challenged the *cofradías* directly for control of fiestas and religious rites and many villages developed dual celebrations. Furthermore, Catholic Action members tended to be young. Power in the hands of the community's youth challenged the age-authority structure that had been the basis of indigenous society.

A new leadership had emerged but how much of the community did they lead? As health educators, storekeepers, cooperative officials and Catholic Action catechists became the new representatives of power and prestige, villages became hopelessly divided making them, in turn, even more vulnerable to outside influence. In the mid 1970s one aid researcher identified 37 different power groups in a single village.

One symptom of the changes was dress. Many Maya men dropped their native dress and today there are only about 20 villages where they habitually wear complete traditional dress. There were a variety of reasons. Men came into contact with *ladinos* more frequently, travelling away from home to work and being exposed to *ladino* shops, styles and discrimination in the process. But, just as significant a factor was cost. 'It's 40 quetzales for our trousers', said one Santa Catarina resident, pointing to his friend's multi-coloured knee-length breeches. 'It's only 10 quetzales for these ordinary cotton ones.'

But the trend was not all one way. Many younger Maya began wearing western clothes away from the village and indigenous dress at home – a reflection of their dual association and identity. Most indigenous women, meanwhile, did not drop their indigenous dress as they increasingly became maids and market traders outside their communities, using it as a means of resistance to discrimination and sexual harassment.

Changing consciousness was reflected in increased demand for education and health care. To Maya communities, both represented western knowledge or skill which could be adapted for the protection of their own culture, often against the very one that had provided it. 'People know they don't have to lose 50 children to a single measles epidemic', points out one Akateko health promoter. Rejection of western education began to centre on the teaching process rather than the knowledge. There was a growing pride in being literate or having literate offspring. 'I can't read but my children can', boasted one Mam father when queried about buying a bible.

Stand-off: polarization begins

None of this took place in a political vacuum. The transformation of Catholic Action and the Christian Democrats from essentially conservative forces to predominantly radical ones in the countryside was the result of external as well as domestic pressures. On the religious side, the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962 to explore the Church's *aggiornamento*, or updating, reached its Latin American conclusion at the continent's own episcopal conference in Medellín, Colombia in 1968.

The Latin American bishops questioned the Church's relationship to the inequitable power structures in the

Land distribution in Guatemala in 1979

Size of farm Units (hectares)	Number of farms	%	Surface (hectares)	%
Less than 0.69	250,918	41.1	60,871.1	1.5
0.69 to 6.99	296,654	48.7	608,083.2	14.7
7.00 to 45.00	49,137	8.0	774,974.3	18.4
45.01 to 902.00	13,158	2.1	1,793,618.6	42.7
More than 902.00	477	0.1	955,921.6	22.7
Total	610,334	100.0	4,193,468.8	100.0

SOURCE:
Davis, Shelton H and Hodson, Julie, *Witness to Political Violence in Guatemala: The Suppression of a Rural Development Movement*, Oxfam America, Boston, 1982, p. 45.

continent, called on the Church to establish decentralized base communities and appealed to believers to make 'a preferential option for the poor'.⁵¹ Values such as freedom of conscience and human rights were endorsed as priorities in a move that was to open the way for the concept of liberation theology.

Few saw what an impact Vatican II would have over the next 20 years but nowhere was the potential greater than amongst the exploited, marginalized but intensely spiritual indigenous communities of Guatemala. Liberation theology turned out for many to be the starting point in the search for a new self-identity as Maya. Certainly liberation theology's precepts had never seemed more relevant.

From the mid 1960s, institutionalized violence grew steadily. Guatemala virtually patented the term *desaparecido* (a disappeared person) as security forces waged war on a new guerilla movement concentrated in the predominantly non-indigenous departments of Zacapa and Izabal. Between 1966 and 1970, some 10,000 non-combatants were killed in the campaign to wipe out an estimated 350 guerrillas.⁵²

When the 'Jackal of Zacapa', as the ruthless counterinsurgency chief General Carlos Arana Osorio was known, became President in 1970, the new indigenous leadership – along with unionists, students and intellectuals – was increasingly targeted. By the 1974 elections, repression, grassroots pressure and growing economic desperation had forced the DCG into its most radical stance yet, its manifesto decrying exploitation and social violence while promising agrarian reform, a minimum salary and a big expansion of the public sector.

In alliance with two other parties, the DCG chose General Efraín Ríos Montt as its presidential candidate – a move calculated to give the reformist coalition the best chance of having an election victory acknowledged by the generals. The DCG alliance was widely recognized to have won the vote but even as an army general himself, Ríos Montt could not secure the count.

The army demonstrated the extent to which its power had grown in the 1960s by imposing its own candidate General Eugenio Kjell Laugerud as president and the country's last chance to avoid widespread civil conflict had been missed. 'The message was that peaceful change would be impossible, options had been exhausted', one Maya *catequista* who survived the consequences recalled. Even those who did not realize it then were to come to the same conclusion as the 1970s wore on.

When the second most powerful earthquake in Latin American history hit the Guatemalan highlands on 4 February 1976, the growing social crisis became acute. Twenty seven thousand people were killed, 77,000 injured and more than one million left homeless. Virtually all of them were Maya living in the kind of homes least able to withstand the tremor. In Guatemala, even earthquakes it seemed discriminated on an ethnic basis.

The consequences of the earthquake rapidly accelerated the processes already affecting indigenous communities. The relief effort intensified *ladino* contact but most importantly it reinforced the lessons many indigenous communities were already learning about the power of their own organization. In particular, it brought Protestants into the highlands in unprecedented numbers.

Some of these, such as mainstream Baptists and Methodists, were dedicated to community action and social development in the same way as Catholic Action. Others, like the myriad of fundamentalist sects who began to arrive, were intensely conservative, taught a total acceptance of authority, however repressive, and a fierce individualism. But their stand against alcohol, their well-funded aid programmes, the participatory nature of their worship and their missionary zeal in villages which in many cases saw a Catholic priest but once a year, went down well. Protestant churches and sects quickly became another power base in many Maya villages.

By 1976 political polarization had thrown up two clear sides. On the one hand there was the radical church, the popular organizations such as cooperatives, and the unions, actively backing change. On the other side was the military, strengthened by US training and military aid during its counterinsurgency campaign; the traditional landowning elite, richer and more powerful than ever after the commodity boom of the 1960s and 1970s and the Protestant sects, refusing to countenance the slightest alteration in the status quo.

Thus by the mid 1970s the military and agro-industrial elite had not only the will but the means to confront the growing pressure for change. However, on the popular side, increasing numbers of indigenous leaders were realizing that persistent electoral fraud and growing repression were ruling out the normal means of change, i.e. elections and economic development. The fear that the growing numbers of killings and kidnappings were designed to engender only served to intimidate popular organizers for short periods, if at all. With each cycle of violence more went underground. Something had to give.

REVOLUTION (1976-82): Maya in the Vanguard?

In January 1972, 16 men crossed the cleared strip of jungle that marks the Mexican border into Guatemala. Although survivors of a previous guerrilla front in eastern Guatemala, they believed they had totally discarded the traditional leftist thinking about 'backward Indians' being poor revolutionary material. They viewed the indigenous people as the potential vanguard of the revolution, a mass social base from which they intended to launch a prolonged popular war lasting 10 or even 20 years.

The group's new approach meant learning as much as teaching for more than three years.

*'With them, we learned how to calculate how a tree would fall, to plant with a digging stick, to orient a house ...' wrote one guerrilla of their first Maya contacts in the group's Ixcán jungle base.*⁵³

Then in mid 1975 they announced their arrival by killing a rapacious Ixcán landowner, Luis Arenas Barrera in front of many of his workers. They called themselves the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (*Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* – EGP).

The EGP were not alone. In the Sierra Madre mountains of Quetzaltenango, San Marcos and Sololá, ORPA, the Organization of the People in Arms (*Organización del Pueblo en Armas*) worked silently among the Mam, K'iche', Tz'utujil and Kaqchikel of the Central Highlands for eight years before declaring themselves in 1979. Also in the northern jungles of the Petén and Alta Verapaz, Guatemala's oldest guerrilla group, the Rebel Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (FAR)) seemed to be rethinking its attitude. 'We know that it is the Indians, half of the population, who will determine the outcome of the revolution in this country', one of the group leaders had declared as early as 1967.⁵⁴

But it was the EGP's war plans that would have most impact on indigenous communities. The group's Local Clandestine Committees, their basic village support base, called for peasants to be organized into sub-committees responsible for logistics, political education, operations and mobilization. Local Irregular Forces aided regular guerrilla units and were responsible for village self-defence. By the end of 1981 this structure was providing shelter, intelligence and food as well as harassing the army on a district, regional and *frente* (front) level in much of the Western Highlands.

The widespread social base supported up to 400 *combatientes* (armed fighters) in each *frente*, and they too were overwhelmingly indigenous. A Mexican editor who spent three months with the EGP in Huehuetenango and El Quiché noted that one guerrilla column was 99 per cent Maya (of the Mam, Akateko, Achí, Ixil, K'iche', Q'anjob'al, Kaqchikel and Chuj groups). Of these 30 per cent were young women less than 18 years of age.⁵⁵ Many had lost their relatives to the military.

'I left my clothing behind, the skirt and huipil I had woven myself and put on trousers and a man's shirt. I cut my

long hair and picked up a rifle...' confided 'Lara', a recruit, who had lost her brother.⁵⁶

In February 1982, United States Embassy press handouts in Guatemala estimated that eight out of ten guerrillas were Maya. The US State Department put their strength at 3,500 combatants, 10,000 members of Local Irregular Forces and 30,000 to 60,000 actively organized supporters. Beneath them was a vast network of tacit supporters: an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 in total.

Despite the numbers it should be stressed that participation varied. Generalization in Maya society – composed of endless, autonomous units in the form of villages, hamlets and by now different interest groups within those communities – is dangerous. In some cases whole communities joined up. In others it was an intensely personal decision made by individuals or groups, a decision which often added to divisions in such communities. In some areas where viable economic alternatives had been developed, where repression had been less, where village structures were unsympathetic, active support for the guerrillas remained minimal or non-existent.

Jim Handy cites Totonicapán as one example.⁵⁷ Another may be the Ixil area of northwestern El Quiché. A new book by the anthropologist David Stoll *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* takes its name from an Ixil description of the guerrilla-army confrontation – 'living between two fires'. Stoll's revisionist view of the violence is based on those who denied any commitment to one side or the other – the majority of the population. He argues that the revolutionary movement did not grow out of popular aspirations and thus did not follow the oppression-rebellion-repression sequence so often assumed.

The strength of Stoll's fieldwork is that it was done in an area assumed to be a guerrilla stronghold. Its weakness is that it was done in 1988-9 when army ascendancy in the area was assured and the collective memory had undergone the appropriate adjustments. By 1989 many of those who had been guerrilla supporters were long dead in the mountains or in exile. Nevertheless, this writer agrees with Stoll that the guerrillas did not adequately represent Ixiles' or other Maya's aspirations and failed, partially at least, as a result. Motivation was the start of the divergence.⁵⁸

Motivation: seeking refuge

The overwhelming reason most Maya joined or supported the guerrillas seems to have been protection and self-defence. Leaders of both the EGP and ORPA have testified to the difficulty of recruiting Maya until army repression surged. The earthquake and the announcement of the EGP's existence in 1976 had brought army occupations of many Maya towns, and kidnappings, murders and disappearances became commonplace. By February 1977 it was reported that killings had included 68 cooperative leaders in the Ixcán, 40 community leaders in Chajul, 28 in Cotzal and 32 in Nebaj.⁵⁹ The bodies found were invariably horribly mutilated, dismembered or sexually abused.

Later, this process broadened to encompass wholesale slaughter in a determination to wipe out any protest or effort to publicize the situation. On 29 May 1978 some

700 Q'eqchi' Maya marched into the town square of Panzós, Alta Verapaz to protest at the dispossession of indigenous peasants along the new road, the Transversal del Norte. Within minutes they had been cut off in the square by 150 soldiers who opened fire. At least 100 were killed and 300 wounded.

The massacre quickly became part of popular Maya consciousness, with more than 100,000 gathering on the first anniversary to commemorate it. The year following the Panzós massacre saw a phenomenal expansion in guerrilla activity and daring. In January 1979 about 100 guerrillas took over the main Ixil town of Nebaj, defeating the occupying police and killing Enrique Brol, another ruthless landowner, in the process.

Another seminal event was what became known as the Spanish Embassy massacre. In the autumn of 1979 a group of K'iche' Maya, including Vicente Menchú, the father of 1992 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Rigoberta Menchú, travelled to Guatemala City to seek an audience with the President, Romero Lucas Garcia. Turned down by the National Palace and Congress they occupied the Spanish Embassy in a final desperate effort to draw attention to what was happening in their communities.

On 31 January 1980, 39 people including 23 K'iche', embassy staff and Guatemalan politicians were burned to death when security forces stormed the building. The sole K'iche' survivor, Gregori Yuja Xona, was dragged from his hospital bed the following day, despite terrible burns and a police guard. His tortured body was discovered shortly afterwards.

Panzós and the Spanish Embassy marked the last real efforts by Maya to appeal to the government rather than the guerrillas for protection. Attacks on Maya community leaders convinced many that the government was waging an ethnic as much as political war. In some communities, self-defence mechanisms against the army were already operating by the time the guerrillas first made contact.

One Maya activist told of a friend who stated that her brother had been killed. 'She said she was next. There was no other choice. It was either death or join the guerrillas.' One aid worker spoke of friends discussing joining the guerrillas 'on the grounds that they would be safer with them than at home'.⁶⁰ Clearly for many Maya it was a pragmatic rather than a political decision.

These feelings were reinforced by the guerrillas themselves. Individual and communal protection were constant themes of their village meetings as they sought to identify themselves with indigenous people. Guerrillas used Maya languages, arrived en masse to celebrate indigenous fiestas, and even employed the *shaman* to 'work spells on the army', according to one K'iche' villager.

The cultural identification that led to guerrilla groups such as the EGP and ORPA being widely described as 'our army' was further facilitated by the numerous Maya legends that told how one day 'the foreigners' would be driven from the country. Tales of Tecún Umán, the K'iche' king killed fighting the Spaniards, and Tata Lopo and his attempt to establish an independent republic in the highlands, took on renewed relevance.⁶¹

As hundreds of catechists and 12 priests were singled out

for army bullets, more and more religious people came to the EGP's own conclusion that in Guatemala one could 'not be a Christian and not a revolutionary'.⁶² Working for peaceful change soon seemed suicidal to many members of Catholic Action while the rebels' teaching on equality and community was a logical extension of the missionaries' message. Priests began to speak of the guerrillas as 'counter-violent', *combatientes* attended bible classes and sometime in 1980-1 Father Fernando Hoyos, a Spanish Jesuit, became the first known priest to pick up a gun and join the EGP.

