

“May All Rise Up”: Highland Mobilization
in Post-1954 Guatemala

by

Betsy Ogburn Konefal

BA, University of Pennsylvania, 1990

MIA, Columbia University, 1996

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This dissertation was presented

by

Betsy Ogburn Konefal

It was defended on

May 25, 2005

and approved by

Alejandro de la Fuente, Ph.D.

Joshua Lund, Ph.D.

Lara Putnam, Ph.D.

George Reid Andrews, Ph.D.
Dissertation Director

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George Reid Andrews, Advisor

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Betsy Ogburn Konefal, PhD

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This dissertation examines a difficult subject in a difficult period: activism by *indígenas* before, during, and after *la violencia* (1978-1983), the most brutal years of Guatemala’s 36-year civil war. It was a time of increasing oppositional politics, and in that context, *indígenas* from different regions began discussions and organizing focused on ethnic and class identities, indigenous culture, justice, and state violence. This study analyzes connections among activists from across the highlands and the complex and evolving ways in which they expressed demands in the name of the *pueblo indígena*. Organizing was diverse: *indígenas* struggled for economic and cultural rights, challenged the state, even fought for revolution, in markedly different ways, some articulated around ideas of race and ethnic identity, others in terms of class struggle.

In the context of armed insurgency in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s, these class- and race-based tendencies among *indígenas* have been interpreted as diametrically opposed, even revolutionary and counter-revolutionary. I focus instead on links that existed among different forms of organizing. The dissertation documents how indigenous students and intellectuals, catechists, campesino organizers, and revolutionaries shaped, challenged, and reinforced each other’s struggles.

State violence had profound and contradictory effects on indigenous organizing: initially state repression had a mobilizing and radicalizing effect on young *indígenas* and

was a catalyst in the formation of broadening pan-Indian identity. As extreme terror reached the level of genocide, however, it had its intended effect, the demobilization of political opposition. The experiences of extreme state terror directed specifically against the indigenous population significantly altered relationships among indigenous activists, and an “indigenous” struggle became divorced from broader opposition movements. *La violencia* continues to shape how *indígenas* and Guatemalan society as a whole remember the past and how they mobilize, or not, in the present. Despite a distancing on the part of many Mayas from a history of activism, this study shows that Mayas were *not* bystanders in the transformations that preceded and accompanied the civil war. Activism by *indígenas* helped shape that war; that war shaped indigenous activism.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“... [W]e had to burn everything, all the documents, all the papers. Now I don’t have a single issue of *Ixim*. Everything had to be burned because we were under repression.”¹ I was in the Quetzaltenango home of Jerónimo Juárez as he described a scene from the early 1980s that took place in the small courtyard adjacent to where we sat. It had been his parents’ house then, and he was part of an activist movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in Guatemala, *indígenas* calling for pride in indigenous “identity” and culture and demanding an end to multiple abuses against the indigenous population: ethnic discrimination, economic exploitation, state violence and repression. He and fellow activists had been warned that the army was on its way, ransacking houses for evidence that would link residents to the country’s guerrilla insurgency, which had been active since the 1960s and by the late 1970s had a strong presence in the highlands.²

¹ Interview with Jerónimo Juárez, February 15, 2002, Quetzaltenango. *Ixim*, an indigenous publication edited by Juárez, is pronounced /ē-shēm/ and means maize in K’iche’ and other Maya languages. Though Juárez and others destroyed their copies of the publication, some of the issues survived in personal and organizations’ collections. See Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA) Archivo Histórico for issues of *Ixim*, which was published monthly beginning in October 1977 and ending in October 1979.

² The Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP) and the Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA) were Marxist revolutionary groups operating in the highlands in the 1970s and 1980s. The EGP first entered Guatemala from Mexico in early 1972, and by 1974 had a presence in indigenous communities in the Ixil region of northern El Quiché and in the capital, through universities and secondary schools. It recruited heavily among the rural masses in the departments of El Quiché, Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz, Sololá, and Chimaltenango, and became the largest of the guerrilla armies. ORPA, also with significant numbers of *indígenas* among its ranks, was formed in the later part of the 1970s and operated in and around Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, and Sololá. The Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR) was a guerilla group organized in the

In the courtyard he and friends frantically threw in the fire anything that might incriminate them, Juárez remembers, books, articles, everything related to the periodical *Ixim: Notas Indígenas* which he had helped found. The army tore the place apart a few days later, he said, but found nothing to link the house's inhabitants to "subversion."

Juárez, a serious and thoughtful man in his fifties, now runs a small photocopying kiosk at a local university, where one evening during a break in his work I approached him to ask about the periodical *Ixim*. Could he tell me about the publication, and would he be willing to reconstruct for me his experiences organizing in the 1970s? The shock of my inquiry was apparent. Like many of the activists involved in indigenous activism in that period, Juárez thought of the work as clandestine and had not discussed it publicly. Who was this *gringa* raising so many (uncomfortable) questions?

This dissertation is an attempt to understand a difficult subject in a difficult period: activism by *indígenas* before, during, and after *la violencia* (1978-1983), the most brutal years of Guatemala's 36-year civil war. It is a study of efforts by *indígenas* like Juárez – mostly men, but with an important presence of women – who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. It analyzes connections among activist *indígenas* from across the highlands and the complex and evolving ways they expressed demands in the name of the *pueblo indígena*. Organizing was diverse: *indígenas* struggled for economic and cultural rights, challenged state repression, even fought for revolution, in multiple ways, some

1960s that initiated the insurgency, and was active mostly in the eastern part of the country. A fourth guerrilla army was made up of a wing of the Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo, the Communist party of Guatemala. These four joined together in 1982 in the umbrella Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, or URNG. As we will see in chapter six, small splinter guerrilla groups formed in the early 1980s, several of them indigenous-only movements. For all of these revolutionary groups, see Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), *Guatemala: Memoria del silencio*, 12 vols. (Guatemala: UNOPS, 1999), 1:172-83.

articulated around ideas of race, others in terms of class struggle. Despite the differences and divisions among varied forms of activism, this dissertation argues that to understand highland mobilization in the period, local and pan-indigenous, we need to place these efforts in relation to each other and to broad and growing movements in the 1970s and 1980s in opposition to a violent counterinsurgency state.

Guatemala's Social Geography

Like many North American students, I became acquainted with Guatemala, home to one of Latin America's most brutal civil wars, through accounts of violence. Reports of human rights violations and anthropological studies in the 1980s (see below) described in chilling detail state violence directed against *indígenas*, descendants of the Maya who make up roughly half the national population. Social categories of *indígena* and ladino (occasionally expressed as *no indígena*) are imperfect reflections of complicated and constructed social relationships, but these labels have a salience that arguably makes them a primary marker of identity in Guatemala.³ National censuses since their inception in 1880 have classified Guatemalans as ladinos or *indígenas*; as the 1950 census argues,

³ Interethnic relations in Guatemala, defined predominantly as relations between *indígenas* and ladinos, are the subject of important new scholarship, including a multi-faceted examination of identity by scholars associated with the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA), *Por qué estamos como estamos?* As one of the study's volumes argues, the binary indigenous/ladino formulation obscures the great diversity found in both of these categories, yet this bipolarity is a necessary subject of analysis in part because it "occupies a place in the thinking of all Guatemalans." Richard Adams and Santiago Bastos, *Las relaciones étnicas en Guatemala, 1944-2000* (Antigua, Guatemala: CIRMA, 2003), p. 35. Yet, the authors warn, ethnic identity cannot be rigidly conceived, nor should it be viewed as a "direct reflection" of what the state wishes it to be. Ethnic relations "arise ... within the framework of a strategy of ideological domination but once set in motion, can take their own paths, sometimes at the margins of state control, sometimes in opposition to it." Adams and Bastos, *Las relaciones étnicas*, p. 37. For more on race and nation in Guatemala see Marta Casaus Arzú, *Guatemala: Linaje y racismo* (San José, Costa Rica: FLACSO, 1992); Clara Arenas Bianchi, Charles

Recognizing the existence of two sectors of the population, the ladino and the *indígena*, with significant differences in characteristics, a population census of Guatemala could not omit the investigation of ethnic group [status] of the inhabitants of the country.⁴

In general, people defined as *indígenas* are among the poorest of Guatemalans, and as a group, lag behind ladinos in terms of literacy levels, health, and political participation.⁵

R. Hale, and Gustavo Palma Murga, eds., *Racismo en Guatemala? Abriendo el debate sobre un tema tabú* (Guatemala: AVANCSO, 1999); and in the CIRMA collection, Arturo Taracena, *Etnicidad, estado y nación en Guatemala, 1808-1944* Vol. 1 (Antigua, Guatemala: CIRMA, 2002); and Arturo Taracena, *Etnicidad, estado y nación en Guatemala, 1944-1985* Vol. 2 (Antigua, Guatemala: CIRMA, 2004). Forthcoming titles in the collection include *Las ideas detrás de la etnicidad: Compendio de textos teóricos*; *Las identidades étnicas en Guatemala a través de documentos históricos*; and *Memorias del mestizaje: Cultura política en América Central, 1920 al presente*. Attempts are being made in these works explicitly to study the ladino, and not merely as an inverse of *indígena*. For a brief history of meanings associated with the term ladino in Guatemala, see Greg Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), ch. 3.

⁴ Dirección General de Estadística, *Sexto Censo de Población, 1950*, April 18, 1950, p. 31. In 1950, 53.6% of the national population was classified as indigenous. Highland figures were considerably higher: over 93% of the inhabitants of three departments (Totonicapán, Sololá, and Alta Verapaz) were *indígenas*; inhabitants of El Quiché were listed as 84% indigenous; Chimaltenango 78%; Huehuetenango and San Marcos 73%; and Suchitepéquez and Quezaltenango 68%. 1950 census, p. 32.

⁵ This pattern can be seen over time. According to the 1940 census, the departments of Totonicapán (96% indigenous), Sololá (93% indigenous), and Huehuetenango (87% indigenous) each had illiteracy rates well above the national average of 65%: 84%, 89%, and 87% respectively. Illiteracy rates were even higher among women in these departments: 91%, 92%, and 89%, respectively. (There are exceptions to this pattern: Chimaltenango, located near the capital, had a lower than average rate of illiteracy (58%), and was 87% indigenous.) See Dirección General de Estadística, *Quinto Censo de Población, levantado el 7 de abril de 1940* (Guatemala: Dirección General de Estadística, 1942), 214-15, 312-13. Ten years later educational discrepancies related to race and gender were again stark. The 1950 census, conducted during the reformist “October Revolution,” found that 49% of ladinos in the nation could read and write, while only 9.7% of *indígenas* could do so. Broken down by gender, the literacy figures were 14.4% for indigenous men, 4.8% for indigenous women. The 1950 census simultaneously measured literacy according to both race and geographical location: in rural areas 33% of

Mayas were disproportionately affected by the civil war: some 83% of the 200,000 dead and disappeared during the conflict were indigenous, and the UN-sponsored Truth Commission determined that certain state counterinsurgency practices amounted to genocide.⁶

These figures mask other important social facts: First, indigenous communities have long been stratified economically, and indigenous elites' power is derived in part from class-based relationships vis-à-vis the indigenous masses, sometimes in alliance with ladino elites and officials. An indigenous middle sector is important as well; students, teachers, health and social workers, for example, led many of the efforts we will address in this study. Second, while a majority of the poor are indigenous, it is also true that a majority of ladinos are among the poor, and marginalized from economic and political power like their indigenous counterparts. The Guatemalan state is understood as "ladino" because ladinos dominate positions of power, yet as anthropologist Diane Nelson warns, "casual reference to a 'ladino state' ignores the enormous costs borne by the majority of ladinos who are not represented there."⁷ Finally, before the state in the early 1980s adopted "scorched earth" counterinsurgency practices of attacking entire indigenous communities in its fight against "subversion," ladino unionists, students, and

ladinos were literate, and 8% of *indígenas*. In urban areas 73% of ladinos were literate, 21% of *indígenas*. Dirección General de Estadística, *Sexto Censo de Población, 1950* (Guatemala: Dirección General de Estadística, April 18, 1950), xxxix. For more recent economic indicators see Diane Steele, "Guatemala," in *Indigenous People and Poverty in Latin America: An Empirical Analysis*, eds. George Psacharopoulos and Harry Anthony Patrinos (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1994), 97-126.