The rift: the ethnic-national contradiction

Maya incorporation changed or at least tipped the balance in the guerrilla movement. There was more concentration on immediate and pressing demands – wages, land ownership, protection – less on a centralized, all-embracing ideology. But such changes in emphasis only demonstrated the differences in perception between what was, by the early 1980s, a *ladino*-dominated leadership and a Maya-dominated rank and file. For all their cultural sensitivity, for all their years in the jungle and *altiplano*, the *ladino* leadership came to the revolution from an ideological point of view; most Maya did not. For the guerrilla leadership, the Maya were an exploited class first, 'Indians' second.

The *ladino* leadership saw the Maya as a means to an end. The Maya recruits saw the *ladino* leadership in the same light. The aims, however, were incompatible. One vision was aggressive, revolutionary, monolithic, nationalist; the other defensive, ethnic, multicultural, even conservative. The *ladino* leadership believed that cultural differences would melt away as Maya joined en masse and class consciousness replaced ethnic consciousness. In fact, struggling alongside *ladinos* at whatever level just served to heighten ethnic consciousness for many Maya. More than 450 years of history – distrust, betrayal, abuse – could not be reversed in a few years.

Whatever the merits of the EGP and ORPA commanders on the ground, the Marxist perspective predominated at the top. It had been best expressed by Severo Martínez Pelaez, an exiled member of Guatemala's orthodox communist party (the PGT) which, from 1982, was to join the EGP, ORPA and the FAR in a united front, the Guatemala National Revolutionary Union (URNG).

In his book, *La Patria del Criollo*, Martínez argued that the Maya had died with the Spanish conquest. Their fragmented and divided ancestors were products of Guatemala's colonial means of production and as such were obstacles to economic and social progress.⁶³ By 1982 the PGT's perspective was unchanged.

*The large Indian mass is constituted by various small minorities ... so fragmented that we cannot identify them as a nation ... they can only be unified effectively into Guatemalan society through the revolution.*⁶⁴

Throughout 1981-2, the EGP in particular worked hard to address what it termed 'the Indian question'. Yet in fuelling the debate, it drew attention to the incompatibili-

ty of the growing demand for Maya cultural autonomy and their own socialist, national aims – the ‘ethnic-national contradiction’ as it became known. By January 1982 racial equality was considered sufficiently important to become one of the five URNG revolutionary goals. But it was equally clear from other policy statements that ‘equality between Indians and *ladinos*’ would be on the revolution’s *ladino*-oriented terms.⁶⁵

‘National-ethnic consciousness’ had to be invested with ‘revolutionary class politics’, said another URNG statement. ‘Otherwise, the revolutionary process runs the risk of becoming distorted, turning into a four-centuries late liberation struggle ...’ Exploitation of the rural labour force had been possible because of the failure of indigenous culture ‘to develop’, based as it was around ‘pre-capitalist agriculture’.⁶⁶ To the average Maya conscript, engaged in what he or she perceived to be a ‘four-centuries late liberation struggle’ to protect, even reinforce ‘pre-capitalist’ maize production, such statements came as something of a shock.

Popular organizations: a sense of power

The guerrillas were not the only radical opposition mobilizing support during this period. As the recession of the late 1970s began to bite, growing numbers of urban Maya took leading roles in unions, slum-dwellers’ committees and community groups. Once again, repression forced these groups to broaden their concept of self-defence and seek closer ties with the armed groups.

In March 1976 delegates from 65 unions formed the National Committee of Trade Union Unity (CNUS) and on May Day 1978 a conglomeration of peasant leagues formed the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC), announcing their arrival in a parade that included the largest indigenous turnout the capital city had ever seen. From the start, the CUC acted as a major support network for the EGP and ORPA, aiding harassment of the army, organizing self-defence schemes and, above all, coordinating political education among workers on the plantations.

It was the CUC which in the wake of the Spanish embassy massacre called a 14 February meeting of indigenous leaders at the Iximché ruins near Tecpán, capital of the Kaqchikel nation until 1524. The resulting statement, the Declaration of Iximché, spoke of a ‘new Maya dawn’ in virtually declaring war on the government. Days later, the CUC did just that, demonstrating its muscle by coordinating an unprecedented walkout by 75,000 workers on coffee, sugar and coffee plantations. The results were equally unprecedented – a near 300 per cent rise in the legal minimum wage from 1.12 to 3.20 quetzales a day.

Fighting, striking or protesting alongside *ladinos* was at least a tacit recognition by indigenous people that they had something in common with non-indigenous peasants and workers. It gave many Maya a previously unknown sense of their own power. But working closely with *ladinos* in class-orientated unions or guerrilla organizations also brought home to many Maya their distinctness, their *Mayanidad*.

The price many indigenous communities or individuals

were paying for the growth in the armed struggle further reinforced racial and historical consciousness. By 1982 the EGP was somewhat ironically warning indigenous nationalists that their ‘more refined sense of ethnic identity’ was taking them in the direction of ‘racist and indigenist ideas’. The leadership was clearly worried that it might not be able to control something they themselves had started. ‘The main danger is that national-ethnic factors will burst forth to the detriment of class factors’, it declared.⁶⁷

Civil war beckons

For the first time in centuries, a significant number of fighting *indígena* had emerged. That in itself was revolutionary. Perhaps too revolutionary for the guerrilla leadership as well as the Guatemalan elite.

‘We are witnessing a new scene with actors different from the Indian who removes his hat, places it on his chest and humbly asks the patrón for a few centavos more’, lamented one business journal.⁶⁸

Although the depth of involvement in these new forces varied enormously, most Maya’s political understanding of the struggle stretched only as far as believing that the guerrillas or union organizers might improve specific aspects of their lives – e.g. protection from army attacks or improved wages and living conditions. Achieving both of these was demanded by the will to survive, not, for the most part, by political commitment.

The guerrilla struggle was after all not only *ladino*-directed and orientated in its political philosophy but *ladino*-inclined in its strategy. Direct confrontation was rarely if ever a Maya means of opposition. By 1982 it seemed clear that unless there was a radical and effective ‘Mayanization’ of the guerrilla movement, most indigenous support would last just as long as Maya communities needed protection and just as long as the armed movement could provide it. It was, and would prove, a marriage of convenience.

Naturally none of this took place in a political vacuum at national level. In time-worn tradition, General Romeo Lucas García had, as President Laugerud’s Defence Minister, succeeded him after the 1978 poll – elections described by the *Washington Post* as ‘a fraud so transparent that nobody could expect to get away with it’.⁶⁹ The transition hastened the slide into a national bloodbath in urban as much as rural areas.

Within months, the presumed election winners, the country’s two brightest reform-minded democrats – Alberto Fuentes Mohr, leader of the Social Democrat Party (PSD) and Manuel Colom Argueta of the United Front for the Revolution (FUR) – were gunned down in broad daylight. Scores of their party officials suffered a similar fate. By September 1980, Guatemala’s Vice President, Dr Francisco Villagran Kramar, had resigned and fled to Washington where he revealed details of the government’s control of death squads from an annex of the National Palace.⁷⁰

As government corruption reached unprecedented levels, the economy began to collapse with a steep drop in the world prices of Guatemala’s main commodity exports –

coffee, sugar, and cotton. Investment and tourism evaporated as the violence increased and for the last two years of Lucas García's presidency anarchy seemed the country's only destination. Under the President's brother, General Benedicto Lucas García, it became obvious the army had no strategy other than more repression to head off the ever-strengthening insurgency.

San Juan Comalapa, San Juan Ixcay, Santiago Atitlán, San Mateo Ixatán, Coya, Cotzal, Patzaj and Panimacac were just a few of the Maya towns and villages in which massacres of 20 or more residents were reported in this period. In April 1981, Oxfam America estimated that 1,500 indigenous people had been murdered by death squads or regular army troops in the previous two months in the department of Chimaltenango alone.⁷¹

Church sources put the 1981 death toll from government security operations at 11,000, the vast majority of the victims indigenous.⁷² In such circumstances it was hardly surprising that the guerrillas could not cope with the surge in potential recruits. By the time of the next presidential election in March 1982, Guatemala was in a state of virtual civil war.



MAYA MASSACRE: A Judicial Framework for Killing

On 23 March 1982 a group of young officers, disillusioned by the army's performance in the war and yet another electoral fraud, surrounded the National Palace and demanded the President's resignation. José Efraín Ríos Montt, the born-again Christian who took his place, claimed power by 'God's will'. In the next three months 'unknown' gunmen's attacks on centrist politicians and intellectuals in the cities came to a virtual halt and all attention shifted to the guerrillas' real power base, the indigenous countryside.

Barely a day went by without reports of Maya being hacked to death, bombed, raped, shot and, most commonly, burnt alive in their homes. Between 24 March and the end of July, Amnesty International recorded 68 separate incidents.⁷³ The Maya surnames listed – Xen, Panjoj, Ajú, Yaqui, to cite just a few – made clear the identity of the victims. Even the conservative daily paper, *El Gráfico*, was moved to an unprecedented outburst. 'The type of genocidal annihilation taking place in the Indian zones of the country is truly horrifying', stated a 20 May editorial.

With the press silenced by a ban on independent reports, a 30-day summer amnesty was followed by the declaration of a 'state of siege', which in Ríos Montt's own words gave the regime 'the judicial framework for killing'. Promising 'a merciless struggle', the general sent 10,000 combat troops into the predominately indigenous departments of El Quiché, Huehuetenango, San Marcos, Chimaltenango, Alta and Baja Verapaz and Sololá.

'Plan Victoria 82' was based on the two-pronged approach outlined in an Orwellian-titled masterplan – 'The National Plan of Security and Development.' Army sweeps through Maya areas would be backed up by a permanent government presence in the form of military garrisons and government development workers. Under the banner *Fusiles y Frijoles* (Bullets and Beans) and later *Techo, Trabajo y Tortillas* (Shelter, Work and Food) it was a plan of attack that allowed no neutrals. 'If you're with us we'll feed you; if not you're dead' as one army officer put it.⁷⁴

The plan was an outright cultural attack. Not only would Maya be killed and driven out of their villages, but the subsequent 'development' was to be an extension of counterinsurgency with the emphasis on absorption and assimilation – in short, another conquest. It was referred to in the National Plan by the phrase 'changes in the basic structure of the state'. As the then Defence Minister General Mejía Victores explained: 'We must get rid of the words "indigenous" and "Indian".'

First came the bullets. On the maps in the operation's nerve-centre different coloured pins classified highland villages according to perceived guerrilla influence. Red meant, in the words of one military source 'guerrilla stronghold – wipe everybody out'. Coya, San Miguel Acatán (Huehuetenango), where about 200 Mam were slaughtered on 20 July, and Finca San Francisco, Nentón (Huehuetenango), where more than 300 Chuj were wiped

out, were just two of the communities selected for elimination. Amnesty International's October 1982 assessment of 2,000 indigenous and peasant farmers massacred since the end of the previous March, was described by Americas Watch as 'responsible and conservative'. By November 1982 the latter group was putting the figure at 10,000.⁷⁵

Final toll remains unknown

The true extent of the slaughter in Guatemala during this period will never be known. By 1984, the army – which for obvious reasons probably knew best – was saying that 440 villages and hamlets had been destroyed in the counterinsurgency campaign. A study by the Juvenile Division of the Supreme Court in 1984 concluded that at least 100,000 and possibly as many as 200,000 highland children had lost at least one parent in the violence, leading lawyers to estimate that 50,000 adults had been killed since 1980.⁷⁶

Meanwhile the Roman Catholic Church estimated from its own sources that one million people – out of a highland population of four million – were displaced at the height of the violence.

Various studies funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) came to broadly similar conclusions. Trying to assess the numbers affected by the destruction of homes, displacement and disruption of normal economic activities, these studies concluded that at least 75,000 people in the department of Huehuetenango had been hit; 175,000 in El Quiché; 77,000 residents of San Marcos and Quetzaltenango and 50-80,000 in Chimaltenango.⁷⁷

The EGP's sphere of influence was singled out by the military. They were not only the most threatening guerrilla group but the most vociferous about indigenous involvement in 'prolonged, popular war'. Such a strategy struck at the deepest vein of *ladino* paranoia. This gave the campaign now unleashed on the *altiplano* a truly genocidal character. Simply living in a certain village could be a death sentence as the army set about waging war on the civilian population rather than the guerrillas themselves – draining the sea (the civilian population) in which the fish (the guerrillas) swam, in Mao Tse-Tung's guerrilla war terms.

Whilst the Mam and K'iche' ethnic groups were at least numerous enough to survive this onslaught as peoples, survival of the smaller groups as culturally distinct entities became increasingly doubtful in 1982-3. The Chuj, who at the time numbered about 29,000, the Akateko (some 8,000) and the Popti' (about 32,000) were all particularly vulnerable as they were directly in the army line of fire on the Mexican border.

One priest working in northern Huehuetenango in the early 1980s estimated that about half the Chuj-speaking Maya had been killed or fled into exile. But it was the estimated 70,000 Ixiles, living in or around what became known as the Ixil Triangle, the three major towns of Nebaj, Cotzal and Chajul, in the north of El Quiché province who probably suffered most. Former mayors of Chajul and Cotzal estimate that about 7,500 and 5,000 residents respectively – about 40 per cent of their total populations – were killed.⁷⁸

'Scorched earth' and 'preventive terror' were the military jargon for destructive sweeps through villages marked on the generals' maps with pink and yellow pins, e.g. less supportive of the guerrillas. Here troops shot villagers as they fled, then burned their homes and *milpas*, destroying everything they could find. Whole hamlets were literally wiped off the face of the map – if they had ever made it there in the first place. Any resident *ladinos* or landowners were first persuaded to leave the area 'for their own safety'. The army wanted no survivors.

Although some human rights groups have cautiously attributed such incidents to 'armed men', it is worth stating that neither displaced Maya nor the military are under any illusions about who was responsible. Villagers could identify the killers by the jungle fatigues and helicopters they arrived in. If the culprits were in civilian dress, they noted army boots, haircuts and weapons.

Soldiers talk openly about the nature of the campaign, specifying how they shot villagers as they fled, then burnt down their houses and crops. Some conscripts told this writer that they had been on 'about 80' such operations. Although indigenous survivors say that they fled because they were frightened, soldiers maintain that since the villagers did not 'surrender' they must have been guerrillas or were running off to join the guerrillas.

The military policy that classified all Maya civilians as guerrillas came right from the top. Ríos Montt's press secretary was quite specific.

*The guerrillas won over many Indian collaborators. Therefore the Indians were subversives. Clearly you had to kill Indians because they were collaborating with subversion.*⁷⁹

Such logic was fed by the campaign itself. Cold and half-starved, many of those who fled were gradually forced to come out of the mountains and surrender to the army, as if they had been active guerrillas. This, in turn, gave the military a chance to try and win hearts and minds, as soldiers fed and housed refugees as part of the 'Beans' campaign.

Civil patrols: the basis of integration

But emergency relief was only the beginning of a long-term plan of control and integration. The military-run National Reconstruction Committee designated the strategy's stages as 'pre-development' when a basic highland infrastructure would be built up and 'development' when resettled Maya, grouped in regularly laid-out model villages, would supply the national economy with basic cash crops and labour. As a start, Maya were set to building roads, reconstructing villages and reforesting mountainsides. The process varied in each locality. In some they were paid but in others one day's labour was conscripted free every week or in exchange for basic foodstuffs.