⁶ CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, 5:21. For discussion of "Acts of Genocide," see 5:48-51.

⁷ Diane Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 35.

leaders of all kinds were the most frequent targets of state assassinations.⁸ Guatemala defies simple explanation; the profound divisions in society that lay at the root of its civil war and motivated activism are ethnic and class based.

A final layer of complexity needs to be noted: linguistic and geographic boundaries differentiate Mayas from each other. This study traces the development of ideas of a broad *pueblo indígena* in Guatemala, but that *pueblo* is divided into twenty-one separate language communities.⁹ Pan-indigenous activists and anthropologists have stressed the fact that these languages descend from a common language “tree,” but communication among monolingual *indígenas* is limited. Ironically, the primary language of pan-indigenous activism in the 1970s was Spanish, and activists were generally among the fortunate few with access to education and *castellanización*. Geographic boundaries also separate indigenous communities, a majority of which are located in the very rugged central and western highlands. The (partial) breaking down of these barriers – linguistic and geographic – facilitated the emergence of the kinds of organizing examined in this study.

Research Questions and Method

Indigenous activism and indigenous rights issues were brought to the fore in Guatemala in advance of the 1992 Quincentennial of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, and during the country’s recent peace process. The 1995 “Accord on Identity and Rights

⁸ See, for example, Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Trade Unionists Against Terror: Guatemala City 1954-1985* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁹ There are either 20 or 21 Maya linguistic communities, depending on whether Achi’ is considered a separate language group or a dialect of K’iche’. The top four language groups, K’iche’, Mam, Kaqchikel, and Q’eqchi’, account for 56.3% of Mayas. See CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, 1:267.

of Indigenous Peoples,” a component of peace accords between the government and guerrilla armies, addressed rights of the indigenous population that included language use and dress, non-discrimination, and education reform. Only vague provisions of the agreement dealt with issues such as communal land rights, and the topic of land reform was delegated to a separate accord on socioeconomic issues.¹⁰

As we will see in chapter seven, in the political context of the 1990s these culturally-focused rights arguably became equated with “indigenous rights” in general. Members of a vocal “Mayanista” movement were recognized as their main proponents. Broader economic and political demands by Mayas linked to a *movimiento popular* – groups of students, human rights advocates, unionists, campesinos – were sidelined in the process. The Maya *populares* were characterized by Mayanistas as not really speaking *for* Mayas or even *as* Mayas, given that their goals were framed in terms of class struggle.

Of the many questions prompted by 1995 debates about the indigenous rights accord, several stood out for me and drove the research for this dissertation: What rights *should* be included as “indigenous?” Could anyone legitimately speak in the name of an expansive and diverse *pueblo indígena*? Theoretically, the “specialized” rights (e.g. to dress, language) of indigenous communities are intended to complement “universal” rights (e.g. to economic justice, freedom from violence). How had these issues – and their advocates – become so separated in the Guatemalan case? And at what cost?

¹⁰ Kay Warren provides a useful summary and analysis of the accord in *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 55-63 and appendix 1, pp. 211-13.

The Mayanista movement has been much studied by foreigners and Guatemalan scholars, and Mayanista intellectuals have been prolific chroniclers of their own efforts.¹¹ The work offers important ethnographic views of the movement's demands and strategies for placing Maya rights on the national agenda. Most of the scholarship focuses on the present, however. The connections between recent indigenous activism in Guatemala and its historical precedents, links to the earlier efforts of individuals like Juárez, for example, are vague and confusing. At the same time, while indigenous movement scholars have helped us to understand the dynamics and content of culturally-focused activism, we learn little about demands made by *indígenas* for broader socio-economic change, including revolution, or how those broader efforts were related to organizing around cultural issues, past and present.¹²

I set out to unravel some of those connections. How did indigenous activism beyond the community level develop? By what (multiple) means did activists express their demands? What did they have to say? To understand how activism changed over time, I began with movements in a period before *la violencia* so altered the shape of

¹¹ For 1990s culturally-focused movements, see Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, *Políticas para la reivindicación de los Mayas de hoy* (Guatemala City: Editorial Cholsamaj, 1994); and *Configuración del pensamiento político del Pueblo Maya* (Guatemala City: Editorial Cholsamaj, 1997); Edward Fischer and R. McKenna Brown, *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound*; and Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics*.

¹² Most scholars of culturally-focused activism have defined *Maya populares* as outside the scope of their studies, but there are important exceptions, works that address cultural organizing and broader multi-ethnic activism by *indígenas*. See especially Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus, *Quebrando el silencio: Organizaciones del Pueblo Maya y sus demandas, 1986 – 1992* (Guatemala City: FLACSO, 1993); *Abriendo caminos: Las organizaciones Mayas desde el Nobel hasta el acuerdo de Derechos Indígenas* (Guatemala City: FLACSO, 1995); and *Entre el mecapan y el cielo: Desarrollo del movimiento maya en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: FLACSO, 2003).

political organizing in Guatemala and before “indigenous rights” grew in political prominence.

I first examined the written sources that are available, though they are limited since the burning of documents that took place in the Juárez family courtyard described above was replicated countless times across Guatemala. Newspapers are available, along with some activists’ writings and opposition movements’ publications from the 1970s and 1980s.¹³ From these sources and the existing secondary literature I compiled a list of important moments, groups, and leaders whose names (or sometimes only faces) emerged. I then turned to oral interviews, which proved to be central to this research. I went knocking on the doors of people like don Jerónimo and over one hundred other

¹³ One former guerrilla member, now an academic, recounted with dismay firecrackers being made in Mexico out of materials produced by the Guatemalan left. Important documentary evidence from the 1970s and early 1980s is now being sent back to Guatemala from solidarity organizations abroad. See the growing collection in the Archivo Histórico at CIRMA, in Antigua, Guatemala. In addition to those materials, I relied heavily on newspaper coverage, generally uncensored in the 1970s, but becoming increasingly vague (self-censored) with the rise in repression in the latter part of the decade and in the early 1980s. I also consulted publications in the Hemeroteca Nacional, municipal and parish archives, and the records of institutions like the Instituto Indígena Santiago, the Instituto Nuestra Señora del Socorro, and the Sociedad el Adelanto. Much current discussion on the history of indigenous organizing relies on two secondary sources, articles by Arturo Arias and Ricardo Falla, Guatemalan academics affiliated with the guerrilla army Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres, or EGP, at the time they were writing. See Falla, “El movimiento indígena,” *Estudios Centroamericanos*, yr. 23, issue 356/357 (June/July 1978): 437-461; and Arias, “El movimiento indígena en Guatemala: 1970-1983,” in R. Menjívar and D. Camacho, eds., *Movimientos populares en Centroamérica* (Costa Rica: FLACSO, 1985). A version of the Arias article was published as “Changing Indian Identity: Guatemala’s Violent Transition to Modernity,” in Carol Smith, ed., *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540 – 1988* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 230-57. These articles were an important beginning in the analysis of pan-indigenous organizing, but they reflect (and share) the EGP’s frustration with activists who insisted on calling attention to indigenous identity, and tend to portray those activists as “counterrevolutionaries.” In addition to what we learn from them about organizing in the 1970s, they are useful when considered as primary sources, evidence of the thinking of the left on evolving politics and questions of identity.

highland *indígenas* who had been active in local and national struggles in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.¹⁴

I am not sure why Juárez and others decided to share their memories with me, but I will be forever grateful for the kindness, patience, even bravery of interviewees who helped me piece together this period and reconstruct the development of pan-indigenous networks by recounting their own roles within them. My questions unleashed intense memories and mixed emotions: anger, determination, hope, fear, regret, and profound sorrow. I have tried to understand what prompted activists' efforts, what they sought and hoped for, and what they experienced in their struggles. These ranged from efforts of "cultural rescue," to campesino organizing, literacy training and *concientización*, beauty pageants, and revolutionary mobilization.

The personal accounts in this dissertation are fraught with the problems associated with oral histories: the fragile, selective, imperfect nature of memory; strategic positioning; the unconscious impact of subsequent events, ideas, and experiences on the reconstruction of history. These problems were magnified by the context of violence and fear in which activism played out in Guatemala and which still stifles political discussion. Whenever possible I brought written sources to the attention of interviewees, which enriched discussions, jogged memories, and made it seem "okay" to discuss an event about which I already had written evidence. I also constantly compared accounts of the

¹⁴ Interviews took place in Guatemala City, and communities in the departments of Alta Verapaz, Chimaltenango, El Quiché, Huehuetenango, Totonicapán, Quetzaltenango, Retalhuleu, and Sololá. I have at times chosen to leave out details of events in this study that I felt could potentially compromise the safety of interviewees. Most interviewees indicated that I should use their names; a few asked that I not do so. I have honored these requests.

same events in an effort to tease out specifics and investigate contradictions.¹⁵ Despite the challenges and problems associated with this method of reconstructing a history marked by violence, oral interviews provided a richness to the research and were as moving as they were informative. My profound thanks to all of the interviewees who made this work possible.

With this dissertation's focus on oppositional mobilization by *indígenas*, I assert that activists' ideas and efforts, in all their complexity, are important to understanding evolving social relations in Guatemala, the course of the war itself, and current indigenous movements. I acknowledge that as activists, interviewees were among a small minority of the indigenous population. Likewise, only a minority of people identified as indigenous felt or expressed affiliations with *indígenas* outside of their communities. The figures in this study – again, members of diverse opposition groups – are not even representative of all politicized Mayas, though their efforts had important effects on political dynamics within communities and nationally. In general, they identified with one (or both) of two tendencies within indigenous opposition politics: resistance (or even just criticism) articulated to questions of race, ethnicity, and identity; and class-based organizing in multi-ethnic alliance with the left. Another interlocutor, conservative indigenous leaders opposed to both of these forms of activism, are obvious and important players as well. I have not examined their presence explicitly and can only

¹⁵ With relatively few written sources, pinning down specifics on much of this history is difficult, and many questions remain. Guatemalans (fortunately!) have a highly developed survival skill of answering questions while revealing little in the way of hard facts. Interviewees' tolerance of my (overly) probing inquiries is gratefully acknowledged.

point to the need for research on the interplay of conservative *indígenas* and indigenous opposition movements.