Nothing illustrated the basic aims of control and integration better than the formation of Civil Self-Defence Patrols or PACs (*Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil*). All men between the ages of 18 and 60 years (in practice neither age limit seems to apply) were and for the most part still are obliged to serve in a civilian militia that both supple-

ments army operations and denies the guerrillas their popular support base. By November 1983, some 700,000 men – nearly one tenth of the population – had been recruited and by mid 1984 the figure was believed to be up to 900,000.⁸⁰

Conditions and demands vary. In the bigger towns service is often only every 15 days but in the smallest *aldeas* it can be every four. While manning checkposts and patrolling the bounds of the community are the normal occupations, civil patrols can be called out on active army operations for up to 10 days. Unlike the military, many Maya have little food to take, no protective clothing and often little more than rope, machetes or slings as weapons.

Families left at home during such extended operations sometimes go hungry until the man returns – if he does. Civil patrollers have, on occasion, been at the forefront of army attacks and in simply walking the trails are exposed to guerrilla mines and trip-wires. Throughout 1982 the local army garrison in Cotzal did not lose a single man fighting the guerrillas while the 900-strong civil patrol lost 76 men. ‘Why lose trained soldiers when these militias can suffer the casualties?’ one young lieutenant in El Quiché asked this writer in 1983.⁸¹

The cultural impact of all this was as alarming as it was intended to be. Civil patrols provided the unscrupulous with a means of settling old scores and building up an army-backed power base that allowed them to kill, rape and seize land with impunity. As a new, army-sponsored power base emerged, yet another fissure developed in Maya communities. Civil patrols became a force of ladinization in the same way that military conscription had always been.

Civil patrols gave the *ladino* state and, in particular, the army the permanent presence that was so necessary to their assimilation strategy. Gradually all forms of civil authority, including the *alcalde* and *cofradía* were subordinated to the military commissioners who headed the patrols. From now on the military – arming, inciting and forcing – could blame the civil patrols for abuses. Patrollers meanwhile increasingly blamed the guerrillas both for attracting the army in the first place then directing their weapons at them. ‘A war between the army and Ixil population had turned into a civil war among the Ixil population.’⁸² The observation applied throughout much of the *altiplano*.

Scorched earth: into the mountains

Again the most significant cultural attack was directed at landholdings. Because land provided both guerrillas and their indigenous support base with food, as well as providing the Maya with a modicum of independence, military strategists regarded it as the key factor in the war. That meant driving tens of thousands of Maya from home and *milpa*, splitting families and cutting the vital link between location, relatives and culture in the process.

All resettlement was on the army’s terms, usually in a different location, probably in a model village and possibly after a stint in a ‘re-education camp’. Whatever remained of traditional lifestyle would then be worn down by the disruption of patrolling, the burden of forced or waged

labour and the prohibitions on travel and custom imposed by the military.

The ferocity of the army onslaught forced whole communities into the mountains.

*‘So many of our peasant bases managed to disappear when the army appeared. In less than a week we tripled our membership with the peasants who sought our protection’, wrote Mario Payeras, an EGP commander.*⁸³

Richard Wilson’s study of the Q’eqchi’ Maya has shown how an enforced nomadic existence brought many communities together.⁸⁴

‘In the bush we did everything together, no one had any more than the other’, one informant told him. However, such a lifestyle also played havoc with traditions. Displacement created a chasm between Maya and the mountain deities, the Tzuultaq’a. ‘How can I pray to a mountain if I no longer live in front of it?’ asked one man.

Yet in some ways the war experience strengthened Maya cosmology. The upheaval saw many seek refuge in the known traditions, *shamans* and deities. Sheer desperation and need saw some communities in the mountains emphasize the role of gods. Mountain spirits were petitioned for the right to pass through their domain as they took on a guardian angel role. ‘The mountains collaborated with us. The mountains and the elders will never leave you’, one Q’eqchi’ told Wilson. ‘The Tzuultaq’a came to me in my sleep – a man all dressed in white’, recalled another.

A sense of betrayal

The most obvious Maya motivation throughout the whole war has been survival. It was largely self-preservation that dictated siding with the guerrillas and it was the same instinct that forced most back towards the army. Survival ordained initial flight from the military and survival later dictated surrender to the same army, as the desperate condition of refugees coming down from the mountains throughout 1982-3 indicated. As an astute ex-guerrilla observed: ‘Survival comes first. These people will go with whoever can protect them.’

Many Maya felt they were deserted by the guerrillas who they claim retreated into the mountains, leaving hopelessly ill-equipped village defence forces to take on the machine guns. The rationale was simple: to most Maya the guerrillas existed to protect them and by 1983 increasing numbers of Maya believed that despite all their promises the guerrillas had failed them. ‘The guerrillas only provoke the army and then go’, complained one evangelical pastor bitterly. ‘We are the ones who suffer the consequences.’

As the consequences unravelled a sort of collective hindsight – playing on all the frictions in the relationship between guerrillas and Maya – emerged. Some were relatively minor complaints such as bans on alcohol at fiestas and restrictions on travel to other villages. Others were distinctly cultural – efforts to impose cooperative, communal farming techniques in areas where landholding was firmly individual.

This new mood of acrimony and blame began to reveal

just how deep the *ladino*-indigenous split in the guerrilla movement had become. 'We were afraid the Indians wouldn't put their guns down after the revolution', one *ladino* ex-guerrilla recalled to a journalist. 'After it's all over we're going to organize our own revolution', agreed one Maya recruit.

Part of the problem was simply the difficulty the guerrillas had in adjusting to the new army tactics – showing once again how effective these were. In 1981-2 the EGP started killing civil patrol members – a development viewed as a personal attack on their community by many Maya. 'The guerrillas admit they had to get tough', said one Guatemala-based writer. 'I've personally seen bodies left with notes "Submit to the revolution, not the civil patrols".'

But the upheaval was not confined to Maya communities. By 1982 the EGP, wrecked by internal debate over the indigenous question and the response to the army onslaught, was splitting. Amid reports that the bitter internal strife included the killing of dissenters, a new faction 'Revolutionary October' (OR) made itself known in 1984.

OR's position was essential separatist and indigenist. They argued that cultural differences did not equate to class divisions and that cultural oppression would not be overcome by granting 'political and economic equality' to indigenous people. Influenced by the Sandinistas' declaration of cultural autonomy for Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast peoples, they argued for Maya political autonomy and the retention of the family-owned *milpas* on which Maya subsistence was based.

OR's timing could not have been better. In the coming years, *perestroika*, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the massive economic changes of the 1980s would help move ethnicity to the fore and socialism onto the backburner. But for most Maya who had lent their support to the guerrillas, the change in tack had come too late. Their view was local not global and it was based on experience, often very bitter experience. The guerrillas had said they would protect them yet had failed when most needed.

Such deception was in itself a very *ladino* quality to many Maya. So as the need to take sides reappeared, the collective memory made the necessary adjustments. If the cooperative failed, so had the guerrillas; if they had threatened a friend then the rebels, obviously, were not friendly; above all, if they could not keep the army out, then what were they for? By 1983 the guerrillas' chance to become a Maya army had come and gone.



RESHAPING MAYA SOCIETY: Permanent Counterinsurgency

On 8 August 1983, General Ríos Montt was overthrown in a coup led by his Defence Minister, Brigadier General Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores. The new administration's aims were simple: stabilization and consolidation. At home this meant eradicating the remnants of subversion while consolidating social control. Abroad, it meant counteracting Guatemala's international pariah image to garner the foreign aid to finance the domestic strategy.

On its own terms, the Mejía Victores government enjoyed considerable success. By the time it handed over the presidential sash to the nominally civilian government headed by Vinicio Cerezo in January 1986, politics had truly become an extension of war. Reorganized to establish a garrison in every town over 10,000 people, with civil patrols in every village, the army was entrenched in the countryside. In building such a power base, the military had become the political equal of the business elite that it had traditionally served in what military strategists came to term 'a state of permanent counterinsurgency'.⁸⁵

By 1985, a dwindling number of guerrillas had been pushed back into the remotest mountains and forest. Denied access to much of their support network, the army seemed to have the EGP in particular, where it wanted them: enough of a threat to justify the massive militarization of the countryside and bloated levels of defence spending, yet no real menace to the new pseudo-democratic state the military was forging.

The names of the military's annual programmes – 'Firmness 83', 'Institutional Re-Encounter 84', 'National Security 85', 'National Consolidation 86' – illustrate how the aims of the five-year plan begun by Ríos Montt's 'Victory 82' were institutionalized. But the true nature of the terminology that applied to the Maya was evident to anyone who took a closer look: 'food for work' = forced labour, 'secure and protect' = neutralize and imprison. Such schemes remained part of the broader strategy of incorporation of the Maya into an army-supervised nation state.

If culture had been the basis of indigenous resistance for more than 450 years then culture must be the basis of attack. As Francisca Alavarez, a Maya delegate told the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations in August 1983:

*The military seeks to destroy and shatter our cultural identity as Indians because the regime knows that our identity constitutes a part of our strength to resist and organize.*⁸⁶

Model villages: 'a nation of prisoners'

The basis of the army's strategy were six poles of development, best defined as high security areas incorporating army bases, air strips and artillery as well as civilian population. The army's own propaganda was quite specific, defining a pole as:

Maya language

es of Guatemala

'an organized population centre ... that guarantees the adherence of the populace and their support and participation with the Armed Institution against communist subversion'.⁸⁷

All six poles were located in what had been considered guerrilla strongholds, where, in the army's view, the population was most subversive.

From these poles of development more than 30 model villages began to radiate, the first, Acul, near Nebaj in the Ixil Triangle being inaugurated in December 1983. The poles and model villages varied enormously. By 1989, there were 19 model villages in the Ixil Triangle with a further 12 under construction. However, the Chacaj and Senahu poles have just one model village each. Tactical flexibility has been the army's watchword with at least 500,000 Maya living in or near the poles of development, although only 10-15 per cent of this total actually live in the new model villages.

Conditions in the model villages varied. In some locations, the population was relatively free despite a full-time army presence. However, relaxed regimes tended to be for international scrutiny in places where greater control was deemed superfluous.

'Where barbed wire and an overt army presence are no longer necessary, fear and mistrust of one's neighbours provide sufficient control over indigenous movements', as one report put it.⁸⁸

In most model villages, particularly Playa Grande in the Ixcán and the Ixil Triangle, onerous civil patrolling, checkpoints, permissions to come and go, barbed wire fences and army watchtowers were the norm. Such features led the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, to label the villages 'concentration camps'. Americas Watch described the indigenous groups suffering in them as 'a nation of prisoners'.

Most of those housed in model villages were the survivors of the onslaught on key villages, so in the army's eyes were guerrilla supporters. Some were rounded up immediately, but others fled and spent months and even years in the mountains and tropical forests of the remotest part of the country. In 1994, the Guatemalan army continued to try and bomb or starve several thousand people still living in 'communities in resistance' as they became known.

Militarizing civil society

This massive exercise in cultural surgery required army infrastructure. Between 1982-5, the number of military zones increased from nine to 22, with all departments now co-extensive with military zones. At the same time, the army launched the Inter-Institutional Coordinator System (IICS) which gave each departmental military zone total jurisdiction over the rural development projects of both governmental and outside agencies. State institutions were subordinate to the IICS's departmental councils – the departmental military commander served as president and the civil commander as vice-president on them. Even the civil commanders and mayors of local communities tended to be appointed by the local military commanders who abolished the position of *regidor* (councillor). By 1984, indigenous civil authorities had become virtually defunct.

From October 1983 to November 1984 the IICS applied to only the highland regions but by 1985 the system had been extended to the whole country. It went hand in hand with the creation of S-5, the army's division of Civilian Affairs and Community Development and the expansion of G-2, the military's intelligence network. All this was crucial for the maintenance of military power, particularly in the countryside, after President Cerezo took office in 1986. Indeed, army hardliners would not have acceded to plans for elections without such infrastructure in place.

The National Reconstruction Committee (CRN) – run by Colonel Eduardo Wohlers Rivas – was responsible for implementing the development poles. Originally founded after the 1976 earthquake, it received a new lease of life between 1983-6, although it was always nominally subservient to S-5. This, and the fact that all national and international private voluntary organizations became formally responsible to a CRN department, meant that all donated aid was effectively requisitioned for what one Guatemalan bishop termed 'the army's own project'.

There was an almost missionary zeal about the army's long-term objective – 'changes in the basic structure of the state'. Addressing the first graduating class of the army's new School of Ideological Warfare in June 1984, Colonel Marco Antonio Sánchez explained how to 'fight and defeat the enemy in the terrain of ideas' with a forceful projection of an 'authentic Guatemalan nationalism'.⁸⁹ He went on:

'The existence of ethnic groups demonstrates that we are not integrated; we lack a national identity. Who better than the men in uniform to project ourselves to every last corner of the Fatherland bearing the message of nationalism.'⁹⁰

Re-education and cultural surgery

Re-education, which followed re-location from late 1983, was a key part of this process. It started with the ideological talks at the refugee camps that housed the displaced or the specialist 're-education' camps such as Nuevo Acamal near Cobán, Alta Verapaz or Xemamatze, near Nebaj, El Quiché. In what human rights groups described as brain-washing sessions, indigenous peoples were lectured on political ideology, civil defence and patriotic symbols. The aim was to create an 'ideologically new' indigenous population as banners and signs at the entrance to many of the new communities made clear. 'We don't turn them loose until we think we have totally changed their ideology ... our desire is 100 per cent success', boasted Julio Corsantes, director of Acamal.⁹¹

The simplest aspects of these regimes, such as flag raising to the singing of the national anthem, found their way into all the model villages as official celebrations such as Army Day and Independence Day took the place of traditional indigenous fiestas. 'It's like rewinding a cassette, because this is like a tape recording and you have to keep playing it over and over again', concluded the sergeant in charge of re-education at the Tzacol refugee camp.⁹² 'Indians are very susceptible, they are easy to ply, just like clay', concluded Major Saúl Figueroa Veliz, head of S-2 in Cobán.⁹³

The cultural abuses inherent in this process were horrific.

Families and communities already split and traumatized were often resettled away from the most important source of their identity, their land. The mixing of different linguistic groups meant that Spanish became the common language in many model villages. 'We are like scrambled eggs now', as one villager resettled in one of 100 new Q'eqchi' communities put it.⁹⁴

Meanwhile, those that were within walking distance of their *milpas* were often prevented from working them by a military keen to develop Maya dependence and prevent any possibility of supplies falling into guerrilla hands. Those who did continue farming, albeit often on other people's land redistributed by the army, were encouraged or even forced to grow cash crops, thus breaking the traditional link with maize.

'Re-education' manipulated Maya culture, playing heavily on the indigenous notion of guilt, according to a study by Wilson.⁹⁵ Traditional Q'eqchi' ideas about the causes of sickness point to culpability, and army 'counsellors' extended this notion to include tragedy and difficulties in general. But if everything the refugees had suffered was the result of their own sins, redemption through the army was at hand.

Wilson notes how officers used fundamentalist religious imagery to push such redemption, hand in hand with the evangelical groups now invited into the new communities to proselytize.