Ideas of race and ethnicity pose multiple challenges for this study. I find no useful difference between the terms “race” and “ethnicity” as they were and are used in Guatemala; both imply certain (multiple, changing, contested) understandings of blood, culture, and place as signifying “Indianness.” Some indigenous activists in the 1970s spoke frequently of *la raza* and blood-based understandings of indigenous identity, while promoting the cultural practices they felt characterized *indígenas* and labeling the highlands the “*tierra maya*.” They asserted connections through blood to pre-Columbian Maya ancestors and to the cultures and spaces that defined them. Over time, activists increasingly stressed links, biological and cultural, to *hermanos indígenas* across geographic and linguistic borders in Guatemala (and beyond), some of them eventually asserting a new ethnic, spatial, and political unity, the “Maya nation.” Significantly, spatial definitions of Indianness – at least for these indigenous activists – were evolving in the 1970s: the “Mayas of today,” as one group of activists termed *indígenas* in 1978, included not just *indígenas* in the countryside, but in Guatemala’s urban centers as well.¹⁶ The idea was being re-defined, of course, to include the writers themselves.

Other *indígenas* involved in campesino organizing or in the ladino-led revolutionary left, placed greater emphasis on class identities, and spoke of the “*pueblo*” as including poor ladinos. Yet as we will see, many struggled throughout the 1970s and 1980s to articulate ethnic-specific claims and identities within multi-ethnic movements.

¹⁶ “El Colonialismo Cultural: Requiem por los homenajes a La Raza Maya,” *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, año 1, n. 8 (May 1978), p. 8, written by a group of activists in Guatemala who signed the very provocative piece, discussed below, “Autor(es) Anónimo(s).”

For *indígenas* linked to the popular left, ideas of “Indianness” were not absent, but intertwined in their thinking and struggles with identities as campesinos.

The Guatemalan state defined the *indio* – a term with derogatory implications, but one appropriated by activist *indígenas* in the 1970s – quite differently. Officials glorified the pre-Columbian past and spoke of blood-based links to the ancient Maya (good for the nation). They employed largely cultural notions, however, to define the present-day Indian (bad for the nation). Spatially, Indians were firmly located in the countryside, grounded in the culture of subsistence agriculture and (backward) community. The timeless glory of the Maya past was claimed as part of the national blood or genetic makeup of Guatemala, while the current Indian “flaws” in the national body politic were to be erased through ladination. While the “flaws” were mostly thought of as cultural and improvement rested on an acceptance by *indígenas* of a cultural “crossing over” to non-Indian, ladination also implied an element of a genetic *mestizaje*.

The racialized Indian, of course, with his ambiguous connotations of blood, culture, and space, has been defined by historical process. As we will see, the meanings of race and ethnicity, the products of racialization, differed over time and depended upon who was doing the defining – ladinos or *indígenas*, elites or the popular classes, indigenous *clasistas* or indigenous *culturalistas*, the latter two terms used to label activists in class-based or race-based organizing, respectively. Following the lead of Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Roseblatt, I have used the term “race” when and how activists used the term. By “race-based organizing,” I mean organizing that was by *indígenas* alone, focused on issues specific and exclusive to what activists thought of as *la raza indígena*. That is not to suggest a static or singular definition of race, but rather

necessitates attention to “how historical actors themselves deployed the term.”¹⁷

Attention both to racialization and to different and contested meanings of race facilitates a focus on “*why* different articulations arose, while noting the continuities that have made race and the racialization of ... identities so pervasive.”¹⁸ As we will see throughout the dissertation, racial discourse was used in different ways and for different ends: to call attention to indigenous history and culture, to mobilize *indígenas* in pan-indigenous and/or multi-ethnic struggles, to condemn state violence and manipulation. We see *indígenas* explicitly contesting state discourses on race and nation. We also see both indigenous and ladino discourses on the Indian being shaped by broader forces, among them leftist revolutionary ideas about the “Indian question,” and international indigenous rights discourses and norms of the late 1980s and 1990s.

Studying Guatemala

Guatemala has been a frequent research site for anthropologists, with Mayas being the subjects of most studies. Scholarship has focused on individual communities, documenting the ways in which indigenous culture was shaped as a defensive response to ladino political and economic domination, or alternatively analyzing both continuity and change within communities. In the 1970s, scholars were beginning to illuminate some of the issues that are dealt with in this dissertation, including changes within communities due to the growth of Catholic Action and its programs in leadership training and

¹⁷ Nancy Appelbaum, Anne Macpherson, and Karin Roseblatt, “Introduction,” in Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Roseblatt, *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 2-3.

¹⁸ Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Roseblatt, *Race and Nation*, p. 9.

concientización, or “consciousness-raising.”¹⁹ In-depth research into community and pan-community politicization became increasingly difficult, however, as guerrilla groups grew in strength and state counterinsurgency violence in the highlands escalated in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Only recently have researchers been able to engage questions of opposition politics in Guatemala’s post-1954 history through empirical research.

Important studies of the civil war period were produced, despite the difficulties of research, with anthropologists in the 1980s documenting Guatemalans’, mostly Mayas’, experiences of violence and displacement. Robert Carmack’s edited volume *Harvest of Violence*, published in 1988, contains gripping accounts of the impact of state terror in highland communities and the forces that pushed many *indígenas* into the struggle.²⁰

Carol Smith’s compilation *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540 to 1988*, published two years later, focuses on the connections between culture and power in Guatemala, and analyzes relations between the state, the revolutionary opposition movements, and Indian communities.²¹ The near impossibility of fieldwork into questions of politicization, however, meant that Mayas were homogenized in these studies and mobilization was

¹⁹ Classic studies of Guatemalan Indians include early works by Sol Tax, “The *Municipios* of the Midwestern Highlands of Guatemala,” *American Anthropologist* 39:3 (1937), 423-44; and *Penny Capitalism* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1953). For Catholic Action and its effects in individual indigenous communities, see ethnographies by Douglas Brintnall, *Revolt Against the Dead: The Modernization of a Mayan Community in the Highlands of Guatemala* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1979); Ricardo Falla, *Quiché Rebelde: Estudio de un movimiento de conversión religiosa, rebelde a las creencias tradicionales en San Antonio Ilotenango* (Guatemala City: Editorial Universitaria, 1978); and Kay Warren, *The Symbols of Subordination: Indian Identity in a Guatemalan Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978).

²⁰ Robert Carmack, ed., *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

²¹ Smith, ed., *Guatemalan Indians and the State*.

interpreted as merely defensive. For the most part, *indígenas* were not portrayed as having an active role in shaping events as they unfolded. By necessity, the works leave us with (unposed) questions about differentiation among *indígenas* and the scope and character of Maya organizing.

Guatemala returned to civilian rule in 1986, initiating a long (and halting) peace process and a degree of moderation in state repression. With this came new research projects, and again, anthropologists led the way. A prominent line of inquiry focused once more on the violence and trauma of the civil war, this time basing studies directly on the detailed personal testimonies of its (mostly Maya) victims, especially widows and the displaced.²² Anthropologist David Stoll, on the other hand, critical of what he perceived to be US anthropologists' sympathy for the revolutionary left, studied Mayas resettled in government controlled "model villages," in his *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*.²³ More recently, Stoll took on the well-known *testimonio* of Rigoberta Menchú Tum, raising questions about the veracity of Menchú's 1982 account of violence and politicization among Maya, which I discuss in chapter seven.²⁴

²² See the powerful account by Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Judith Zur, *Violent Memories: Mayan War Widows in Guatemala* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998); and Linda Green, *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

²³ David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

²⁴ See Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (New York: Verso, 1984); and David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999). The response to Stoll's work has been abundant. On Stoll's assertions regarding Rigoberta Menchú see collected articles and statements in Arturo Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001).

Many of these studies are excellent and provide powerful accounts of recent Maya experiences. What they do not do (nor do they intend to) is examine differentiation among Mayas or (with the exception of Stoll's work) address issues of past Maya activism. In the accounts of widows' experiences, researchers hesitate to pose questions about past politics, focusing instead on the experiences of violence and loss, and claimsmaking in the present. Stoll's *Between Two Armies* sets out (all) Mayas as apolitical, wanting and having nothing to do with the turmoil surrounding them. His critique of Menchú counters her claims that Mayas were indeed part of revolutionary struggles by poking holes in the "story of all poor Guatemalans."²⁵

Other work in anthropology and history does delve more effectively into questions of Maya roles in politics. Historian Greg Grandin, in his study of 19th-century K'iche' elites in Quetzaltenango, locates Guatemalan *indígenas* at the center of a full-length study as central agents in historical change. His work demonstrates the highly contested nature of power and authority over time, among K'iche's and between K'iche' and ladino elites.²⁶ His more recent work and that of anthropologist Carlota McAllister take the approach of examining Mayas as political actors into the period of Guatemala's civil war.²⁷ In these studies indigenous revolutionary activism, not just defensive

²⁵ Menchú begins her account by saying that "I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people." Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p. 1.

²⁶ Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala*.

²⁷ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Carlota McAllister, "Good People: Revolution, Community, and *Conciencia*

reaction on the part of Mayas, is analyzed in detail, by McAllister in Chupol, El Quiché, and by Grandin in the department of Alta Verapaz. Regarding Mayas in national-level organizing, Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus have published three important works on Guatemalan indigenous movements from 1986 to 2001, with attention both to the historical development of organizing by Mayas and diversity among them.²⁸ Together, these allow us not only to witness the turmoil of civil war, but help us to understand the shaping of that war and Maya roles in it. McAllister argues that acknowledging Maya revolutionary action in the civil war period is essential to the future: “Understanding the revolution as a defeat, not as a nonevent,” she argues, “is crucial to enabling Chupolenses and Maya like them to make claims on Guatemala.”²⁹

How those “claims” on the present are framed is an extremely pressing issue. The indigenous rights accord, despite the hope borne of its signing in 1995, resulted in little, and legislation needed for its implementation was voted down by a national referendum in 1999. Bastos and Camus in their latest work on Maya activism have labeled Guatemala’s peace a “mirage.”³⁰ A cultural rights movement remains at odds with broader efforts by Mayas for social change.

in a Maya-K’iche’ Village in Guatemala” (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 2003). See also Grandin, “To End With All These Evils: Ethnic Transformation and Community Mobilization in Guatemala’s Western Highlands, 1954-1980,” *Latin American Perspectives* 24:2 (Mar. 1997), 7-34.

²⁸ Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus, *Quebrando el silencio; Abriendo caminos; and Entre el mecapal y el cielo*.

²⁹ McAllister, “Good People,” p. 8. See also pp. 8-28 for a useful discussion of anthropological approaches to studying the Guatemalan Maya.

³⁰ Bastos and Camus, *Entre el mecapal y el cielo*, p. 261. For a discussion of the complicated issue of the failed reform legislation, see pp. 192-201.

I found myself asking repeatedly what the past might show us about this political moment in Guatemala. To begin to answer that question, I examined how *indígenas* mobilized in opposition to the Guatemalan state in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The lines of division we see in the 1990s are readily apparent in earlier periods, and in fact emerged quite early in the development of these movements. Yet when we look closely, we see that there was overlap in diverse activists' goals, and individuals were often involved in multiple forms of organizing. Despite contrasting ideologies and strategies, activists interacted with each other in important ways, and their relationships provide a valuable window into the dynamics of indigenous mobilization. An understanding of those past dynamics helps us begin to explain how, in the aftermath of state genocide, relationships among activist *indígenas* fell apart.

A Road Map

As context for this study, chapter two provides an overview of highly ambiguous state discourses and policies on the Indian from the 1920s to the late 1970s.³¹ In the early decades under review, he is seen (and treated) as folkloric and at the same time, servile, apolitical, and in need of the heavy guiding and controlling hand of the state. In the late 1970s, however, we find these assumptions shifting dramatically: in the context of insurgency in the highlands, the Indian suddenly becomes, in the eyes of the state, a potential subversive. It is a shift that paves the way for genocide.

Chapters three, four, five, and six chronologically trace the history of indigenous mobilization, from the 1940s onward, first at the local level (chapter three), then at the

³¹ The topic of ladinos within the opposition movements and their racialization of *indígenas* will be treated in subsequent chapters.

regional and national levels (chapters four, five, and six.) Chapter four specifically deals with the growth of regional organizing and the development of pan-indigenous activism. Here we see differences solidifying within indigenous movements, with some *indígenas* stressing questions of ethnic identity, while others opt for class-based organizing, mostly agrarian, in partnership with ladinos. Yet as we will see, their efforts continued to overlap.

State violence had profound and radicalizing effects on indigenous opposition movements and on relationships among various forms of organizing. Chapter five details a protest by indigenous community queens and organizers in which they condemned the 1978 army massacre of Indian campesinos in Panzós, Alta Verapaz. Chapter six follows indigenous organizers as debates about race and revolution intensified and violence pushed many together in support of armed insurgency. The chapter also addresses efforts by the counterinsurgency state to undermine opposition movements by fueling tensions among *indígenas*.

Finally, chapter seven examines relationships between indigenous *clasistas* and *culturalistas* in the 1980s, when in the aftermath of state genocide a sector of the *movimiento indio* pushed for Maya separation and autonomy. The revolutionary left, in turn, labeled them traitors and counterrevolutionaries. The chapter examines both the impact of violence on indigenous organizing in the 1980s and 1990s, and the role of international indigenous rights movements and discourse in shaping Guatemalan political movements by *indígenas*.

Chapter 2: “Uncountable Corpses” or Soul of the Nation?: Racializing the Indian in 20th-Century Guatemala

... the *indígena* hides ever more obstinately in his ancestral customs, ... without great ambitions nor aspirations that would stimulate him to leave this state of stagnancy By this attitude ... the *indígena* becomes a deadweight ... for social, economic, and cultural development”

– Instituto Indigenista Nacional,
Por qué es indispensable el indigenismo?, 1969

Tecún Umán [conquest-era warrior] is a... representative of the land; as clean as our skies, above political conflicts and fratricidal struggles, sacrificed when the two bloods that run in our veins met, source of the river of our history

– *Revista Cultural del Ejército*, January – June 1979

What are they without *traje* [traditional dress]? Nothing but Indian trash.

– Hotel owner, Cobán, Alta Verapaz, 2002

I speak for my race I speak for the blood that circulates in my veins, the blood of the kekchíes, – the Maya blood! ... They [ladinos] try to incorporate us into their society so we can continue serving them and they can continue humiliating us, because that is what the *indígena* has always been: servant, ... peon, beast of burden, ... until he has become a thing.

– Eduardo Pacay Coy, in *La Ruta*, September 26, 1971

Race has been a central and problematic theme in Guatemala’s vision of itself since the country’s inception. It is a nation of profound and remarkably lasting contrasts – linguistic, cultural, and economic – which tend to coalesce around the racialized and opposing categories of “Indian” and “ladino,” the latter a term applied in Guatemala to virtually all those not (self)defined as indigenous.¹ The chapter’s epigraphs give a hint of

¹ A small elite sector of the population prefers to think of itself not as ladino, but as white or European. See Casaús Arzú, *Linaje y racismo*. Most *indígenas* have only recently and in a limited sense begun to think of themselves as “indigenous,” identifying predominantly with their local *municipio*, and perhaps secondarily, with their linguistic community. An activist sector began in the 1970s to speak frequently of a pan-

the nature of the debates that have surrounded ideas of race and nation. “Dead,” “obstinate,” and “stagnant” are among the recurrent images used by ladinos elites and the state to describe *indígenas*. These equate race not with blood, but with “backward” indigenous practices and a low class status, and naturalize coercive labor practices in the process. At the same time, certain symbols of an essential “Indianness” and of a glorified ancient Maya past have been celebrated and appropriated by a state eager to claim Maya heritage for the nation. Official homages and commemorations include an annual Day of the Indian; another honoring the 16th-century Indian warrior Tecún Umán; an annual Folklore Festival and museums showcasing Indian *traje* and handicrafts; and a twenty-five *centavo* coin featuring the profile of an indigenous woman, in circulation since 1948.

More than a century of nationalist discourse and policies have, in fact, called for the assimilation and integration of the Indian into Guatemalan society.² Yet despite (or perhaps because of?) professed assimilationist desires, a binary relationship has been constructed and maintained during the same period between “Indian” and “ladino” as two

indigenous identity, as we will see in the coming chapters, and activists today use the label “Maya” to refer to *indígenas*.

² To commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, for example, the Guatemalan state in 1892 sponsored a contest for the best essay addressing how to civilize the Indian and bring him into the nation. The decree by President José Reina Barrios stated that *indígenas*, the vast majority of the country, “have not been able to participate in the benefits of civilization, without which progress is impossible and true happiness illusory,” and that the Reina Barrios administration was “interested in taking out by the roots all obstacles that stand in the way of the forward march of the country” See government decree number 451, October 10, 1892, in Jorge Skinner Klée, *Legislación indigenista de Guatemala* (Mexico: Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, 1995). The winner was Antonio Batres Jáuregui, with his essay “*Los indios, su historia y su civilización*,” in which he argued that assimilation of the Indian was not just a kind-hearted thing to do, but something good for the Guatemalan nation and a step that would prevent ethnic violence. Cited in Ramón González Ponciano, “‘Esas sangres no están limpias’: Modernidad y pensamiento civilizatorio en Guatemala (1954-1977),” in Arenas Bianchi et al., *Racismo en Guatemala?*, p. 17.

distinct races that constitute the nation. Through discursive segregation, the on-going use of racialized and overwhelmingly negative images of Indians, along with homages to a pre-conquest Maya past, Guatemala has been imagined and represented not as a merging of indigenous and ladino cultures, but as a nation of two separate peoples. These ideas have reflected, reinforced, and naturalized more material forms of race-based segregation, in the areas of labor, education, health, access to land, and effective citizenship.

Historian Arturo Taracena argues that such segregation – rhetorical and material – historically has been more powerful than assimilationism, a fact he attributes to the use and function of race in upholding the economic and political inequalities that have benefited Guatemala’s oligarchy. Indian resistance to assimilationist pressures has undoubtedly contributed to on-going ethnic segregation as well, as have obstacles of geography and language.³ While causation likely involves a combination of many factors – discourse, economic and political structures, geographic and cultural gulfs, resistance – a binary understanding of race, a classification of Guatemalans as *indígenas* or *no indígenas*, has penetrated deep into the national psyche. Even at the most obvious and symbolic level of national pageantry, racial boundaries are solidified and naturalized by racially-separate contests for the naming of Guatemala’s national “queens.” A ladina Miss Guatemala has long represented and set the standard for national beauty, before the nation and the world; an indigenous “Miss Maya” or Rabín Ahau, the celebrated focal point of an annual Folklore Festival since the early 1970s, personifies the authenticity and

³ Many rural *indígenas*, especially women, are monolingual, speaking one of Guatemala’s twenty-one separate languages.

grandeur of the Maya past, an integral part of the nation, but distinct from ladina – and national – standards of beauty.⁴

The modern Guatemalan nation, novelist and Nobel laureate Miguel Angel Asturias argued in 1923, had to be defined as ladino, in direct opposition to the anti-modern world of the Indian: “The Indian represents a past civilization and the ... *ladino* [non-Indian]..., a future civilization....,” Asturias wrote in his law school thesis. “What a nation, where two thirds of its population are dead to intelligent life!”⁵ The so-called “Indian problem” revolved around how to bring the *indígena* into that nation, through ladinization. An effect of a binary understanding and construction of race in Guatemala has been an erasing or denial of multi-ethnic or *mestizo* identities. Indianness in the dominant 20th-century construction has been equated with specific cultural traits – Indians live, speak, think, and dress like Indians – so Indian identity is left behind or lost as one becomes ladino. Acquiring shoes, the Spanish language, literacy, and westernized consumption habits renders a person ladino and no longer Indian. Of course, ladinization is a type of (whitened) *mestizaje*, yet the notion of mixing – cultural or genetic – is downplayed in Guatemalan racial discourse.

⁴ For a fascinating discussion of the national indigenous queen contest in Guatemala, see Carlota McAllister, “Authenticity and Guatemala’s Maya Queen,” in Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, eds., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 105-124. McAllister has noted that Miss Guatemala, the nation’s symbol of idealized beauty, is “invariably among the whitest of the nation’s young women.” The indigenous queen’s “task,” she writes, is “to represent what makes Guatemala most distinct: her tradition, her Indian past. Authenticity marks the Maya Queens’ particularity as an aesthetic property, subordinate to the truly beautiful.” McAllister, “Authenticity,” p. 106. For more on indigenous beauty queens, see ch. 5 of this dissertation.

⁵ Miguel Angel Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology: the Social Problem of the Indian* (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1977), p. 66.

This chapter reviews the development of elite and state thinking about “the Indian” in Guatemala, considering discourses and policies as sites of the production of racialized identities.⁶ It begins with the 1920s when Asturias wrote about the nation’s “Indian problem.” It addresses the Ubico era (1931-1944) when *indigenismo* began to flourish in Mexico and among Guatemalan students and intellectuals, and when Guatemalan *indígenas* still lived under policies of forced labor – not incompatible, as we will see, with *indigenismo*. It then turns to the reform governments of 1944-54 during which the Guatemalan Instituto Indigenista Nacional was created and official *indigenismo* took hold, celebrating the Indian and at the same time calling for structural reform in the countryside. This “October Revolution” was short-lived, followed by military regimes that focused on Indians as folklore and passive subjects to be integrated into the ladino nation. Finally we will turn to a shift in state assumptions about the Indian in the 1970s, an era when the state paired a potentially genocidal racism with racial homage and paternalism.

Indigenous voices were part of debates surrounding race and nation; while there is only a hint of their presence in this chapter, we turn our attention to them more fully in subsequent chapters. Challenges to state assumptions about the Indian were particularly prominent in the 1970s, as we will see. One indigenous community queen, for example, had inscribed on her tombstone in 1970, “We have been beaten and humiliated, but the

⁶ Ladinos are not a homogenous population. In this chapter I have (perhaps wrongly) collapsed state and ladino elite ideas about the Indian, but important differences exist between elite and non-elite ladinos. We will examine the positions of ladinos in opposition and revolutionary movements, in particular, in subsequent chapters.

race was never defeated.”⁷ Activists like her, as well as Eduardo Pacay in the chapter’s final epigraph, used terms such as “beaten,” “humiliated,” and “beast of burden,” while claiming nonetheless that Indians were unvanquished as a “race.” Many drew not on ladino understandings of race stressing culture and class, but rather on ideologies of blood.⁸ They resisted the social integration and ladinization that was at the heart of ladino *indigenismo*, and refused to acquiesce to a nationalism that denied that Indians could be other than the poor servants of ladinos, or that *indígenas* could exist apart from the “bean patch.” The present chapter sets the context for an examination of indigenous interaction with and responses to the state, and *indígenas*’ (multiple) articulations of race and identity, a subject of the remainder of this dissertation.