The army explicitly implicated Catholics, especially catechists, as causes of the violence. Understanding that it had been a religious conversion which had prompted the people to rebel, the military presumed that it would take another conversion to quell their uprising.'

Although many Maya came to blame themselves for their involvement with the guerrillas the sentiment was as much a reaction to the devastation that their support had brought to their communities as an admission of guilt. Regret did not wipe out the memory of who had actually killed their relatives or burnt their homes. Apparent support for the army or compliance with the civil patrols was just another judicious survival tactic for most Maya. In the camps army officers and journalists were usually told what an informant thought they wanted to hear. But as force not persuasion was the army's chosen tactic and resistance to outside forces was a Maya forte, hearts and minds were hardly likely to be won over.

The Maya response: authority usurped

Evolution and adaptation were again the hallmarks of Maya response. The military's shrewd efforts to co-opt Maya symbols and deities, meant that authority was usurped rather than replaced. As soon as communities reestablished even minimal autonomy from 1985 onwards, *huipiles* were woven again, religious ceremonies re-initiated, cooperatives restarted. Wilson has argued that if ethnocide, ethnically-motivated attack, was the cause, ethnogenesis, cultural rebirth, was the effect.⁹⁶

By the late 1980s it was clear that the army's highland programme had heightened Maya cultural consciousness, not subsumed it. Mixing different ethnic groups had bridged divides which helped establish the basis for a new

pan-Maya consciousness. What had happened seemed to bear out the direst warnings about the nature of the Guatemalan state from Catholic Action activists, grass-roots organizers and even the guerrillas. In Maya thinking opposites attract, balances have to be made, action breeds reaction. By the late 1980s there was sound evidence that the army's 'reconquest' of the highlands was doing just that – breeding a reaction.

Throughout 1983-6 there was further evidence of continuing massacres in those parts of the country that remained zones of conflict. The general pattern in both the development poles and the remainder of the *altiplano*, however, became selective assassination, often the result of army pressure on civil patrols. By 1984, the patrols were undoubtedly the military's single most important vehicle for both securing the population and undermining indigenous society, disrupting economic activity and encouraging individuals to inform on each other. More than a decade later, they remain so.

Jean-Marie Simon cites one typical incident when the army presented five villagers to the local civil patrol, told them they were guerrillas and asked them to decide what to do with them. Despite knowing that the accused were innocent, the village took a community decision to kill the five in order to save the rest of the village from a possible massacre.⁹⁷ Such instances of civil patrol members having to choose between killing or being killed were common. As one civil patroller from Patzún told Americas Watch: 'This is what hell must be like.'⁹⁸

Development as repression

The economic consequences of all this political upheaval were devastating and probably represented as great a long term threat to indigenous society as the immediate physical abuses. With the productive capacity of the highlands crippled by depopulation, forced labour, civil patrolling and the disruption of normal trading patterns, malnutrition and related health problems intensified. Shortages pushed up prices, but many were not allowed by the army to follow the traditional migration pattern to the coastal plantations to boost family income. Many families who sold weaving suffered as tourism dried up.

In some ways, the economic crisis reflected that affecting Guatemalan society as a whole. Inflation increased nearly sixfold to 18.7 per cent in 1985, then doubled again to 37 per cent in 1986, while the minimum wage, even when it was paid, remained fixed. GDP per capita shrunk steadily and dramatically throughout the mid 1980s and a growing shortage of foreign exchange forced the devaluation of the quetzal. Indigenous communities at the bottom of the economic pile, disrupted by war and under military occupation, were the least able to protect themselves.

The army counteracted criticism with elaborate press briefings on the merits of their 'development' projects for the highlands. They pointed to health posts, schools, running water, electricity and roads in their model villages. 'These people have been neglected for centuries, that's how the guerrillas won them over in the first place', one army captain told this writer in 1984. But benevolence was never more than a distant second to security and counterinsurgency concerns.

While schools and health centres have been built in the model villages most often shown to visitors, drugs, books and staff are almost non-existent. The most important issue remains the appropriateness of the development model now foisted on indigenous communities. 'You have roads, but how many Maya have cars?' asked one development expert. 'What use is electricity if you have no means of earning to pay for it?'

The truth, of course, was that the 'development' proffered during this period was on the army's terms, with no indigenous consultation whatsoever. Roads were designed to enable army trucks and jeeps to travel in, rather than let Maya out. Electricity and telecommunications posts were for military intelligence or orders, not for Maya leaders to tell the world what was now happening in their communities. By 1986, even the army-inspired construction programme had been stagnant for more than a year as funds dried up. Only one new model village was inaugurated in 1986. As the new civilian President Vinicio Cerezo took power in January, thousands of displaced Maya awaited rescue from army holding camps.



PLUS ÇA CHANGE... Maya Victims of a Tacit Deal

Although greeted as a positive step abroad, few Guatemalans had any illusions about how much power Vinicio Cerezo, the new 41 year old President would wield at home. The campaign itself did not augur well. Human rights, land reform and the army's 'development' of the countryside remained taboo issues. Despite the absence of a public deal with the military, Cerezo knew where he stood. Asked if there would be trials for human rights abuses he replied: 'We are not going to be able to investigate the past. We would have to put the entire army in jail.'⁹⁹

In what was to emerge as a theme of the Cerezo years, the image rather than any substance was the message. Elections and civilian government became ends in themselves rather than a means to achieve the real reforms that the new President had advocated as a radical young Christian Democrat in the 1970s. Cerezo's failure to use his decisive electoral victory to ally himself with the reemerging popular sector and tackle the army was to cost him, and the country's indigenous people, dear.

Three coup attempts in May 1988, May 1989 and the following August forced Cerezo to become ever more of a hostage to military hardliners as the price of seeing out his term. Such 'technical' coups, designed to extract concessions as much as genuinely threaten the President's tenure, reflected divisions in the military over the conduct of the war and the possibility of peace negotiations with the guerrilla URNG.

In the end the only choice Cerezo seemed to make was to ally himself with what became known as the 'Low-Intensity Conflict' (LIC) wing of the army. This faction, personified by Defence Minister Hector Gramajo, opposed the more hardline 'War and Crisis' (WAC) group who wanted military victory and all-out repression of the popular sector. As neo-liberal economics and political repression became the accepted means of combatting the ongoing socio-political crisis, ordinary Guatemalans, in particular the poorest, paid the price. By the time Cerezo left office, extrajudicial killings were running at more than 900 a year, inflation was up to 60 per cent and unemployment had soared to 45 per cent while real wages fell below the levels of 1980.

The military also knew where they stood. Days before Cerezo took power they decreed an amnesty forbidding any prosecutions of military personnel for actions 'in the course of their duties'. Their arrogance was epitomized by Mejía Victores' press officer, Colonel Edgar D'Jalma Domínguez, who, when asked about the possibility of military trials retorted:

*'Do you think we've left proof? In Argentina there are witnesses, there are books, there are films ... In Guatemala there is none of that. Here there are no survivors.'*¹⁰⁰

The Guatemalan military's confidence was inspired by

their belief that they had vacated the National Palace as victors in their war against the guerrillas. Democratization in fact strengthened the army, freeing the military from having to take the flak for the economic crisis while allowing the country to shed its international pariah status and bid for international aid for the military's 'development' project. As D'Jalma himself said shortly after Cerezo took power: 'For convenience's sake a civilian government is preferable ... the real power will not be lost.'¹⁰¹

It soon became obvious that the army's power base, its control of the countryside, was to remain intact, leaving the country's indigenous people as the real victims of the tacit deal between the new government and the military. Civilian rule was just the third stage of the military's long term masterplan, outlined in the army's 'Plan for Security and Development' in 1982. Total war under Ríos Montt (1982-3) had been replaced by military consolidation in the guise of development under Mejía Victores (1983-5) to be followed now by political consolidation – dubbed 'Security and Development' – under nominal civilian rule. From now on, low-intensity conflict would go hand in hand with low-intensity democracy.

Just one month after being sworn in as President, Vinicio Cerezo confirmed his approval of the model villages by inaugurating the Chisec development pole in Alta Verapaz. He even claimed that the poles had been part of the Christian Democrats' programme since the 1960s. Meanwhile, the new Minister of Development René de León Schlotter stated quite categorically that the main purpose of his ministry was 'to combat subversion ideologically, in much the same way as the army had been doing through the IICCS'.¹⁰²

There were a few changes, albeit as superficial as the nature of the democracy itself. The IICCS were formally replaced by Councils of Development and their military leaders replaced by 22 civilian governors, although only on the proviso that both projects and model villages remain as tightly controlled by the military as ever. Civil Defence Patrols were renamed Voluntary Civil Defence Committees, with President Cerezo making a great show of the fact that patrolling was no longer mandatory. The reality was that in the areas where the military considered them strategically important the patrols were as compulsory as ever.

Above all, the human rights abuses continued, with G-2, the army intelligence division, highlighted as the hub of what two experts described as 'a government programme of political murder more comfortably entrenched than at any time since the mid 1960s'.¹⁰³ Apart from a slight drop in 1988, extrajudicial killings increased steadily under Cerezo to more than 900 by 1990. The reason was simple: the limited political opening that Cerezo's election allowed enabled the popular sector to re-emerge, making repression an even more essential tool of control.

Maya popular organizations in the 1980s

This failure of the new democracy to bring any significant improvements spurred indigenous people to become actively involved in several new pressure groups. The first

and most vociferous of these was the Mutual Support Group or GAM. Founded in 1984 by five *ladino* women who met in city morgues looking for the bodies of their disappeared husbands and sons, it grew rapidly. By 1986 it had more than 1,000 members, 850 of them Maya and nearly all women.¹⁰⁴

Although the dominance of its non-Maya leadership was to become a source of tension and dispute, in the mid 1980s GAM seemed to demonstrate how indigenous and *ladino* women could work side by side in common cause. Hundreds of widows from the highlands learnt how to organize and protest, taking their experience and a new courage back to their communities. 'We learned that we were not alone in our suffering and a great strength I never knew I had came from that', one Maya GAM member told this writer in 1986.

Weekly demonstrations outside the National Palace were an unprecedented step for any opposition group in Guatemala, let alone an organization composed largely of the most marginalized sector of Guatemalan society, indigenous women. A reaction was inevitable and over Easter in 1985 two of the group's leaders, Hector Gómez Calito and Rosario Godoy de Cuevas were tortured and murdered, along with Rosario's 21 year old brother and two year old son.

GAM was followed by the formation in 1988 of the Council of Ethnic Communities *Runujel Junam* (meaning 'Everyone is Equal' in K'iche') or CERJ in Santa Cruz del Quiché, the capital of El Quiché. CERJ's declared aim was to pressure the Guatemalan government 'to advance the goals of democracy, justice and dignity for the Maya peoples while fighting racial discrimination'.¹⁰⁵ Like GAM, CERJ is led by a *ladino*, Amilcar Mendez Urizar but, unlike GAM, is dedicated to the enforcement of indigenous peoples' constitutional rights. Articles 66-70, which address the cultural and ethnic rights of Maya peoples, and Article 34 which prohibits the forced participation in civil defence patrols, have been the main campaigning points to date.

By choosing to campaign specifically on the notion of constitutional rights, CERJ highlighted the gap between the law of Congress for the urban elite and the international community on one side and the law of the army for the rural population on the other. But it also drew attention to a fundamental difference in perception. As one participant in the Minority Rights Group's Maya seminar noted:

'It is important to understand that for us the word "right" refers to something which belongs to us. When someone is abiding by the norms of our community we say that they are practising this "right". When the ladinos speak of rights, however, they mean what any person wants or can have, what is written in the law.'

By 1987 the constitution had been translated into Mam, Kaqchikel, K'iche' and Q'eqchi' – the four main Maya languages in Guatemala – as part of the Cerezo government's concessions on bilingual education. These translations became a powerful *concientización* (consciousness raising) tool for the CERJ human rights promoters who now fanned out from their headquarters in Santa Cruz del Quiché into the surrounding villages.

Legal challenges involved collecting evidence and before long CERJ had thousands of pages of documentation and oral testimony. This was to prove an invaluable resource for a clutch of scholars, anthropologists and human rights activists, some of them Maya, trying to establish the truth of what had happened in the department of El Quiché in the early 1980s. By October 1988 CERJ reported that 78 communities had partially or totally stopped patrolling.

By March the following year, 6,000 Maya had formally demanded the elimination of the civil patrols in their communities; by March 1994 the figure was up to 14,000. The scale of the threat this represented to the military could be measured by the reaction. By March 1992, 25 of CERJ's most prominent campaigners had been killed or disappeared – victims of the increasingly selective repression.¹⁰⁶

In Guatemala City, CONDEG, the National Council of the Displaced of Guatemala, started working amongst the tens of thousands who had fled their homes in the *altiplano* to seek refuge in the slums of Guatemala City. It was a recognition of the twilight world in which many such 'foreigners in their own country' lived. Without identification papers, sought by the military who had often killed family and friends and forced to live clandestinely in illegal shanty towns, many of these displaced people existed completely outside the law.

CONAVIGUA: Maya women take the lead

Indigenous people also played significant roles in other popular organizations. The National Coordinating Committee of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA), almost totally Maya, began in 1988 by making broad demands for material support for families of victims of violence. CONAVIGUA evolved rapidly to become one of the most original popular organizations in Guatemala, making specifically feminist, then cultural demands as it attracted widespread international funding. The organization was to prove there was an alternative to what one participant in the Minority Rights Group seminar described as the *ladino* way of organizing society where 'women and older people are not given proper place and consideration'. In doing so CONAVIGUA developed pioneering proposals, later taken up by others, such as the replacement of civil patrols by a system of civic service in development projects in the highlands.

By 1989 a pattern was discernible in popular organizing. GAM, CERJ, CONAVIGUA and CONDEG were quite fluid organizations whose campaigns often evolved from basic human rights issues social and economic demands. This in itself was a very Maya trait – traditional community organizations had always responded to members' immediate needs, growing organically to fill any crevice of potential resistance or opposition to the economic or political forces ranged against them. GAM, CERJ, CONAVIGUA and CONDEG were all largely or even totally indigenous, even if the leaders of the first two were not. CERJ and CONAVIGUA had also broken new ground in basing themselves in the *altiplano* – taking the military on in what had become its own backyard.

Crucial too was the emergence of indigenous women, not

just as activists in the rank and file but in figures such as Rosalina Tuyuc, María Morales and Fermina López of CONAVIGUA as national leaders and original thinkers. The violence and murder of many men had not only radicalized a whole generation of Maya women but had also transformed social relations in many parts of the *altiplano*. Women now worked the fields, sought more paid employment outside their village and headed more households. By 1994, CONAVIGUA had 14,000 members, organizing, voting and campaigning within a democratic structure operating at village, department and national level.

Judith Züir has suggested that war widows in El Quiché came to occupy a special state as they were freed from some of the constraints of identity and social control within Maya society.¹⁰⁷ This aided their efforts to organize as they learnt Spanish, travelled more widely and earned their own incomes in the *ladino* world. One widow, Doña Flora reflected on her transformation.

*'Ladinos treat us badly in the market place and on the buses. But we as widows are beginning to know a little. Before as wives when we went to the town we would not even think of ascending the steps of the town hall. Now we not only ascend the steps but talk to the mayor!'*¹⁰⁸

From a government and military point of view the organic nature of the popular sector, its interlocking nature, its village base and its growing international links made it almost impossible to combat. CERJ and CONAVIGUA in particular were composed of cell-like units within Maya villages. By 1990 they were complementing a flourishing development sector of co-ops, Maya schools and social organizations under the wing of the church, non-governmental organizations and development groups, both Guatemalan and foreign. To those who had survived the violence of the 1980s it must have seemed like the 1970s all over again but with a renewed emphasis on cultural rights and women's issues.

The growth of the popular sector reinforced the trend of Maya working with *ladinos*. In 1988, GAM, CERJ and CONAVIGUA joined the newly-formed Labour and Popular Action (USAP), an umbrella group headed by the UNSITRAGUA labour confederation. In the same year, the CUC emerged from underground, immediately demonstrating its strength with a January 1989 strike call that saw 70,000 plantation workers walk out demanding higher wages.

Land: protest erupts

The most significant development on the land issue during this period was the formation of the National Association of Peasants for Land (ANC) under Father Andrés Girón. Within months of Cerezo's inauguration, Girón led 16,000 *campesinos* (peasants) from his Escuintla Church to the National Palace in a 'March for Land'. The idea was to test the government's commitment to making land available for purchase. Girón, although arguing that wholesale land reform was the only answer in the long term, stressed that the ANC wanted to purchase land on concessionary terms and secure credit to work it collectively.

By 1988 the ANC had more than 150,000 members and some groups, tired of token moves by the Cerezo administration, had taken to occupying fallow land. The same year the President was obliged to distribute five farms to peasant groups like the ANC thanks, in part, to a US \$8.4 million donation from the European Community which allowed the purchase of 7,700 ha. Girón, meanwhile, condemned INTA (the National Institute for Agrarian Transformation) as ‘an evil organization created for the very purpose of making all land reform a failure’.¹⁰⁹

Girón provided impetus to the development of a limited open land market in Guatemala, although two organizations, CONATIERRA, a state body founded in 1986 and the Penny Foundation, a private USAID-funded organization, already existed to buy land on the open market and redistribute it. But the dynamics of the agrarian situation remained firmly against the Maya, as their land base was further eroded during the Cerezo administration. The government needed to buy land to keep up even a minimal level of redistribution because by the late 1980s there were no more state lands left to distribute. But buying, even if it had been a priority, was hampered by the sorry state of government finances and a surge in the price of land.

The pressure was maintained by the Bishops Conference with their pastoral letter of 1988 entitled *The Cry for Land*. Without offering remedies, the bishops spoke of the urgent need to ‘change our sinful social structures’. The letter marked a new stage in the radicalization of the Bishops Conference – historically one of the most conservative on the continent – a rather belated concession to the pressure from laity and their own clerical conference CONFREGUA. In January 1990 the Archdiocese set up a Human Rights Office, quickly developing a network of monitors and human rights educators which became another important source of pressure on the government.

Although the land crisis intensified during the 1980s, a neo-liberal economic model and the belief that wholesale agrarian reform was not an achievable aim, did lead to the adoption of alternatives. One of these, encouraged by the military, was the intensive cultivation of non-traditional crops for export, in particular vegetables such as snowpeas and broccoli. Grown under contract for food-processing companies in the central and increasingly the western highlands, the new crops allowed Maya to earn far more from their plots. The long term environmental price – large quantities of fertilizers and toxic pesticides with no fallow period – was, however, still to be paid.

This agricultural transformation was just part of the economic diversification of many Maya communities during the 1980s. Urban commerce, crafts, manufacturing and tourism had by 1990 become as important as plantation labour or traditional agriculture in many communities. Most of this was the product of necessity but the diversification was also made possible by opportunity – more roads, more tourists, family or community trading links in towns and the capital.

The Maya way – the only way

The Cerezo regime was another vital stage in raising political consciousness among Guatemala’s Maya. By 1990 it was clear that Cerezo had given almost nothing on basic Maya demands – any concessions had been extracted at a high cost to the pressure groups concerned. Many felt betrayed by Cerezo but to many Maya this betrayal took on an ethnic significance – it was betrayal by a *ladino* who had won at least partially with indigenous votes. There was a growing sense that only Maya could understand, campaign for or deliver Maya demands, that only Maya could appreciate the complete powerlessness and cultural abuse of 500 years of history.

For many Maya this belief had been reinforced by working within *ladino* structures alongside *ladinos* in the popular sector. On the one hand, Maya activists were asking themselves whether in a state where *ladinos* monopolized power, *ladinos* and Maya could ever share the same objectives. On the other hand it was a question of strategy. *Ladino*-run organizations tended to confront the state head on as the guerrillas had done, with the resultant repression usually heaped on the most vulnerable Maya.

Maya strategy was to challenge particular areas of state power, often at a local level, often on a purely cultural agenda – language, traditions, religion or community politics. By 1990 it was becoming clear how much more vulnerable the state was to this multi-faceted, multi-communal approach and how less likely it was to react repressively to cultural rather than political demands.

As the will to set a Maya agenda and use their own means strengthened, the desire to work within *ladino* or state organizations weakened. The political system, widely discredited by the Cerezo years, was one obvious case. In the 1985 elections, eight Maya deputies had been elected, six of them Christian Democrats. In the 1990 elections only six were elected, only two of them Christian Democrats.

But if *ladino* party affiliations, essential to secure election to Congress, were discredited, local representation, where increased numbers of Maya ran as civic committee independents, was not. In the 1985 municipal elections, 59 Maya mayors and 111 *ladinos* were elected. The municipalities that went to the polls in 1988 returned 68 Maya mayors and 80 *ladinos*. In 1990 some 80 Maya mayors were elected and in 1993, 92 Maya mayors won office compared to only 56 *ladinos*.¹¹⁰

In October 1990, the Permanent Seminar of Mayan Studies (SPEM) organized a one-day Maya People’s Forum for the eight *ladino* candidates hoping to take the Presidential sash from Vinicio Cerezo. ‘We hoped on the basis of answers to questions about their policy towards us to be able to recommend a candidate to indigenous people. We could not’, explains Alberto Esquit, archivist at CEDIM, a Maya research institute. The way forward it seemed, had to be Maya.

INDIGENOUS INTERNATIONALISM: Refugees and Rapporteurs

Refugees, the Guatemalan diaspora and the international attention it spawned proved one of the government's biggest headaches and one of the Maya community's most effective pressure points in the 1980s and 1990s. Successive Presidents found it difficult to maintain that they were developing a flourishing democracy while tens of thousands of nationals remained in exile, fearing for their lives. The exiles, meanwhile, played a key role in drawing international attention to Guatemala, as they recounted their personal testimonies or lobbied foreign governments, the United Nations or non-governmental organizations.

Such 'indigenous internationalism' as one exile, Victor Montejo, dubbed it, assumed a new importance in the run up to the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Europeans in Latin America in 1992. Guatemala – along with Bolivia, one of only two Latin American countries with a majority indigenous population – was the most potent media example of the continuing conquest. The country also seemed increasingly out of step as the civil conflicts in Nicaragua (1990) and El Salvador (1992) came to a halt and the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc made a nonsense of the unchanged Cold War rhetoric of the Guatemalan military.

It is impossible to say how many fled Guatemala at the height of the repression but it seems that about 120,000 people – the vast majority indigenous – made it into Mexico. However, refugee camps near the border housed only about 46,000, mostly communities that had fled the departments of El Quiché and Huehuetenango en masse.

The remainder were absorbed into Mexican society generally, went on to the United States or sought refuge in other countries, in particular Honduras and Belize. The extent of the diaspora could be measured by the swollen Guatemalan communities in Mexico City, Los Angeles and even Canada. One of the most interesting from an indigenous perspective was the several hundred Q'anjob'al Maya who settled as a community in what became known as Indiantown, Florida.¹¹¹

The Esquipulas peace accord of 1987 identified assistance for refugees and the displaced as a regional priority. The result in Guatemala was the formation of the government's Committee for Aid to Returnees (CEAR) – designed to persuade exiles to return. Its impact was minimal, even by the Cerezo regime's own estimation. According to CEAR, some 13,500 Guatemalans had returned spontaneously or under the agencies of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) by December 1988.¹¹² Independent estimates put the number at barely a third of this total.

The major obstacle was the lack of effective guarantees of humane treatment – in essence the fact that the Cerezo administration's writ did not run in army-controlled areas. 'Maya have no confidence, can you blame them?' asked

one priest at a refugee camp in Chiapas, Mexico in 1986. 'Returnees are regarded with particular suspicion by the army. To their minds these are the ones that got away.'

For many indigenous communities, exile was almost as traumatic as the massacres and the repression that had provoked it. Uprooted from the ancestral lands and landscapes around which individual village culture revolved, many found their identity severely threatened. During 1982-5, Guatemalan army raids over the border into Chiapas were common and for many the trauma was intensified when the Mexican government began a relocation scheme which saw their removal to a series of major camps in Campeche and Quintana Roo, hundreds of miles away from the frontier. Relocation seemed to rule out the possibility of a quick return and took the refugees away from their cultural cousins in Mexico's highland Maya communities.

El retorno: **reinforcing communal identity**

The move and concern about the loss of indigenous identity stimulated the formation of a Permanent Commission of Representatives of Guatemalan Refugees (CCPP). Representatives of about 60 delegates from all the camps began negotiations with the Cerezo government in 1989 as part of the National Reconciliation Commission's 'National Dialogue' under the Esquipulas peace accord. Since the army refused to take part, the talks mirrored those with the URNG in 1987 and 1990, stumbling over key demands such as the disbanding of the civil patrols.

It was not until October 1992, nearly two years into the government of Jorge Serrano, who had replaced Vinicio Cerezo, that a minimal deal was done. In the 1992 accord the government recognized the right to life, free movement, 'community integrity' and access to land. But the CCPP failed to negotiate the abolition of the civil patrols or the removal of military barracks in the areas in which they were to resettle, in particular the Ixcán. CCPP leaders were disappointed. 'This is no gift from the Guatemalan government', one complained.

On the civil patrols, the CCPP had to be content with a strictly limited agreement between the URNG and the government initialled in Mexico City just weeks before their own accord. Even this agreement – essentially a pledge not to organize new civil patrols in areas in which 'there are no reasons to do so' (i.e. where there was no military threat) – was only due to come into force when an overall agreement on human rights was implemented.

But all that seemed to matter little as the convoy of 70 buses bringing 2,400 refugees who made up the first mass return wound their way through the highlands to Guatemala City in January 1993. Thousands lined the route to cheer the refugees and offer gifts – bags of corn, kitchen utensils, money. Others had more pressing missions – searching the lists of returnees for missing relatives or the grandchildren they had never seen.

The nature of the return was a reflection of the community that had evolved in the Mexican camps over the previous decade. Refugees termed the mass return in January 1993 and one further homecoming of 900 individuals a

year later in January 1994 *'el retorno'* (the return). This CCPP-negotiated collective return as a community contrasted with the CEAR-mediated voluntary repatriation known to the refugee community as *'la repatriación'*.

The distinction demonstrated the extent to which the refugees had become a politically-conscious grassroots organization in their own right while in exile. A sense of community and culture had by 1993 been reinforced through agencies like the CCPP. Finn Stepputat has noted the way in which social organization in the camps was based on the so-called *cargo* (burden) systems of communal responsibilities in indigenous communities. Stepputat points out that in adopting the *cargo* system the refugees were actually reviving practices which had been abandoned in most Maya communities by the mid 1970s.¹¹³

In Mexico, different ethnic groups had been housed in different streets and neighbourhoods, allowing individuals to speak their own language and name their place of refuge after their own village. The same practice was adopted in their new location in Guatemala: the 4,500 hectares of muddy Ixcán forest entitled 'Polígono 14' on government maps was rapidly renamed 'Victoria 20 de Enero' by the returnees.

Continued resistance: the CPRs

Other refugees still within Guatemala began to make their presence known from 1990 onwards. Among the hundreds of thousands who had been displaced were some 20,000 people who had fled and hidden in remote mountains or jungle since the early 1980s. Calling themselves the Communities of Population in Resistance or CPRs, these groups withstood all manner of deprivation as they were singled out for attack by the military. To senior army officers, the CPRs constituted crucial logistical support for the URNG and set a dangerous precedent for evasion of control mechanisms such as the civil patrols. Ariel bombing raids were common with whole communities abandoned when army patrols raided CPR villages.

The CPR's demands mirrored those of the refugees in Mexico: withdrawal of army bases, suspension of civil patrols, suspension of all military activity against them, freedom of movement and full civil rights. They wanted, as Isabel Brito one CPR member put it: 'To come out of the mud, the cold and the shadows'.¹¹⁴ From 1991 onwards a series of international delegations visited the CPRs in the Ixcán and surrounding mountains as they became the focus of a major campaign in Guatemala and abroad. In January 1994, the first CPR came out of hiding, stepping literally into the 'sunshine' of the media spotlight with television crews, human rights officials, ambassadors and bishops all on hand to greet them.

The refugees and in particular the CPRs – democratic and self-governing – were a powerful symbol on a number of different levels. Firstly, they represented resistance – the sort of unarmed but effective resistance that had ensured the survival of the Maya people over the previous 500 years. In particular, the CPRs demonstrated the reluctance of Maya from some of the most traditional and isolated communities to leave their land. Secondly, CPR

members represented the power of personal witness, being survivors who carried with them the oral history of the fate of many highland communities – communities from which in some cases there were believed to be no survivors.

Thirdly, the CPRs represented the survival and reinforcement of a community spirit that seemed to be dissipating in so many indigenous communities. While many Maya villages now found themselves divided by religion, civil patrols, politics and even personal income, the CPRs had had to hang together, developing schools and health posts, a communal farming system and a revival of Maya tradition and culture in the process.

Fourthly, the CPRs demonstrated the extent to which the war was continuing and how much the civilian population remained a target. Stalemate at the negotiating table since 1987 had only served to bring on periodic intensifications of the war as the army persisted in its belief that it could finish off the guerrillas on the battlefield. According to the CPRs, as recently as March 1993, 700 of their members had to flee across the Mexican border to escape helicopter strafings and mortar fire.

The CPRs saw themselves as 'an example of the new society for Guatemala's poor'.¹¹⁵ Such political consciousness made their emergence from hiding as much a political as logistical problem for the government. In many ways, CPR members emerged back into society to face the same problems they had fled – militarization, land shortages and economic uncertainty.

It is too early to say whether government promises will be fulfilled, but the experience of the Mexican refugees who returned during the Cerezo administration has not been encouraging. Those who were granted land by INTA were often given disputed titles on plots subject to severe erosion or flooding. In 1994, many repatriated refugees were still waiting for new citizenship documents and the promised government resettlement assistance.

Internationalism: the broader context

From 1982 onwards, the refugee exodus helped to focus the international spotlight on what was happening in Guatemala. Human rights groups published reports and lobbied while refugees, helped by the Sanctuary Movement, which offered refuge in homes and churches in North America, began to attract media attention with their testimonies. But the process was also operating in reverse. As Guatemala came to the world's attention, the world came to Guatemala. Delegations, human rights investigators and aid agency personnel initially came for short visits before increasingly beginning to establish offices and a permanent presence.