The State and the Indian Problem: 1920s-1954

The tremendous growth of export agriculture in Guatemala during the Liberal regimes that spanned from 1871 to 1944 relied heavily on indigenous labor, the availability of which was guaranteed by the state through various mechanisms of force: debt servitude, *mandamientos* or labor drafts, and finally, vagrancy laws requiring work of the landless. Scholars of the period point to an ideological discourse inherited from

⁷ On the tombstone of Quetzaltenango indigenous community queen Thelma Beatriz Quixtán Argueta, 1970, in Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala*, p. 4.

⁸ See Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala*, for a discussion of 19th-century K’iche’ elites’ efforts to shape understandings of race and nation in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. To resist the ladino equating of culture with class, K’iche’ elites, writes Grandin, “had to embrace a racial definition of indigenous culture so as not to lose their ethnic identity. Ironically, they were less equivocal than Ladinos about the racial content of ethnicity: one could adopt as many defined Ladino traits as possible and still remain indigenous.” He argues that these ideas still resonate with many K’iche’s. In interviews with members of the Sociedad El Adelanto, he found that, “for these men, ethnicity was defined by blood rather than culture or class traits. ‘We have the blood of Tecún, they [the Ladinos] have the blood of Pedro de Alvarado.’” Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala*, p. 284, fn. 41.

the colonial era which justified and reinforced economic and political labor practices: Indians, though capable workers when forced, were barbaric, lazy, stupid, childlike, and tended toward vice and criminality. They needed, for their own good as well as the good of the nation, to be under the tutelage and *mano dura* of the state and *finquero*. Under the Liberal *Reforma* of the 1870s, the constitution no longer differentiated between Indians and ladinos as had the previous Conservative constitution, yet on-going segregation was achieved through legislative policies enabling labor coercion, and through the theories of racism that supported them. As anthropologist Ramón González Ponciano argues, the *indígena* thus evoked was absent from the founding myths of the Liberal nation, considered to be incapable of contributing something of value to the national fabric.⁹

By the 1920s, ideas of race and nation were undergoing a certain degree of change. Discussion of the “Indian problem” increasingly reflected anxieties on the part of intellectuals about creating a modern nation given the anti-modern nature of labor relations in the Guatemalan countryside. There was also a growing concern about connecting what were viewed as the fragments within Guatemalan national borders, the indigenous communities in geographic, cultural, linguistic, and political isolation from the national body politic. A well-known – even foundational – expression of thinking about race in the 1920s in Guatemala comes from the 1923 law school thesis of Miguel Asturias, who would go on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1967.

⁹ González Ponciano, “Esas sangres,” pp. 16-17. González Ponciano analyzed over 600 press articles and opinion pieces from the end of the 19th century to the present, finding a “double stigmatization” of the *indígena*: he is *laborioso*, but because of his inclination to vice, in need of the heavy hand of the *finquero*. The “hard worker” images included the Indian as obedient, capable, useful, simple, humble, and respectful. These were consistently paired with negative stereotypes such as stupid, stubborn, lazy, drunk, lying, crafty, backward, vengeful, abusive, cruel, and swindling.

The political moment in which Asturias wrote his thesis was one of considerable hope for a new generation of intellectuals in Guatemala, and of interest in the Indian. Asturias participated with other university students in the successful overthrow in 1920 of Guatemalan dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera (the dictator was the subject of his chilling novel, *El señor Presidente*, published in 1946), helped to organize the Association of University Students, and in 1922 was involved in establishing a People's University, a free school for adult education focusing on literacy and citizenship for the masses. At the same time, archeological discoveries in the Petén jungle of Guatemala were revealing an advanced pre-Columbian Maya civilization. These brought a fresh perspective on the Indian and national questions: considering the advanced nature of Maya social systems in the past, what accounted for the contemporary "Indian problem," the backwardness and lamentable social condition of the *indígena* in the present?

Asturias, among others, put the blame for the plight of the Indian on colonial inheritance, the economic backwardness of the nation, and ongoing injustices against *indígenas*, including forced labor and land usurpation, claiming Indians' inherent right to citizenship. Asturias, inspired by the example of Mexico's land reform and efforts of José Vasconcelos to educate the rural Indian masses, argued for the need to "level" and homogenize Guatemalan society, to achieve the uniformity (racial, cultural, and economic) he considered essential to creating a unified, modern nation. In order to achieve this, Asturias in 1923 argued that Guatemalans (i.e. ladinos) needed to know their country and its Indians (in a variation of the paternalistic discourse of the time, he did not refer to them as "our" Indians, but as the property of the nation): "The study of the Guatemalan social reality will provide us with the opportunity to make a racially,

culturally, linguistically and economically homogenous nation of Guatemala,” he wrote. “The Guatemalan nation is in the process of formation. It does not yet exist as the result of a solidarity among its members, a unity of culture and a community of aspirations....” Study of the Indians and “social reality,” he argued, would provide the knowledge to make that solidarity possible.¹⁰

Asturias’s work exemplifies an emerging interpretation of the Indian problem and its solution: it reflected a growing emphasis on the pre-Hispanic past as an element of Guatemalan nationalism, and more explicitly, offered a critique of an abusive and unjust contemporary economic and political system. As such, it was a precursor to the *indigenismo* that would shape perceptions of the Indian question in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet its characterizations of the present-day Indian were extremely harsh and owed much to preconceived notions of Indians’ genetic and cultural inferiority. The thesis is thus useful as evidence of changes and continuities in contemporary thinking on the “Indian question,” and interesting when considered alongside the rise of *indigenismo* and Asturias’s subsequent fictional work, discussed below.

Asturias argued explicitly that a modern nation had to be ladino and could *not* draw its sustenance from the Indian, who was inherently “degenerate.” The Indian represented the past, he asserted, and the ladino the national future. The ladino was living a historical moment “different” from that of the Indian: the *indígena* was in the throes of death; the ladino, in a historical moment of vitality. “With spurts of ambition

¹⁰ Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, pp. 64-65.

and romanticism,” Asturias wrote, “[the ladino] aspires, desires, and is, ... the vital part of the Guatemalan nation.”¹¹

The work is best known for its bitter critique of the failings – physical and psychological – of contemporary Indians. In a chapter entitled “Sociorganology,” Asturias detailed what he considered to be Indians’ “ugly” physical attributes. He described skin, hair, and eye color, the Indian’s wide nose and mouth, “thick lips with turned down corners,” sharp cheekbones, and large ears which together “give the Indian a physiognomy ugly in itself.”¹² His “psychological” findings were no more flattering, to his subjects or to himself as an observer, and were saturated with paternalistic stereotypes of the Indian as well as racial anxieties: “Moral feelings are utilitarian,” he argued, “mentality is relatively slight, and will power is nonexistent. [The Indian] is cruel in his family relationships, quiet and calculating; ... he laughs with a terrible grimace, ... and has chillingly malicious eyes.”¹³

The central question of the thesis was answered in advance: “Is the Indian improving or degenerating?” Not surprisingly, no hint of “improvement” was advanced, and a detailed list of symptoms of physical degeneration was followed by a discussion of “psychic” degeneration, together constituting a description of a dead and dying race. In one of the more bizarre passages, he remarks,

¹¹ Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, pp. 65-66.

¹² Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, p. 77. Joshua Lund points out that this was something of auto-flagellation, since later in life Asturias emphasized his own phenotypic “Indianness.” Lund, personal communication.

¹³ Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, p. 78.

The indigenous populations give the impression of huge asylums for beggars, jails for criminals, waiting rooms for cemeteries, where clouds of brandy and corn beer extend over rotting flesh and numb organs gasping in the throes of a slow death. Societies that present such profound anomalies in their development, that are retrogressing, whose moral and economic confusion are extreme, ... cannot be the basis upon which the future of a nation such as Guatemala rests¹⁴

To halt the degeneration of the Indian race, Asturias's recommended "therapy" reflected cultural and material understandings of race and included improved education, health, and hygiene, but also returned to biological, eugenist ideologies. Most urgently, he argued, the Indian needed new blood:

[The Indian's] profound defects stem from a racial background that is insufficient.... The indigenous race is in physiological decadence and who will deny that this is worse than death? ... The Indians have worn themselves out.... New blood, renewing streams that mend the fatigue of his systems, life that bubbles vigorously and harmoniously, is needed.... The stagnation of the indigenous race, its immorality, inaction and rude way of thinking have their origin in the lack of blood lines that will push it vigorously toward progress.... It is a matter of an exhausted race.¹⁵

¹⁴ Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, p. 92.

¹⁵ Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, pp. 101-3.

Seeking to emulate Argentina and the US as examples of “what immigration does for nations,” and looking longingly to Europe for the blood he sought for the nation, he wrote,

Thus the question, why aren't elements of some other vigorous and more suitable race brought in to improve our Indians? It's a heroic remedy Recalling the degenerative symptoms of the Indian ..., the following qualities must be especially sought in order to counterbalance his deficiencies and defects: superior weight and size, approximately eighty-two degrees of facial angle, white race¹⁶

The “heroic remedy” of whitening and the precise facial angle sought by Asturias clearly reflected the climate of 1920s race thinking in Guatemala and elsewhere in Latin America.¹⁷ He also called for structural change to “liberate” the Indian. These two prescriptions were in no way incompatible, as both sought to repair/replace what was degenerate about the Indian population. Asturias advocated the detailed study of rural highland communities, which would be undertaken with intensity by North American anthropologists beginning in the 1930s, and in the 1940s by ladino *indigenistas* working through the Instituto Indigenista Nacional. The remote Indian highlands and Indian life in

¹⁶ Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, pp. 103-4.

¹⁷ González Ponciano points out that Rafael Arévalo Martínez advanced very similar explanations and “solutions” for racial degeneration in Central America in 1919. González Ponciano, “Esas sangres,” pp. 18-19. On the history of these ideas in other contexts, see Richard Graham, ed., *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Nancy Leys Stepan, “*The Hour of Eugenics*”: *Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Roseblatt, eds., *Race and Nation*; and George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ch. 4.

general were utterly foreign to most ladinos in the 1920s, and to Asturias himself.

“Guatemalan territory is of startling beauty,” he wrote in his thesis. “It is both inspiring and saddening to realize this.”¹⁸ For reform-minded Guatemalans, to know the Indian came to be considered a requirement for fixing the Indian and the nation.

In 1923, Asturias left Guatemala to study in Europe, staying for nearly a decade. He returned in the midst of the long and repressive dictatorship of Jorge Ubico (1931-1944). Meanwhile, *indigenismo* was flourishing in Mexico, and enthusiasm for the study of the Indian grew among intellectuals in Guatemala, some of whom had been student contemporaries of Asturias. Archeological discoveries fueled widespread interest in pre-Columbian Maya civilization, and the state became an enthusiastic patron of the anthropological sciences. It soon created the Dirección General de Arqueología, Etnología e Historia, and a museum of archeology, a repository for the “historical patrimony” that was being uncovered in the jungles of the Petén.

The celebration of ancient Maya glories quickly found its way into nationalist discourse. “The Maya empire, nest of our aboriginal progenitors,” declared one enthusiast during commemorations of Guatemalan independence in 1923, “is the most elevated example of the culture of the [Indian] *pueblos*.”¹⁹ The Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala (SGHG) was founded in 1923, a state-funded institution that set out official discourses on “national historical identity” and worked to foster knowledge about the pre-Columbian Maya past as a pillar of Guatemalan nationalism and tourism. In 1927, José Villacorta of the Sociedad declared the pre-hispanic Maya text the *Popul*

¹⁸ Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, p. 78.

¹⁹ Cited in Taracena, *Etnicidad, estado y nación*, vol. 1, pp. 108-09.

Vuh to be the patrimony of all Guatemalans and published its Spanish translation.²⁰ A Guatemalan newspaper editorialized that the purpose of making the *Popul Vuh* available in Spanish was to create the “national soul.”²¹

The new enthusiasm for studying the Indian in no way signaled a shift away from racism. Regarding that national soul, the same Villacorta maintained that a European cultural heritage was superior to an indigenous, semi-barbaric one. For Villacorta, the progressive element for the Guatemalan nation was, as Asturias had argued, ladino. Other members of the Sociedad held similarly ambiguous positions on the relationship between past Maya glories and present Indian degeneration. While the Sociedad created maps, catalogued flora and fauna, and studied social organization and textiles of Guatemalan indigenous communities, González Ponciano points out that Sociedad leaders held political positions that could not be considered beneficial to the contemporary Indian. Adrián Recinos, as president of the National Legislative Assembly, rejected a decree to prohibit the use of the *mecapal* or tumpline, the leather harness crossing the forehead with which Indians traditionally strapped cargo to their backs. Another Sociedad leader opposed banana workers’ right to strike, still others defended the need for dictatorship in Guatemala and justified continuation of corporal punishment for *indígenas* on the *fincas*.²² Enduring assumptions about the Indian laborer remained wholly compatible with state *indigenismo*.

²⁰ Cited in Taracena, *Etnicidad, estado y nación*, vol. 1, p. 125.

²¹ Cited in Taracena, *Etnicidad, estado y nación*, vol. 1, pp. 125-26.

²² González Ponciano, “Esas sangres,” p. 19.

Meanwhile, beyond Guatemala steps were being taken in the 1930s to institutionalize growing support for *indigenismo*. Discussions in 1938 at the eighth Conferencia Internacional Americana in Lima, Peru, led to calls for the creation of centers throughout the Americas dedicated to studying the Indian and processes of national integration. In 1940, the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano (III) was founded, with the participation of a number of Guatemalans, but not the Guatemalan state. The dictatorship of Jorge Ubico refused to become party to the Institute because, Ubico argued, Guatemala had no “Indian problem.” The nation resolved any such issues through laws and education, the regime asserted, and therefore “... the situation of the Guatemalan Indian does not reach the proportion nor the characteristics of a problem.”²³ Literacy training took place in the military barracks, Ubico argued, and that constituted evidence that the Indian issue was being addressed. As one official statement asserted in 1943, “The barracks and other military centers have been converted during the administration of Comandante General don Jorge Ubico into true centers of teaching ...”²⁴

State aims to civilize and educate the Indian through the military coexisted with continuing paternalistic ideologies of race relations, which in turn justified state policies of forced labor recruitment, mostly of *indígenas*. General Ubico ordered the ending of practices of long-term debt peonage, widespread in Guatemala as a means of labor recruitment, on May 7, 1934. The very next day, however, the congress passed a new

²³ From official document of the Ubico regime, Ministry of Public Education, in a meeting of Ministers of Education, Panama, 1943. In Ramón González Ponciano, “Diez años de Indigenismo en Guatemala (1944-1954),” (B.A. thesis, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, D.F., 1988), fn. 13, p. 90 and p. 104.

²⁴ In González Ponciano, “Diez años,” p. 104.

Law Against Vagrancy, which legislated obligatory work, between 100 and 150 days per year and generally performed on the coffee *fincas*, for those without “profession, salary, or honest occupation,” and those who did not farm relatively sizeable plots of land, to which few Indians (or poor ladinos) had access in the 1930s.²⁵ In a later plea to retain this system, one proponent of Indian forced labor expressed its justification: “It is argued that [the Law Against Vagrancy] is a harsh law, but our Indian requires harshness as long as he cannot meet his own needs....”²⁶

Since the Ubico government refused to take part in the activities of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, an independent “Primer Grupo Indigenista” was founded in Guatemala in 1941 to further the *indigenista* idea and to encourage Guatemalan participation in regional *indigenista* efforts. Combining ideas about modernity, race, and nation, the group argued that “the progress of the entire nation” depended upon “the betterment of the living conditions of the indigenous masses.”²⁷ The Primer Grupo established a pattern for the many *indigenista* efforts to come by sharply differentiating those Indian practices that should be supported and encouraged from those better eradicated for the progress of the nation. The group called for studies of Indian communities, to identify “useful” customs and ideas, and to inform policies “to modify or substitute those [practices] that impede economic and cultural evolution.”²⁸ The aims of

²⁵ These legislative decrees were numbers 1995 and 1996, respectively, May 7 and 8, 1934. Reproduced in Skinner-Klée, *Legislación indigenista*, pp. 108-14.

²⁶ *El Imparcial*, December 2, 1945, cited in Richard Adams, “Ethnic Images and Strategies in 1944,” in Carol Smith, ed., *Guatemalan Indians and the State*, p. 160.

²⁷ In González Ponciano, “Diez años,” p. 78.

²⁸ In González Ponciano, “Diez años,” pp. 79-80.

the group thus included lifting up the Indian from his position of “inferiority,” as well as supporting the “traditional esthetic value” of selected indigenous customs. Guatemalan *indigenismo*, even if momentarily without official sponsorship, had arrived.

1944-1954: The October Revolution

Indigenista efforts, resisted by the Ubico dictatorship, became institutionalized during the elected reform governments of Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz, 1944-54, together known as the “October Revolution.” A Guatemalan Instituto Indigenista Nacional was established in 1945, and in 1946 the congress passed a decree ratifying the convention of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, stating that “it is an urgent necessity to focus ... on the ethnic problem that confronts the country ..., to incorporate the *indígena* into the national culture, releasing him from the situation of inferiority in which he has been kept.” With the aim of making a citizen of him, the decree stated that investigations of the social and economic situation of the Indian would be undertaken, to study and resolve that situation – immediately assuming, of course, that it needed fixing!²⁹ The Arévalo regime stated that “our government, ... is in reality, a Department of Indigenous Affairs, or ... it should be....”³⁰

The Indian question, fiercely debated in the Arévalo administration, was shaped by multiple issues, among them ethnic violence and the vast structural inequalities inherited from Ubico. The revolution had been ushered in by a massacre in the community of Patzicía, beginning two days after Arévalo took office. Fourteen ladinos,

²⁹ Decree 269, August 10, 1946, reproduced in Skinner-Klée, *Legislación indigenista*, pp. 126-27.

³⁰ Cited in González Ponciano, “Diez Años,” fn. 15, pp. 146-47.

supporters of Arévalo, were killed by *indígenas* in the community, seemingly the result of tensions and threats related to the elections and claims set forth during campaigning regarding land. In the days to follow, ladinos in Patzicía and from surrounding communities took revenge. The number of dead *indígenas* is unclear, though apparently substantial; the press focused detailed attention on the descriptions of the Indians' bloody attack on ladinos, but provided no detail on the numbers of dead Indians, only that there were "uncountable corpses."³¹ The event was portrayed with great alarm in the national press. Dire warnings of impending ethnic wars stirred racial fears throughout the country, magnifying the urgency of the Indian problem for the Arévalo regime.

At the same time, reformists were acutely aware of the tremendous problems they faced in the countryside, problems with ethnic undertones since *indígenas* constituted a great majority of the population in the rural highlands. Patterns of land tenure were vastly unequal (see chapter 3), and rural *indígenas* remained tied to large *fincas* through debt peonage. The government sought to address these problems from a number of angles. Emphasis was placed on the need for structural reform of Guatemala's economy, especially in the area of land tenure. Rural bilingual education was made a similarly high priority after an educational census revealed that 80% of rural Guatemalans of school age had no access to formal education.³² While the reforms did not specifically target *indígenas*, as a group they were disproportionately affected. Access to land and education, as well as health and civics lessons, would make effective citizenship available

³¹ See Richard Adams, "Las masacres de Patzicía de 1944: Una reflexión," *Winak Boletín Intercultural*, vol. 7, nos. 1-4 (June 1991 – March 1992), pp. 3-40.

³² "Censo Escolar," *Boletín Indigenista*, vol. II, nos. 2-3, March-June 1946.

to Indians for the first time, the Revolution argued, and in so doing would create the nation.

To begin to formulate the state's new "revolutionary" approach to Guatemala's Indian problem, the state turned to the Instituto Indigenista Nacional. Manuel Galich, the Minister of Education, said in a speech inaugurating the IIN that of all national concerns, the Indian problem was the most acute. Indians were foreign to ladinos: first we must confess, he said, "that we know nothing about the Guatemalan Indian"³³ Antonio Goubaud Carrera, in charge of the official *indigenista* program and reflecting on the obstacles confronting revolutionary aims, asked in the *Boletín Indigenista*, "... how many Guatemalans will there be [who are] speaking strange languages [*idiomas extraños*] ..., dressing in ... *trajes de fantasía* that set them off from the rest of the population, ... tied to technologies from thousands of years ago – how many ... will think about Guatemala being more than what is encircled by the mountains around their community?"³⁴ As Asturias had argued two decades earlier, national homogeneity was not possible without knowledge of the Guatemalan Indian. To discover what was "wrong," and thus how to fix it, the IIN commissioned studies in Indian communities throughout the highlands.

In 1947, a "sociological guide" was published by the IIN outlining the kinds of information sought in these studies: information regarding ecology, housing, furniture, dress, agriculture and other work, social organization, socio-political and religious structures, health, reproduction, the supernatural world, and the life cycle. Sample questions filled forty-five pages of the IIN *Boletín*, and were wide-ranging and revealing.

³³ Cited in González Ponciano, "Diez Años," pp. 104-05.

³⁴ *Boletín Indigenista*, v. 1:4, December 1945, pp. 362-364.