Such groups took many forms. Peace Brigades International (PBI) sought to provide foreign escort protection for individuals at risk and produce human rights reports. The Centre for Human Rights Legal Action (CHRLA) prised open international legal doors by taking cases of human rights abuse or disputed land tenure to the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington. And since 1992, the Guatemalan Forensic

Anthropology Team has been trying to identify the remains of more than 200 Maya dug up at three different clandestine burial sites in the *altiplano*.

A major international catalyst from the indigenous perspective was the publication of *I ... Rigoberta Menchú* in 1984. It was hard to quibble with the publisher's description of the text as 'one of the few complete expressions of Indian self-knowledge since the Spanish conquest'.¹¹⁶ Ms Menchú, a K'iche' Maya who became a CUC leader after the murder of her brother, father and mother in separate incidents of army brutality, simply told her story in what *The Times* of London described as 'a fascinating description of the culture of an entire people'. The power of Menchú's testimony was confirmed by her first few lines: 'My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.'¹¹⁷

From 1982 Rigoberta Menchú was among the first indigenous people to present cases at a special United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations established the previous year. The power of their testimony and the link-up with other indigenous groups developed into a campaign within the United Nations for legal recognition of indigenous rights.

In August 1988 the United Indian Delegation of Guatemala represented by Gabriel Ixmatá of the Guatemalan Cooperative Movement (MCG), Francisco Calí of the Highlands Campesino Committee (CCDA) and Rigoberta Menchú and Rosario Pu of the CUC, made the most complete presentation to date.¹¹⁸ At that session, the working group made progress in drafting a Universal Declaration on Indigenous Rights as the first step on the long road to adoption of a United Nations Declaration or even Convention.

Maya pressure was also instrumental in forcing a revision in 1989 of the International Labour Organisation's Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. Convention 169 – still the only international statutory instrument on the rights of indigenous people – has now become a campaign issue as Maya groups step up the pressure on the Guatemalan government to sign the Convention.

However, there were setbacks. After determined lobbying by the Guatemalan government, the General Assembly of the United Nations decided in February 1987 to mark an 'improvement' in the human rights situation in Guatemala by downgrading its concern. Hector Gros Espiell, an Uruguayan, was appointed as a UN 'special expert' in place of a 'special rapporteur'. The latter represented the highest level of UN concern, having to make regular trips to Guatemala and present full reports to the General Assembly.

Espiell was replaced by Christian Tomuschat who in turn was replaced by the former Argentine lawyer, Dr Monica Pinto, in 1993. Both Tomuschat and Pinto pressed the Guatemalan government on two key issues: impunity and the dissolution of the civil patrols. In her most recent report in February 1994, Pinto repeated the demands of her predecessor for the government to enact the laws that would make Articles 66-70 of the constitution – those dealing with indigenous rights – a reality.¹¹⁹

Pinto also pushed for 'measures of positive or reverse discrimination' in favour of Guatemala's Maya and the ratifi-

cation of ILO Convention 169.¹²⁰ But it was a measure of how central the Maya had become in the UN that by 1993 they were pressing for their own special rapporteur for indigenous issues. Mayanization was not just a domestic phenomenon.

MAYANIDAD: alone but together

By the time Vinicio Cerezo left office in January 1991, it was clear that a fledgling Maya movement was on the rise. Based on *Mayanidad* or the belief that to be Maya was something culturally, socially and even politically distinct, the movement was, of course, not new. The tenacity with which indigenous people had held to this belief for more than 500 years had been the very basis of their survival.

What was new were the organizational abilities, the educational background and the political motivation of the new exponents and the way in which they were prepared to write, speak and campaign openly on a platform of *Mayanidad*. Students, intellectuals, community-based professionals, teachers and health care workers – the new advocates were literate and largely urban but often had strong links to the mass of rural indigenous people in the communities they came from or visited in their work.

The first product of the new wave was *Maya Majawil Q'ij* (Mam for 'New Dawn'). *Maya Majawil Q'ij* was originally formed in September 1990 to coordinate the Second Continental Meeting of the 500 Years of Indigenous and Popular Resistance in Quetzaltenango the following year. The main sponsoring organizations were those already well established in the popular sector – CONAVIGUA, CUC, CONDEG, GAM, the CPRs and CERJ. But the objective of *Maya Majawil Q'ij* – an umbrella group for such organizations – was slightly different, providing a forum for the discussion of ideas and projects of members as Maya. Ethnicity, usually present but nearly always subordinated within the popular sector, was the starting point within *Maya Majawil Q'ij*.

Dividing the country up into regions under local coordinators, *Maya Majawil Q'ij* developed projects with local communities at village level and pushed for inclusion of Maya representatives as Maya in national fora. Much of the activity was interlinked. 'Workshops that encouraged older people to recall traditional religious practices or farming techniques might stimulate younger community activists to revive them', says Juan León, a leading *Maya Majawil Q'ij* member. Unity was a constant theme, not only amongst different Maya groups but also with *ladinos* who supported their cultural objectives.

Maya Majawil Q'ij was a logical development of the growing Mayanization of non Maya-specific organizations which had significant indigenous membership. Demands for what were broadly termed cultural rights, meaning rights as Maya, had been pushed up the agenda of many popular organizations by 1991. Some of this was attributable to the general cultural revival, but other aspects were purely practical. Traditional medicine, for instance, had surged in popularity within grassroots organizations in the 1980s as a response to the economic crisis and the rise in the price of imported drugs.

The Council of Maya Organizations of Guatemala: a new militancy

By the end of that year, another coordinating body had announced its formation. The Council of Maya Organizations of Guatemala (COMG) is an umbrella group of cultural organizations including linguistic groups such as the Academy of Maya Languages of Guatemala (ALMG, see box), research and documentation centres such as CEDIM, and development organizations such as COCADI, the Kaqchikel Coordinator for Integral Development. It was designed to bridge a perceived gap between the intellectuals in the academic organizations and people on the ground in the *altiplano*.

COMG soon came into direct confrontation with the government on political and economic issues. Its manifesto, *The Specific Demands of the Maya People*, called for economic and political self-determination with legal, civil and military autonomy in order to 'guarantee the Maya people their right to seek their own destiny'.¹²¹ The demand for semi-sovereign arrangements sprang from the belief that the Maya, like other indigenous peoples worldwide, were a series of conquered nations, not ethnic minorities.

COMG's platform pushed the *Mayanidad* movement into 1992 – the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas – and a new militancy. Support from abroad, the growth of indigenous movements continent-wide and the limited political opening at home were crucial factors, but local activity was the key. Demetrio Cotjí, an executive member of COMG, made this observation when asked about militancy: 'The questions of Maya identity invite confrontation by their very nature. I am being pushed from behind.'¹²²

Raising ethnic consciousness involved raising questions and the plethora of groups involved in political, educational or development work amongst Maya people by 1992 were all having similar impacts. 'Read people their rights in a constitution written in Mam or K'iche' and they want to know why their rights are not being respected', observed one CERJ activist.

As more Maya moved into Maya groups rather than the popular organizations that had absorbed them in the 1980s, the ethnic-class debate began to rage again. The division was apparently clear: the *ladino*-dominated unions and popular organizations tended to use a class analysis. Maya were seen as part of the struggle because they were the poorest, most repressed and most marginalized sector of the population, not because they were Maya. The concept of *Mayanidad* or what by 1992 was becoming known as Maya nationalism, reversed the analysis. Maya were the poorest, most repressed and most marginalized sector of the Guatemalan population precisely because of the cultural racism inherent in the Guatemalan state.

Class-culture debate rages again

In many ways it was the same debate that had raged in guerrilla ranks 10 years earlier. Indeed, the strength with which the *Mayanidad* movement emerged in the 1990s undoubtedly reflected some of the deception and disillusion felt towards the guerrillas. It was a reaction to the

guerrilla leadership as *ladinos* as much as political thinkers. *Ladino* wrongdoing went back more than 400 years in Maya oral history, to many the guerrillas were now part of that experience.

There was another factor underlying the movement's cultural emphasis. Culture seemed less political and was thus less likely to attract the repression that direct political involvement had done in the 1970s and 1980s. Religion, literacy, history and even cultural rights seemed less threatening but could be just as potent. 'Now we talk about the times of our ancestors and let people make their own connections', explained Herminio Pérez, a Mam radio station broadcaster. 'For us the past is a tool to analyse the present in order to plan the future.'¹²³

The fault line between Maya and popular politics was often indiscernible, but one clear indication of where any one of the ever-growing number of organizations stood was its relationship with the URNG. Pure Mayanists believe it is as important to rid Maya communities of the class analysis of the left as the repression of the right. As nation states dissolved in a post cold war world where left-wing ideology seemed to crumble as fast as the Berlin Wall, the Mayanist analysis gained ground. If conquered nations in the Baltics or Caucasus could win their independence or autonomy, why not the Maya nations of Central America?

But it would be wrong to place too much emphasis on a class-culture division. In reality, there is a great deal of overlap between popular and cultural organizations, the division being one of approach and tactics rather than action and aims. Political or social activity in Guatemala has often been a shifting kaleidoscope of the same personalities wearing different hats under different banners. For most Maya, the 'recovery of Maya identity' advocated by the Mayanists had to go hand in hand with the practical material objectives of the popular movement. 'It's not either or, one first, the other second', notes one Maya teacher. 'You can't eat culture.'

Perhaps the key source of unity in the ethnic-class debate is simply the common threat. 'Both the popular organizations and the ethnic sector are too weak to reject potential allies', notes one foreign development worker. 'What does it matter if you're kidnapped or killed because you're campaigning for a pay increase as a trade union leader or to end civil patrol recruitment as a Maya nationalist?'

Quetzaltenango meeting highlights differences

Indeed, the real or potential divisions within the *Mayanidad* movement might prove as potent as any with natural allies outside it. All the movement's key leaders have different priorities and emphases. As anthropologist Carol Smith has pointed out, for Demetrio Cotjí, Maya nationalism means challenging the colonial ideology embedded in progressive as well as conservative thinking.¹²⁴ For Guillermo Rodríguez, director of a Maya research organization in Quetzaltenango, Maya nationalism means combining modern science and technology with traditional Maya knowledge.

For Ricardo Cajas, political activist and 1990 mayoral can-

didate for Quetzaltenango, it means taking charge of Maya political organizations and economic development without paternalistic *ladino* or foreign intermediaries. This is another key point of fissure within the Maya movement. Juan León of *Maya Majawil Q'ij* identifies three main groups.

'There are those who want to ally themselves with the government to effect change, the separatists who don't want anything to do with any organization with a ladino component or association, and those who'll work with anyone if they think it furthers their specifically Maya aims.'

The second meeting of the 'Continental Campaign of 500 Years of Indigenous, Popular and Black Resistance' in Guatemala's second largest city, Quetzaltenango, in October 1991 demonstrated many of the emerging trends. The first was simply the scale of Maya mobilization and organization. As delegates from all over Latin America and the Caribbean honed their plans to counteract official government celebrations of the Columbus quincentenary the following year, 25,000 Maya, complete with banners, bands and Maya priests conducting religious ceremonies, gathered outside.

The second feature was the intensification of the culture-class debate. Rigoberta Menchú, by now Guatemala's most famous Maya exile, came under attack for her work with non-indigenous organizations. It was by no means the majority view. The Continental Campaign, as its full title implied, was a broad alliance and *indigenista* advocates were warned of falling into the trap of being as racist as their opponents.

By 1992 it was clear that Maya, whether within popular or purely indigenous organizations, were in the vanguard of the movement for social change. In February 1992 a number of indigenous groups demanded participation as Maya in the government-URNG peace talks. The demand was a logical extension of the growing belief that it was indigenous people who had been the principal victims of both armies. Later that year a group of Maya individuals went further, filing a lawsuit for one million quetzales' damages against the URNG for pain and suffering, crop destruction and kidnapping.¹²⁵

Protest grows as Columbus anniversary approaches

By the summer of 1992 political tension had risen markedly. As the press launched a series of investigations into military impunity, some 500 Maya from the village of Cajola near Quetzaltenango began a march to Guatemala City. They arrived in the main square in July demanding land to which they had been granted title in 1910. They spoke for tens of thousands of Maya, increasing numbers of whom were taking direct action on land issues.

Within three hours they were under sustained attack from baton-wielding anti-riot police, even as their leaders were meeting with government representatives in the National Palace. Television flashed the pictures of indigenous women and children running for cover around the country. The resulting outcry forced the resignation of Interior Minister Fernando Hurtado.

Human rights, the demand for land, poverty ... it did not go unnoticed in the Guatemalan press that the causes of popular protest in 1992 were the same as those that had launched the armed struggle 30 years before. But something else was becoming clear. While the government was confident in negotiating with a weak and relatively pliant union movement, the popular sectors, particularly Maya organizations, were less predictable, more diverse and apparently everywhere. In short, they were less controllable.

The reason was the simple diversity of indigenous organization, a reflection of the diversity of Maya culture itself. Just as it had precluded the application of an effective 'Indian control' policy in the past, so it did now. Under such umbrella groups as COMG or *Maya Majawil Q'ij* were dozens of co-ops, health programmes, literacy classes, women's organizations and human rights groups.

These groups succeeded by avoiding direct confrontation with state/*ladino* power – economic or political – with only occasional direct challenges when circumstances were propitious. By 1992 it was clear that this traditional Maya way: local, subtle and culturally rooted, was proving more effective and less costly than the guerrillas' very *ladino*, headlong confrontation with the state.

In July 1992, Vice President Gustavo Espina showed typical *ladino* disdain when he proposed that the Cajola Maya be relocated from outside the National Palace so that 'they do not mix with other popular sectors that can use them politically'. The real alarm, of course, was that 500 Maya from an unknown *altiplano* village might ignite an uncontrollable wave of popular protest by leading rather than being led.

Rigoberta Menchú: Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

In October 1992, Rigoberta Menchú returned to Guatemala for only the third time since she had gone into exile in 1981. She was in the highland town of San Marcos when, at dawn on 12 October, the Norwegian ambassador in Mexico telephoned to tell her that the Nobel Committee had made her the Peace Prize Laureate of 1992.

As the Nobel Laureate, Rigoberta Menchú threatened the increasingly nervous Guatemalan state on three levels: she was a Maya, a woman and, above all, a survivor. She brought together in one person many of the disparate strands of the Maya movement, linking the campaign at home and abroad. As a leader of the CUC peasant federation in Guatemala but a spokesperson for indigenous people abroad, she seemed to bridge the class-culture debate gap.

As thousands of ordinary Maya lined the highland roads to cheer her triumphal progress to Guatemala City on 13 October 1992 it was clear that the voiceless, at least, saw her as the Nobel Committee had intended – as their representative. In a culture with few role models, the example of Rigoberta, an illiterate, virtual slave just 15 years before she stepped out under the bright lights of Oslo City Hall to receive the award in December 1992, was tremendous. Maya defining themselves as Maya and winning recognition as such on the international stage could only help advance the cause of cultural equality at home.