Some were straight forward fact-finding: *Is the municipio in a valley, a mountain, near a river? Is the climate cold, temperate, warm? What public services are available? Of what are houses constructed? Roofs? Floors? Are there windows?* Others types of questions sought information about levels of knowledge and perceptions: *Is it good to have sufficient light inside the house? Is it good for a house to be ventilated?* Still others inquired about “good” and “bad” habits and preferences, and how they functioned as impediments to ladinization: *Do most people in the house sleep on beds, or on the floor? How often do you change your clothes? What do women wear? If the man in the household uses both ladino clothing and indigenous clothing, what indigenous articles does he use, and why? If he uses ladino clothing and the woman in the household does not, why? Why don't Indians wear shoes?* Some questions, or at least their phrasing, bordered on the absurd: *Do you wish there wouldn't be: lice? flies? fleas? chiggers? bedbugs? Why? How do you kill lice? If you kill them with your teeth, do you swallow them, and why?*³⁵

Beyond assessing what was “wrong” with the *pueblo indígena*, the IIN and the revolutionary state were very interested in Indian customs of “value.” Indigenous weaving, especially, was identified as an important part of the national culture and in need of state protection. The 1945 Constitution included an article calling for the protection and conservation of artisan “authenticity.”³⁶ This was to be accomplished both through laws and the creation of museums of indigenous art. In 1947, a detailed, sixteen-

³⁵ See *Boletín del Instituto Indigenista Nacional*, vol. II, no. 2, March 1947, “Guía Sociológica: Investigaciones de campo de las comunidades indígenas Guatemaltecas,” pp. 54-105.

³⁶ Constitution of 1945, Article 87, in Skinner-Klée, *Legislación indigenista*, p. 126.

part decree was passed aiming to guard the “authenticity” of indigenous *traje* from “adulteration,” ordering the study, cataloguing, and even patenting of community-specific weaving designs. It was both the “duty of the state,” according to this law, and in the national interest, “to protect native industry, a genuine manifestation of the art and tradition of the indigenous element.”³⁷

Anthropologist Diane Nelson uses the double meaning of “fix” (in English, not in Spanish) to point to the ambiguities underlying relations between Indians and the *indigenista* state. Attempts to “fix” indigenous tradition – both in the sense of modifying unwanted or backward behavior, and protecting what was “useful” and of value by controlling “authenticity” – were fully intertwined in *indigenista* aims, and inherently contradictory. As Nelson notes, repairing Indians and bringing them into the nation, given the conception of that nation as ladino, “would presumably strip them of their distinctive clothing.”³⁸ Recall that the IIN official quoted above decried *traje* as setting Indians apart from others. Yet distinctive Indian dress was of great importance to the IIN, the focus of much concern and regulation. Even Indian elements of “value,” it seems, in all their beauty and carefully-measured authenticity, had little or no place in modern Guatemala, and were destined for the museum.

Asturias’s Men of Maize

In the grass was a mule, on the mule was a man, and in the
man was a dead man. His eyes were his eyes, his hands

³⁷ Congressional Decree 426, September, 24, 1947, in Skinner-Klée, *Legislación indigenista*, pp. 127-130.

³⁸ Diane Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound*, note 17, p. 89.

were his hands, his voice was his voice, his legs were his legs and his feet were his feet for taking him to war as soon as he could get away from the snake of six hundred thousand coils of mud, moon, forests, rainstorms, mountains, lakes, birds and echoes that had curled itself around his body. But how could he get away, how could he untie himself ..., ... how could he break free ... with the half-flowered bean patch about his arms, the warm chayote tips around his neck, and his feet caught in the noose of the daily round?³⁹

Literature of the era highlights some of the ongoing contradictions and tensions within *indigenismo*. In the context of the reformist euphoria of the 1944-54 period and the rise of institutionalized *indigenismo* in Guatemala, Asturias published his epic novel of the Guatemalan Indian, *Hombres de maíz*. In contrast to his 1923 thesis, which described Indians from a distinctly outsider's – and overtly harsh – perspective (and one which he soon repudiated), *Men of Maize* has been credited with getting inside the Indian world, leaping into the “timelessness” of the “primitive” mind, “drawing us into that archaic world and unfolding its mystery to us.”⁴⁰ While his work did reflect a partial rethinking of the Indian question, it did not require that he abandon many of the racial assumptions that informed his earlier work. As an example of Guatemalan *indigenista* literature, *Men of Maize* has much to tell us not only about what changed in the two

³⁹ Miguel Angel Asturias, *Men of Maize*, translated by Gerald Martin (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 8.

⁴⁰ Richard Callan, “Introduction to the Revised Edition,” in Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, p. ix.

decades separating the thesis and the novel, but how continuities in thinking about race informed Asturias's work and *indigenista* discourse in general.

Men of Maize reflected *indigenista* positions of the reformist 1940s in that it valorized aspects of Indian customs, while incorporating a socio-economic critique of the structures that undermined and destroyed the Indian himself, namely, land-loss and the commodification of maize. Asturias went much farther, in fact, than many *indigenistas* in positively and explicitly describing the rural life of *indígenas*, implying that it could and should be again made viable through land reform. Yet the novel depends on a racial essentialism, especially in the form of physical and psychological descriptions.

One character, a postman – on his way to becoming ladino, but not there yet – is typical: “His nose was flat; his moustache grew in two straggling brushes over the corners of his mouth; he was round-shouldered as a bottle,” and he held a straw hat which he turned round and round in his hands. His Indian clothes, of simple white cotton, are in his case worn underneath his ladino clothes. The contrast between the postman and a ladino official whose audience he seeks could not be more pronounced, an “old soldier with captain’s ribbons and the look of those who crucified God,” a “veteran flogger of the defenseless.”⁴¹ In another example, an Indian coffin carrier is similarly submissive and marked by his clothes and hat: “The Indian, with his hat in his hand, his white breeches above the knee, his white shirt with short sleeves, seemed made of bronzed stone.”⁴² In the latter characterization, we recognize a pattern that Asturias uses repeatedly, fixing

⁴¹ Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 159.

⁴² Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 88.

Indianness by turning it to stone. The coffin carrier as stone, like others in the novel, is rendered permanent, part of the earth itself.

Psychological descriptions in the novel are similar to those in the earlier thesis as well, with characters exhibiting “relatively slight” mental capacity, lack of willpower, and a complete inability to handle alcohol. Characters in *Men of Maize*, as in the thesis, are insensitive “to either moral or physical pain.” “[The Indian] watches death come without fear,” Asturias wrote in 1923, “his courage is passive, long-suffering and stoic....” This is precisely how the novel depicts Indians, especially the essential symbol of the race, the Indian woman. Only ladinos in the novel feel physical pain; Indians seemingly only the tremendous pain of identity loss.

Asturias’s treatment of Indians’ loss of identity and ladinization is the aspect of the novel that most clearly reveals the ambiguities of *indigenismo*. There is one obvious difference between his 1923 work and *Men of Maize*. In his earlier thinking, ladinization was the goal, seemingly painless and positive, and the key to formation of the modern Guatemalan nation. Two decades later, Asturias portrays the process by which Indians cease being Indians as fraught with tragedy, symbolized by arid landscapes, wakefulness, thirst, hunger, rootlessness, fleeing women, vagabonds. The final moment in which an Indian crosses over to ladino identity is represented by falling, be it into a ravine or over a cliff. Losing Indianness no longer means simply gaining identity as a *guatemalteco*. The character himself goes missing. When the postman “crosses over” to ladino, we learn that, “They’ve lost their postman. He’s become invisible. He’s turned into nobody.”⁴³

⁴³ Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 233.

There is present in the novel, like in the thesis, a sense that modernity *requires* Indians to become ladino, as much pain as that might cause. The Indian protagonist Gaspar Ilom, in the opening scene of the novel reproduced above, is, after all, both asleep, and a dead man on a mule. He has the capacity to break free, to become alive, to wake. He has the eyes a man needs, the hands, the legs, and feet to carry him off. Asturias depicts the ties holding him to the land and Indianness as nearly – but not quite – unbreakable, “a snake of six hundred thousand coils,” the bean patch that ensnares him, the noose around his feet. But even with the enormity of the snake and all that traps him, there is a driving force that propels the characters, despite the tragedy that ensues, away from Indianness and toward something else: modernity, the city, literacy and “sight.”

Throughout the novel we meet characters that are on that difficult path toward ladinization, with racialized elements of Indian lingering about them, but about to be lost. Figures are portrayed with gradations of Indian/ladino identity, men with one shoe off (barefoot Indian) and one shoe on (ladino). The postman literally wears two sets of clothes. Postal workers in the city as well, figures that connected rural and urban Guatemala, are described as having “sweaty feet half out of their shoes”⁴⁴ A boy from the street selling newspapers, that symbol of modernity and literacy, is nonetheless not quite modern: “tousled and wretched,” he has “one shoe on and the other half on.”⁴⁵ Even those men who made a relatively complete transformation to ladino display an anxiety in certain circumstances – in the city, for example – and can revert to former “Indian” habits. A muleteer is described as physically mixed, with a dark face but

⁴⁴ Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 220.

⁴⁵ Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 232.

“aquiline” nose. He puts his shoes on to go to the city, but pulls them off again in the countryside, to go “deliciously barefoot.”⁴⁶

Asturias’ ladinization, full of ambiguities, gradations, and anxieties, is portrayed like something of a river with a strong current pulling victims along. Only the women, by fleeing, maintain and symbolize racial purity, a fitting image since women in Guatemala, as we will see in chapter five, serve to produce and mark Indian identity. Men in the novel are the ones engaged in commerce, and for Asturias it was that economic structure of society that pulled Indians into the ladino world, and into the moral corruption and loss of origins that the structure produced.

The single male character able to return to being Indian, an itinerate merchant named Goyo Yic, is an exception that highlights Asturias’s complex position on identity. A blind character who gains sight (symbolizing literacy, or knowledge of the world outside the Indian community?) only to lose his ability to “see” his Indian woman and that which connected him to his origins and Indian identity, Yic is in the end saved by that woman. His new eyesight moves him along the path of destruction, the path of ladinization: “His eyes flew away, ... eyes which, now they had emerged from their shells, would always be running away from him.”⁴⁷ Along the path he is part ladino, part Indian: a salesman carrying his western goods in a “big peddler’s tray ... just above his waist, in front of him” (ladino) when he worked, and “on his back” (Indian) when he traveled.⁴⁸ After wandering in search of his wife, he becomes, through grief, searching,

⁴⁶ Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 216.

⁴⁷ Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 117.

⁴⁸ Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 124.

liquor, “diminished ... until he was turned into someone who was no one,” a ladino.⁴⁹ His feeling of loss is acute: “You couldn’t spell out all I feel in my body: sometimes the tickle of wanting to hear news of them or wanting to peer right across everything that’s hiding them from me, to see how they are; sometimes a suffocating feeling that won’t go away until I start walking, as if by walking, by keeping on moving, I was shortening the distance between me and them.” But the reader knows his wandering only increases the distance. After a period, he loses the connection completely: “... it’s been so long that now I don’t feel anything. Before, ... I searched to find her; now I search so as not to find her.”⁵⁰

What message does Asturias give the reader by allowing Yic’s wife, ultimately, to find him? The central theme of ladinization is complicated by a brief glimpse of a type of *indigenismo* and a political revolution with a potential place for an Indian who does not succumb to ladinization. A link is made between structural change (land reform), nation, and race, with nation in this case not implying (only) ladino identity as viable for a modern Guatemala. Asturias’ position on the Indian question goes beyond the October Revolution’s *indigenismo* by imagining a multi-ethnic nation, indigenous and ladino. It is a vision that would be articulated three decades later, in the 1970s, by Carlos Guzmán Böckler and embraced by a generation of indigenous activists.

The ending in *Men of Maize*, with a multi-ethnic nation and successful land reform, was of course purely fictional. The agrarian reform of 1952 triggered a US-backed military coup that overthrew the October Revolution on June 27, 1954. In the

⁴⁹ Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 135.