'We were working on a water project which was stalled for genuine fear of reprisals', recalls André Bessières, the first Guatemala Director of the Vicente Menchú Foundation, the development organization set up with the Nobel Peace Prize award. 'A few days after the announcement one of the participants said to me: "I'm not sure what it means but we should go ahead now because if anything happens to us I know Rigoberta will raise our case abroad".'

Serrano coup backfires

The international attention that Guatemala attracted throughout the last three months of 1992 added to the pressure on the fragile regime of President Jorge Serrano. The Nobel Peace Prize was followed by Bill Clinton's victory in the US presidential elections – a development which increased calls for peace and demilitarization in Central America. Both events reinforced divisions within the army, already accentuated by the on-off nature of the peace negotiations with the URNG and the agreement with the CCPP on the mass repatriation of refugees from Mexico.

Crucially, the popular sector managed to maintain much of the momentum built up in 1992 into the following year. The announcement of a 50 per cent increase in electricity prices in February saw the popular sector and industry unite in a chorus of complaint. In May increasingly powerless and threatened by an investigation into government corruption, Serrano tried to imitate the *autogolpe* or 'self-coup' of President Alberto Fujimori of Peru. Announcing the dissolution of Congress and the Supreme Court, he proceeded to suspend parts of the constitution.

There was national and international outrage. The military which had initially come together to back Serrano sensed it could not hold the line and decided to play reconciliatory kingmaker. Congressional leaders, private sector groups and members of the Constitutional Court were called together to try and hammer out a solution. At one point Rigoberta Menchú, in Guatemala for an international summit of indigenous peoples, was asked to join the negotiations. She walked out in a matter of hours claiming that representatives were only interested in using her presence to legitimize the process.

When it became clear that Serrano's hardline deputy Gustavo Espina Salguero would not command international or popular support, the army settled on Ramón de León Carpio, one of their sternest critics in his capacity as the country's widely respected human rights ombudsman. The new President was confirmed by Congress on 6 June. The army, once again centre stage in the political process, had pulled off its most sophisticated coup yet.

Maya education: going to the sixth grade

Carlos had looked forward to going to school and was desperate to learn. But when the eager six year old sat down in class in San Juan Comalapa, Chimaltenango, he could not understand a word. The teacher spoke Spanish; Carlos only spoke Kaqchikel. 'It was like being in a box without an escape', says Carlos. Although he went on to become an economist, most of his classmates did not. Fifty per cent had to repeat first grade; only 10 per cent of Carlos' classmates got to the sixth grade.

Government figures put illiteracy in Guatemala at 49.2 per cent, making it the second most illiterate country in Latin America. Amongst indigenous people, illiteracy is 75 to 80 per cent, rising to over 90 per cent for indigenous women. 'The school itself is the source of illiteracy. It is the scene of a confrontation of cultures', concludes Mario Leyton, a UN educational consultant working in Guatemala.¹²⁶

Bilingual education: assimilationist?

In October 1984, the government took the first tentative steps towards change, inaugurating the Primary Education Improvement Project (Bilingual Education), or PRONEB. The aim was simple: 'to provide relevant bilingual education to the indigenous children of the Guatemalan highlands'.¹²⁷

The theory included training for teachers, the development of bilingual teaching materials and relevant curriculum development. The practice was the gradual introduction of Spanish as a second language, as well as greater cultural sensitivity. No classes were to be held during the harvest seasons; maths, PRONEBI suggested, might be learnt in terms of the economics of coffee growing.

Ten years on, it is clear that PRONEBI has had some impact. A USAID evaluation study in 1993 concluded that PRONEBI schools had lower dropout and higher promotion rates than their traditional equivalents. The scheme seemed to be particularly effective in encouraging more girls to stay at school. But PRONEBI is very limited. For the past 10 years it has only operated in Mam, Kaqchikel, K'iche' and Q'eqchi – the four most widely spoken of Guatemala's 21 indigenous languages – although the programme is now expanding to cover Q'anjob'al, Ixil, Tz'utujil and Poqomchi'. In 1991, just 14.7 per cent of the indigenous population of school age (5-14 years) were enrolled in a PRONEBI school.¹²⁸

Licda Ernestina Reyes, the director of PRONEBI, is the first to admit the difficulties. In recent years her budgets have been slashed, poor pay means an annual haemorrhage of expensively-trained bilingual teachers, and she complains of a shortage of PRONEBI teachers for grades beyond the second.

Whether by design or intent, the result is that most Maya children are taught in Spanish from the age of seven or eight, even in PRONEBI schools. 'What they have been doing is using the Maya languages to teach Spanish. When the child has learnt Spanish they stop teaching Maya', claims Demetrio Cotjí, a sociologist who was one of the first Maya in Guatemala to secure a doctorate. 'Unfortunately the Ministry of Education is financing a programme of ethnocide and destruction'.¹²⁹

Maya schools: the Academy of Maya Languages (ALMG)

Indeed, the most lasting legacy of the PRONEBI programme may be its catalytic effect: since it was launched, dozens of local Maya schools have sprung up all over the country, run by and for Mayas, and teaching only in Maya.

The Academy of Maya Languages of Guatemala has been at the forefront of training for Maya literacy facilitators, who run such schools in more than 50 centres around the country. Founded in October 1986, the ALMG became a legally autonomous body in November 1990 when a legislative decree passed by Congress guaranteed it an annual budget.

In 1987 the government approved the ALMG's plans for a uniform Maya alphabet for all 21 languages. For months intense debate had raged, particularly over what sounds should be represented by the letters 'w', 'k', and 'q'. However, the problems of equating one letter to one sound was just a symptom of something much broader: the real arguments were political and cultural.

Past efforts to teach Maya languages had been hampered by a variety of alphabets, nearly all of which had been devised by Europeans and North Americans. Foremost amongst these was the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), whose evangelical preachers, teachers and missionaries had a vested economic and social interest in texts published in previous alphabets. For many, like Cotjí, the assertion of the ALMG's alphabet was a nationalist cause, a symbolic reclaiming by Maya of their own languages. 'We have no more need for foreign excavators and interpreters of our heritage', he told SIL representatives in a debate on Maya languages in Quetzaltenango.¹³⁰ Andres Cuz, the Cultural-Linguistic Director of ALMG, agrees but is quick to point out how far things have moved on.¹³¹

Today the ALMG runs five programmes, covering research, education and language development, work overseen by a council composed of the presidents of each of the 21 Maya language groups. Dictionaries of up to 5,000 words in each language are being compiled; the only limits Cuz says are resources – trained personnel and money.

Mayanizing the education system

Andres Cuz sees the ALMG's work as having a domino effect. Accessible education means a surge in demand for education; literacy means a demand for books. 'Often people start literacy classes asking: "What use is it to me?" By the time they have finished they are asking: "Where are our books? Where are our libraries?"'¹³²

If language is the single most defining criteria of indigenous identity, the ALMG is one of the most important Maya organizations in Guatemala today. In the past 15 years there has been an explosion in the demand for education amongst the Maya. Linguist Nora England points out that in 1976 there were no more than 30 Maya university students in the whole country; by 1991 there were more than 500. In the past most of those would have emerged completely ladinizated. Not today. The student body at the University of Quetzaltenango is now 40 per cent self-recognized Maya.

The education system, like so much else in Guatemala, is experiencing a wave of 'Mayanization' from both within and without. As the ALMG's catalogue of textbooks, and dictionaries grows, so the need to make a conversion into Spanish education will diminish. As literacy grows, so access to Maya culture will increase. As the uniform alphabet gathers force, so will pan-Maya nationalism and an already discernible trend towards more Maya bilingualism in Maya languages.

CONCLUSION: Now and Forever

As President, Ramiro de León Carpio has so far proved as much a disappointment for indigenous people as his predecessors. With no party or power base, there were high hopes that he would ally himself with the popular sector with which he had established so much credibility as Human Rights Ombudsman.

Instead, he was soon following the Cerezo route, allying himself with the military and business sector who had smoothed his path to power. The broad coalition that had backed his assumption of the presidency fell apart as a result. On 8 October an alliance of popular forces formally withdrew support as issues of economic and social policy were resolved in favour of CACIF, the private business chamber.

The result was a massive boycott of a presidential referendum on constitutional reform on 30 January 1994 when less than 16 per cent of registered electors voted, nearly one-fifth of whom spoiled their ballots. One commentator spoke of: 'An overwhelming defeat for all politicians ... an institutional emergency. By abstaining the people have expressed their desire for change.'¹³³ Disaffection was followed by a spate of strikes and popular protests throughout the spring, with coup rumours rife from February onwards.

One of the biggest disappointments for indigenous people has been the new President's failure to abolish the civil patrols. By early 1994, Ramiro de León Carpio was proposing to convert them into Peace and Development Committees, local networks that would effectively act as police forces and aid channels throughout the highlands.

Most observers saw this as a development which anticipates the implementation of a peace agreement with the guerrillas. Such committees would maintain the crucial army intelligence and control apparatus in Maya areas, reinforce the existing divisions within the communities and perhaps form the basis for a military-sponsored political party.

Whatever their eventual form, the civil patrols remain crucial to military control. After extensive research in the highland municipality of San Mateo Ixtatán, the Ixil region of El Quiché and the northern lowland area of the Ixcán, the anthropologist Beatriz Manz reached the following conclusion:

*The military has embedded itself in the countryside in new and far-reaching ways, forcing major cultural adaptations; political constraints continue to prevent fundamental economic and social reform and the essential guarantees of life and safety are absent.*¹³⁴

The civil patrols, along with the permanent military garrisons that have accompanied their establishment, remain the major instruments of that military presence. Although it is almost impossible to draw general conclusions about indigenous society, based as it is on autonomous and varied village units, it does seem clear that Manz's conclu-

sions now apply to most Maya communities. The differences between individual villages or hamlets are purely a matter of degree.

The mass terror of the early 1980s and its sequel, counterinsurgency and social control disguised as development, was initially provoked by an armed insurgency. However, as Manz explains, the onslaught went far beyond what was militarily necessary to confront the rebels. 'The actions taken violated universally accepted rules of war, let alone the most elemental concepts of human decency.'¹³⁵

This was quite simply because the real target was always the people and their culture – any guerrillas caught in the assault were a bonus. Several thousand armed insurgents were not a problem for one of the continent's most ruthless armed forces which, by 1982, had been fighting guerrillas for nearly 20 years. A mobilized, politicized indigenous population was a far greater problem; it awoke the very real racist neurosis that lies at the heart of the Guatemalan state.

Using history to resist

Anyone who doubts that the processes begun in 1492 are continuing today need only take a trip to the Guatemalan highlands or read the specialist press covering the country. The *conquistadores* settled the Maya in model villages, formed them into work gangs and incorporated them into armies to fight other Maya in someone else's war. The last 15 years have seen all the old tactics resurrected, couched in new rhetoric. The more Guatemala changes, the more it stays the same.

But if the conquest has not yet ended, nor has the resistance to it. If history has been harnessed to launch perhaps the most concerted attack yet on indigenous culture, it is also being harnessed by a new generation of Maya to launch one of the most vigorous defences of it.

Although it is too early to say what the overall impact of the events of the last 15 years will be, some trends are apparent. The civil patrols for instance have now been around long enough to have been absorbed into the Maya corporate community in the same way as so many other externally-imposed structures have been in the past.

Although Maya organizations are campaigning for the abolition of the civil patrols, many communities have learnt to live with them. In many villages they have been effectively Mayanized, serving the community as much as the army by conspiring to neutralize the latter's influence and avoiding or even fraternizing with the guerrillas. As such they already resemble the sort of traditional Maya patrols now reconstituted in Santiago Atitlán where they serve to keep the army as much as the guerrillas out. In colonial times, the segregation that created indigenous communities was an instrument of power. Today it is the basis of Maya cultural identity. Who is to say civil patrols will not be of equal importance in years to come?

The patrols are but one example. Attack has led to riposte, action to reaction on almost every front – in education, health, on land issues, on human rights. Unable to choose the means of attack, Maya have chosen the ground on which to fight back. There is already evidence that the

Maya counterattack may be far more durable in its impact than the military's onslaught.

CISMA has noted how *ladinos* are being pushed out of huge swathes of the *altiplano* – the departments of Totonicapán, El Quiché and Huehuetenango are just three examples – as Maya reassert themselves in local politics and economics.¹³⁶ The Q'anjobal Maya of Huehuetenango department have been particularly successful at buying out *ladino* businesses or land in their towns and villages. Other communities have had the same impact by boycotting non-Maya traders or labour recruiters. As Smith has noted: 'The Indian exodus was temporary, the *ladino* exodus may be permanent.'¹³⁷

The phenomenal resurgence in Maya culture is due in no small part to the ferocity with which that same culture has come under attack in recent years. What is probably the most systematic effort yet to incorporate Maya culture into a *ladino* state, to subsume it into a monolithic nation state, may, in fact, only serve to change the nature of the nation state itself.

Cultural rights and *Mayanidad*

For as Maya push into whatever limited openings they can find – on every front, in every village, in every barrio – the state has been dragged closer towards becoming the multi-plural, multicultural entity which the Maya are demanding. The legal/judicial framework for some of the multi-ethnic state already exists – it is the gap between theory and practice, the culture of impunity and racism that has to be tackled most urgently.

The Maya suffer on at least three levels. Firstly, they are denied physical and civil rights through the obvious means of repression – murder, torture, kidnapping and forced relocation. Secondly, they are denied social and economic rights – health, education, legal wages and market prices for products. Thirdly, they suffer abuse of their cultural rights – the right to a different manner of dress, living, language and outlook. Many of the latter, suffered exclusively by indigenous people as opposed to the first two which affect *ladinos* as well, are rights not recognized in law yet, let alone in everyday life.

All these rights are interlinked. Because an indigenous person enjoys no cultural recognition, he/she suffers particularly severe denials of economic and social rights. One of the most obvious examples is being obliged to carry out all official business in a second language.

In reverse, the process is even more evident. Because indigenous people have no social, economic or civil rights, their culture is under attack. More than anything it has been socio-economic deprivation that has caused the erosion or evolution of indigenous society. Lack of access to land and the subsequent migration demonstrates this process best.

In the last decade and in particular the last five years, it has become clear that *Mayanidad* is a movement in its own right. Although principally cultural, like Maya resistance overall it is subtly amorphous, political in some guises, social in others, economic in still others.

It ranges from the humblest pig-breeding co-op or literacy

class to the sophistication of some of the intellectuals heading groups like *Maya Majawil Q'ij* or COMG. It is not exclusively indigenist in all forms. Indeed, Mayanizing mixed *ladino*-indigenous structures or organizations so that Maya cultural concerns are given priority is one of its strengths.

The amorphous, chameleon-like nature of the *Mayanidad* movement means it defies classification on the conventional political spectrum – another strength. For obvious reasons the movement has rejected the rightist stance of the *ladino* state: institutionalized terror and death squads at worst, cultural integration and paternalism at best.

The experience with the guerrillas on the other hand has led many adherents to reject the left – they differ on the material significance and importance of culture. However, many in the *Mayanidad* movement would agree with the aims of the left. Some of them are busy Mayanizing elements of it.

The broader view

While experience of the political left and right has been the catalyst for such a movement in recent years, other factors have made its rapid growth possible. One is the Maya's broadening world view – the vision of themselves as part of something bigger has heightened the sense of self and identity.

The diaspora of refugees and economic migrants, radio, and contact with international groups have all accelerated a process well under way before the latest upsurge in violence. Another factor is the international pressure on the Guatemalan government and global solidarity with the Maya people. International fora and support, ranging from the environmental movement to the global human rights network have now become essential levers within Guatemala as the state has become steadily more susceptible to such pressure.

The largely indigenous uprising in Chiapas in January 1994 is another source of pressure. The seizure of four towns by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Mexico's southernmost state internationalized the Maya struggle, with Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan Maya who had sought refuge in Mexico, negotiating as an indigenous representative with Mexican Maya. The issues – land, human rights, economic policies detrimental to subsistence farming – were the same. So were the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol and Tojolobal Maya who carried the guns.

In the short term the uprising led to a reversal of the refugee flows of the 1980s with Mexican Maya seeking refuge in Guatemala. The longer term consequences are likely to be much stronger pressure from Mexico City on the Guatemalan government to implement a full peace agreement and repatriate the tens of thousands of Guatemalan refugees still waiting to return home. The ethnic consciousness and political determination of the exiled Guatemalan Maya can only have been reinforced by the success the *Zapatistas* have enjoyed in focusing international attention on their specifically indigenous demands.

By 1994 it was clear that the uprising in Chiapas was just the latest indication that the Maya were now at the fore-

front of the continental, even worldwide, indigenous peoples' movement. Rigoberta Menchú became the United Nation's Goodwill Ambassador during 1993 – the UN International Year of Indigenous People. By 1994 the movement had succeeded in turning the year into a decade (1995-2004) and holding the First World Summit of Indigenous People in Chimaltenango, Guatemala (B'kob', as it now became in Kaqchikel).

Final destination: Mayanization of *ladino* society

It is too early to predict the final destination of the new Maya consciousness. Some form of autonomy, in one or all of the political, economic and social fields, is one possibility. Some even predict eventual demands for a Maya national entity stretching beyond the bounds of Guatemala into Mexico and Belize. But it would be much more realistic to see the movement as Maya do: an amorphous collection of autonomous groups and organizations with no set destination.

The movement remains as evolutionary as Maya culture, the debate always redirecting the struggle and the experience of the struggle changing the debate. For Maya the issue is justice.

*'We are not fighting for our culture – we already have it', one comments. 'We only want our rights: the right to peace, the right to define our own development path, the right to educate our children in our own languages and traditions, the right to represent ourselves.'*²¹³⁸

The way in which such changes come about is likely to be just as evolutionary. Maya groups will continue to campaign for adoption of international instruments such as the ILO's Convention 169 and for a constitution recognizing the plural, multi-ethnic nature of the Guatemalan state like that secured by Colombia's indigenous people in 1991. However, it is the process as much as any potential achievement that is likely to have most impact on Guatemalan society.

Just as Maya have Mayanized campaigning tools such as popular organizations, so they are Mayanizing the consultation and negotiation processes they are involved in. The consensual, gradualist Maya approach in which everyone's opinion is heard, considered then weighed up, is a style which could help fill Guatemala's democratic deficit. 'Real democracy is the basis of Maya village life where collaboration and consultation are the norm', observes Manuel Colop, a *Maya Majawil Q'ij* participant in the Minority Rights Group seminar. 'We have what Guatemala needs.'

The seminar was in itself an example of such Maya style – a reminder of what indigenous society has to offer Guatemala. But dangers are apparent in closer transcultural contact. One potential pitfall is whether the pan-Maya leadership that has now emerged will manage to change government policy without being partially or wholly co-opted. The bi-cultural Maya leading the current debate run a very serious risk of being absorbed by the state they are trying to change.

The risk is likely to increase once a peace agreement with

the URNG is fully implemented and the Guatemalan government will be seeking the endorsement of indigenous leaders to boost its international image. Another fear must be whether any pan-Maya force will lose the traditional strength that has come from diversity as it becomes more homogeneous. Finally, could rifts develop between a largely urban, intellectual Maya elite in the cities and the traditional peasant farmers or underemployed migrant masses of the city slums?

The final point raises the key question of what will determine Maya identity by the time of the next *xu'tun*, the approximately 520-year cycle that is the largest measurement of time in the Maya calendar (about 2008). Some of today's lifestyles and dress would not be recognized by ancestors of a mere two or three generations ago, yet remain totally Maya as defined by Maya themselves rather than anthropologists.

As more and more Maya make their presence felt in the professions, popular organizations, business and politics, Maya values will have a growing impact throughout Guatemalan life. It could be a sort of generalized version of the 'reverse ladinization' referred to above, encompassing everything from style to customs. A Mayanization of the *ladino* state? The ultimate cultural evolution?

It would be foolish to underestimate the task, but no more foolish than it would be to underestimate the strength and resilience of Maya culture and its key role in determining the nature of the Guatemalan state. The Maya have always expected a reconquest of the land that has always been theirs – it is as much part of their culture as their cyclical sense of time. Perhaps the time, Maya time, has finally come in a rather Maya way.



WHAT WE UNDERSTAND BY RIGHTS

‘We have a different understanding of rights than other people. We are conscious of the fact that our rights have always been violated. We Maya are not respected as a people, we are ignored; we have few opportunities. People say “the Indians are ignorant”. So we feel the solution is to seek to unite our efforts and our ideas.

When we say unity, what we mean is a common exchange of ideas. The first step is to let our ethnic groups speak out. Our struggle is to recover and develop our identity.

We know that human rights violations also take place outside Guatemala. Unity, then, means knowing about the struggles of other peoples and countries and learning from them.

We indigenous people have to fight for our own development. Our children and our people must carry on this struggle which will be a long one. This is why one of the activities we are interested in carrying out is an exchange of experience with our elders to learn from what they have lived through. Thus, on International Women’s Day we plan to meet with the Maya women priests to draw from their history and experience.

It is important to understand that for us the word “right” refers to something which belongs to us. When someone is abiding by the norms of our community we say that they are practising this “right”. When the *ladinos* speak of rights, however, they mean what any person wants or can have, what is written in the law. But we know that the law is not applied fairly, rather, it is wielded by the powerful in their own interest.

We might say then, that we understand our rights within the context of our communities. But when we deal with the *ladinos* we claim our rights under their laws, in the way they understand, because they do not value our indigenous rights.’

These are some of our cultural rights:

■ Our way of organizing; we have our own special way of holding meetings, of talking. In order to decide what day to hold a meeting we look at the calendar and search for a good day which will augur well for our deliberations. Before an important meeting we prepare our hearts with a Maya ceremony. After that we are ready to share our problems and ideas, ready to listen to all and to try and understand what each has to say. Later we have a period of conciliation to enable us to reach a commonly-held position.

It’s not a question of counting votes; rather we try to bring about a consensus, based on flexible and tolerant speech and thought. We reach agreement in the group and although we may make mistakes, there may be certain problems, we don’t waste time fighting and blaming others. Instead we put right what is wrong.

■ Dance and music: in dance we express our feelings, our thanks, our joy to the heart of the Heaven and the Earth. We dance to the marimba, our wood-voiced instrument of nature.

■ Our religion: the Maya altars are very significant for us. They hold meaning which only our priests can interpret. Sadly they have been robbed, desecrated, destroyed by people looking for trophies of our ancestors.

Outsiders have trouble understanding the Maya religion. For example, the Maya faith does not ask for forgiveness; it is our way of communicating with God and talking to him about our children, our crops, many things. It educates us to respect nature. And that’s when we do complain because we see how the natural world is being destroyed around us.

■ Our traditional dress also expresses something about us, it has meaning for us. Yet as we are discriminated against for wearing it, often we decide not to.

■ Our language is a vehicle for others to know how we think. Also to express ourselves. But we’ve done little to develop it.

■ Another unrecognized right is the practice of our customs. We know that in *ladino* society women and older people are not given proper place and consideration. Neither do the *ladinos* respect our particular form of greeting and other customs such as eating in silence. Even we are forgetting our own cultural practices.

■ For the Maya people land is everything. But it must also be for everyone, because it provides our daily nourishment. Our life depends upon the land which is why it is the arterial root of our culture. This drives our demand for the land; not for private ownership, we have never thought in such terms – we never think of taking all for ourselves and leaving our brothers and sisters with nothing. In fact this idea of private property arrived with the Spanish.

We have come to realize that we have been unable to share these thoughts with the *ladinos*. Then again, there are also differences between us because many people no longer believe in the traditional rights of our communities.

From here stems the counterpoising of concepts like private property and communal property; of those who appropriate and take from others; of those who don’t respect even their own laws. Further, there is no respect or acknowledgement of the community legal system. Guatemalan law clearly establishes that custom does not make law whilst we have organized our community life on the basis of custom.

There have also been changes to the law. Previously the mayors were responsible for applying the law and were more effective than the local magistrates who are now in charge. Often they don’t even speak the indigenous languages and even if they do, they refuse to do so and insist on use of an interpreter to be paid by the person bringing the complaint. Often poverty dictates that the complaint is dropped as there is no money to pay the interpreter.

In some municipalities or magistrates’ offices there are indigenous people in positions of authority. Yet this does not mean that they act as they should. It makes us sad that it is often our own brothers who undermine our rights.

As for the indigenous mayors, they don’t always behave as they should. Many no longer identify with us and sometimes they have lost their identity completely. This is why

we say that previously the mayor's office existed to deal with the needs of the indigenous peoples, whilst many today play the game of the political parties.

For example, some people were looking for a Maya judge in Cantel, from the Mam area. The interpreter was from the Civic Committee brought in by this judge. People see this as the same thing, it means they can't trust the interpreter. So they didn't use the interpreter but entered directly into negotiation with the judge. The interpreter was detailed instead to do some cleaning duties.

This judge began as an ardent Maya. But when he decided to stand for deputy it was personal gain that was driving him and which pushed him into the arms of a political party thus losing the people's trust.

So far when people have won positions of power, it has been a result of the initiative of one individual or a small group, not a consensus. Before, it was the community which decided who would be the candidate; now it is the political parties. This is a result of the years of violence that Guatemala has suffered and we have to recognize that it destroyed community participation.

There is always some division in our communities, particularly between Catholics and evangelicals. It is the religions coming in from outside which have caused these divisions. In the past there weren't many different religions. But the violence caused many people to convert to evangelical faiths to protect themselves, as the Guatemalan army was persecuting Catholic catechists. And as we well know there is more conflict when people are not organized.

There are points around which we find consensus. Our culture is under fire but we are working to "Mayanize" our life. Even when our families are divided by religion or other problems we still believe that these things are no obstacle to unity. We just have to work hard for it.'

OUR IDEA OF DIVERSITY

'Our struggle is neither rebellion nor revenge. We want to bring people together, acknowledge our interests as Maya and express our respect for the differences we have with the *ladinos*. If we can all come together, perhaps we can build a different country, with a government of national salvation.

We have to develop to be able to do this. We want to start by establishing what indigenous people need: confidence and the chance to participate – because we can, and we do have skills and opinions. We need more opportunities for involvement than have been available to date.

We are searching for the way forward even though our efforts have led to paltry results. We need the space to do what we think is right for our people. After 500 years of repression we need a lot of time. Also we need an understanding of the importance of the role we can play in creating the conditions for democracy to grow in Guatemala. It is untenable that we, the majority, are denied the chance to participate in this.

As for development, we have to find the way to work globally, combining work and training. Part of our plan is to record the thinking of our ancestors. This will give us

inspiration for a new idea: if they worked thus, so must we work now. We want to put down roots into the past so that working in the present we can create a better future.

"Development" seems to mean "give me what I want". We have lost the habit of working – we ask any comer to give us this, that and the other. We wait for the outsiders and then we make our requests, but give no opinion. The result is that we don't contribute anything because we think we don't know anything.

This dependent mentality is not only the fault of the people in our communities: they have become accustomed to this by the outsiders, whether with good or bad intention. This is why our work has to be directed towards recovering our values, like *Kux'bal*; mutual help and cooperation of all the community. So self-management should be seen as the attempt to create our own organization to support our work, to move on and up.

We have to be creative in our work on behalf of our communities, or else our organizations will die. Our creativity can create change, and change can bring development.

But we should be clear that this development is long term. We have a lot of work to do, but the involvement of the entire community will propel us forward. We want our rights as peoples acknowledged and respected. So far a few individuals have been accepted but not our ideas, which is why we have to keep working. Sometimes it is hard to accept, but amongst us Maya no one is better than the rest, or is worth more than the rest: we are all equals. Sometimes those who have been educated do not understand what we, who have not been to school, can say in our simple words.

The present period is one of making demands. We are looking at what we eat, how we learn, what justice is meted out to us.

We are marked by diversity: our culture, our remote villages, by those who have left to study. We know we will lose many along the way but there are always more to take their place. When we have a better standard of living and greater equality of conditions then consensus on the way forward will emerge.

This diversity which divides us means that first we have to win more justice, more equality. This is why we say it is a mid to long term project. We all know that to change other people is difficult. But to believe that we can is the first, the inner battle, to feel that we can build our own future. We should not forget, however, that people are riddled with complexes to be overcome.

We are building a project for our development. It is not yet clearly defined beyond some initial demands – land, our rights, our values.

Some people distort our ideas. We believe there are still too few of us seeking equality. Because there's a difference between seeking equality and seeking wealth. We search for solutions to our problems, to our hurt – we try to sort it out. The political parties only look for personal enrichment.

We seek comradeship, the sharing of ideas and experience, but above all we seek the equality of all people, whatever their language, religion or race.

We know we lack information in our country. This is why when we work with other brothers and sisters, like the Communities of Peoples in Resistance (CPRs) others say: "You're involved with those crazies, who stay up in the mountains for the hell of it as far as we can see." But when one begins to work with them, one sees how hard their situation is, how sad.

There is money and wealth in Guatemala. But it belongs to just a few who get richer whilst we die of starvation. So when we talk of equality we mean that we have the right to the same opportunities and to the respect of difference.

Change will not come on the heels of an Indian being elected president, for example. It's the structure that has to change. We don't want just one at the top, we want Indians everywhere, at every level. But we have seen that when we take just a first small step the *ladinos*, the army, respond with repression.

The first generation of Maya through university were lost to us, because they stopped being Maya. Nevertheless despite this lost generation we have to keep studying as the more young people who study the less we lose and we will move forward with those who affirm their identity. We see the same with many mayors. They came from the community but got lost inside the parties. To give an example: we have an indigenous Minister of Education who has facilitated the passage of several of our demands, but we know that he alone cannot change much, given the nature of the government. Building a government of equality and respect requires a process of far-reaching participation. This is why we think that we have to move into the system so as to then return to our own. We want real power; not just for show.

These are our hopes.'



Taken from the Minority Rights Group seminar report *Perspectivas y Propuestas de los Pueblos Mayas de Guatemala*, 'Views and Proposals of the Maya People of Guatemala', prepared by the Fundación Vicente Menchú. The seminar was held in Guatemala on 8 and 9 February 1994.

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