⁵⁰ Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 137.

anti-Communist fervor that followed, the tensions inherent in *indigenismo* became increasingly pronounced. The state continued an active, but this time decidedly non-reformist, role in identifying those elements of Indian essence that made a “good” and “authentic” contribution to the national patrimony, and those parts of Indianness that needed to be erased.

Social Integration and Folklore: The Indian in the Counter-Revolutionary Nation

The anti-Communist, counter-revolutionary movement building in the early 1950s had an understanding of the Indian question that differed from that of the October Revolution.⁵¹ It again focused on the need to fortify Guatemalan nationalism with the rhetorical union of (ancient) Indian and ladino as constituting the nation. But where the October Revolution had advocated land reform and bilingual education to attain assimilation, the new nationalism of the counter-revolutionary movement involved overturning such reforms. Land expropriations in particular had, it was argued, undermined stability in the countryside and threatened the nation. A new ideology was set out, involving citizenship, capitalism, family, culture, and education, with the underlying concern of fighting Communism. The goal was to incorporate the Indian into the Guatemalan nation through the promotion of folklore and developmentalist policies, together seen as a means to build nationalism and secure the countryside against the spread of leftist sympathies.

Within weeks of the coup that brought Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas to power in Guatemala, the Instituto Indigenista Nacional was suspended by government decree. It

⁵¹ See the opposition party Movimiento de Liberación Nacional’s “Plan de Tegucigalpa,” December 24, 1953, published in Luis Mariñas Otero, *Las Constituciones de Guatemala* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Políticos, 1958): 681-730.

was “re-organized” and soon reopened, but stripped of much of its influence and budget.⁵² In the ensuing period it was largely overshadowed by a new Seminario de Integración Social Guatemalteca (SISG) created in 1955, a state institution which explicitly focused on integration of the Indian into the counter-revolutionary nation through developmentalism.⁵³

The union of folklore and developmentalism (the respective mandates of the IIN and the SISG) was evident in the regime’s new constitution. Indigenous artisan production, long identified as important to the nation, now belonged *to* the nation: “*Típicas de la Nación*,” the constitution proclaimed, deserved the special protection of the state, both to preserve “authenticity” and to get the goods to market.⁵⁴ The work of the “new” IIN, while focused on culture and folklore, also included explicitly anti-Communist programs. In 1955 the IIN held a conference to assist the Guatemalan Army in addressing problems it faced in rural indigenous communities. The IIN translated materials for the Committee of National Defense against Communism from Spanish into indigenous languages, including a piece entitled, “A lesson dedicated to the Guatemalan campesinos.”⁵⁵

⁵² Presidential decree number 105, October 7, 1954.

⁵³ See *Boletín Indigenista Nacional*, 2nd epoch, vol. 1, nos. 1-5, 1955 (republished in 1957), “Un dictamen favorable,” pp. 23-4, and “Nuevo reglamento del Instituto,” pp. 33-42.

⁵⁴ 1956 Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala, article 109, in Skinner-Klée, *Legislación indigenista*, p. 139. Aside from claiming *típicas* for the nation, the article was nearly the same as article 87 of the 1945 constitution, which also sought to maintain “authenticity” and address the production and distribution of artisan production.

⁵⁵ Informe de IIN, 1955, *Boletín Indigenista*, vol. 6, no. 1-4, 1956, pp. 58-60.

The folkloric component of post-revolutionary *indigenismo* involved countless state homages to the *indígena* and the elevation of the Indian as a national symbol. In 1955 a *Museo del Indio Guatemalteco* was proposed, “dedicated to exalting the values of the *indio guatemalteco*, ... [through] a permanent exhibit of our folklore.” The museum was to showcase ceramics, textiles, music, and the “esoteric world” of the Indian, and aimed to attract national and international tourism.⁵⁶ In 1958, the Ydígoras Fuentes regime designated an official “Día del Aborígen,” first commemorated on April 19, 1959, a day when Indians could “focus the spirit of their race and awaken their patriotic sentiment.” The *indígena* deserved such homage, the government decree declared, as he was the “original architect of the purest Guatemalan nationality.”⁵⁷

In 1961, an *indigenista* publication *Guatemala Indígena* was founded at the IIN, dedicated to integration of the Indian and to providing information about the indigenous “vision of the world,” knowledge of “*lo indígena*” as the “foundation of our nationality.”⁵⁸ An introductory essay set out the “Indian-national problem” in stark and familiar terms: sociologically, Guatemala was not a unified nation, but “an ethnic mosaic” of Indians and ladinos. As a result, the piece argued, the nation could not reap the benefits of democracy. The solution lay in the integration of the Indian, to be achieved through the SISG.⁵⁹ In 1969 and 1970, the title-page of *Guatemala Indígena*

⁵⁶ See “El museo del indio guatemalteco,” *Boletín Indigenista Nacional*, 2nd epoch, vol. 1, nos. 1-5, 1955 (republished in 1957), pp. 47-50.

⁵⁷ Decree of April 9, 1959, by Ydígoras Fuentes, reproduced in the newspaper *Ruta*, April 16, 1974.

⁵⁸ *Guatemala Indígena*, vol. 1, no. 1, January – March 1961, p. 5.

⁵⁹ “En torno a la integración social de Guatemala,” *Guatemala Indígena*, vol. 1, no. 1, January – March 1961, p. 7-30.

featured the motto, “Development of the *indígena*: the foundation of our nationality.” For the next decade, it became “The *indígena*: the foundation of the national structure.” That national structure itself, however, at least economically and politically, was clearly *not* at issue. The journal dealt instead with folklore and culture: indigenous marriage customs, *traje*, music, language, pre-hispanic culture and Indian manuscripts, indigenous conceptions of the supernatural, traditional medicine, religion and *cofradías*.

In 1969, official Instituto Indigenista Nacional statements regarding the Indian problem reflected a *finquero* paternalism and justified the strong hand of the state in dealing with the Indian. “Why is *indigenismo* indispensable?” asked the IIN. And is paternalism, the IIN continued, at times justifiable? As *indigenistas* had been doing for half a century, the IIN decried that half the nation’s population was ignorant of national laws, illiterate, spoke only indigenous languages, continued to believe in multiple gods and supernatural powers, and was geographically isolated, converting “every hut into a hiding place....” (These were some of the same “customs” showcased in *Guatemala Indígena*.) “Can this population,” the IIN asked, “be governed and led in the same way as the other half?”⁶⁰ Defending a “special” approach to the racialized Indian, the IIN claimed that the appropriate means to deal with the Indian problem would be through an institution “that knows and understands the Indian soul; that would treat [*indígenas*] in a special manner, not precisely the democratic way.” The IIN claimed that “To know the soul of the *indio* is not a matter of intuition, nor of improvisation, it is a matter of study

⁶⁰ Instituto Indigenista Nacional, *Por qué es indispensable el indigenismo?* (Guatemala: IIN, 1969), p. 9.

and a function of love. This study, that understanding, and ... love for the *indio* constitutes the essence of *indigenismo*.”⁶¹

Pairing State Homage and Repression: *Indígenas* Respond

As we will see in subsequent chapters, indigenous activists in the 1970s fiercely condemned these sorts of homages, including the *Día del Aborígen* or *Día de la Raza*. An editorial in the indigenous periodical *Ixim* in 1978 called the *Día de la Raza* the “Day of Disgrace.” What the state portrayed as the birth of the nation was not something to celebrate, they argued, but rather signified loss – spiritual, social, political, cultural:

For us, this day is a day of sorrow, ... the day we lost our ... liberty, to become slaves of the pseudo Spaniards. On this day they proclaim heroes those who murdered us, those who are the cause of our disgrace, poverty, injustices, urban and rural We cannot celebrate the *día de la raza* because it ... meant [our] binding to a ... system that has only served to prostitute our *pueblo*.⁶²

Activists directed similarly heated criticism toward state homages to Tecún Umán, a K’iche’ leader and warrior at the time of the Spanish conquest. A principal character in state *folklorismo*, Tecún Umán in 1960 he was designated a “national hero” by the state, and the rhetorical “first soldier of Guatemala” for his valiant, if misguided, efforts against Spanish conquistador Pedro Alvarado. The popularly-held version of the legend was that Tecún Umán struck Alvarado’s horse rather than the man, thinking him a

⁶¹ Instituto Indigenista Nacional, *Por qué es indispensable...?*, pp. 9-10.

⁶² *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, vol. 1, no. 12, September 1978. More recently, campesino activists have taken to commemorating the day by occupying the nation’s highways and plantations to demand access to land.

god and the horse an extension of his body. The image of the Indian as brave but somewhat mentally deficient cannot be overlooked here. Tecún Umán has been a favored symbol especially of the Army, assigned the rhetorical task of unifying the two races that make the Guatemalan nation. In the late 1950s and 1960s the Guatemalan legislature called for national commemorations, parades featuring *indígenas*, and monuments to be erected in his honor.⁶³

Anthropologist Irma Otzoy has written on the state use of Tecún Umán, arguing that the state, by choosing a conquest-era Maya as the symbol of Indianness, effectively distanced itself from and erased present day Maya. Tecún Umán, writes Otzoy, “represents a space in which the Mayas are present in the form of death, without any real participation, without political inclusion.”⁶⁴ If Tecún Umán, Otzoy argues, “represents an icon of the Indian space within the nation, [it] is a space in which the Mayas are present in a petrified form, leaving no possibility for their development, inclusion, self-

⁶³ Tecún Umán figured in several accounts of Guatemalan history in an earlier era as well. See, for example, a textbook by José Villacorta, *Curso de la Historia de la América Central para uso de los Institutos y Escuelas Normales*, published in 1915. Tecún Umán was the subject of a poem published in 1911 in *El Comercio*, Quetzaltenango, August 12, 1911. Both cited in Taracena, *Etnicidad, estado y nación*, vol. 1, p. 126-27, notes 232 and 233. Greg Grandin notes that Quetzaltenango K'iché elites in the early 20th century developed a “cult” of Tecún Umán, which was then appropriated and militarized by the national state and army. See Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala*, pp. 288-89, fn. 18.

⁶⁴ Irma Otzoy, “Tekum Umam: From Nationalism to Maya Resistance” (Ph.D. diss., University of California Davis, 1999), p. 153. Similarly, Joshua Lund asks of the “*mestizo*” Porfirian state, “What was the space of the Indian ...? ... [It] was an ancient space, a traditional space, a foundational space, even a sacred space; all of this is another way of saying that it was a space of erasure, abstractly included, concretely excluded.” Joshua Lund, “They Were Not a Barbarous Tribe,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2003), p. 175.

determination or autonomy.”⁶⁵ Indianness is again “contained” by such a move, fixed in the past and divorced from the present.

But while the state tried to control “Indianness” by such maneuvers, it had an increasingly difficult time controlling Indians. As we saw in the epigraph from the Army’s *Cultural Review*, the armed forces in Guatemala explicitly argued that Tecún Umán is apolitical and exists apart from the civil war that has wracked the country since the 1960s.⁶⁶ In 1992, a Maya organization graphically contested this state image by portraying a very different relationship between Tecún Umán and the Guatemalan nation. In an anti-Quincentennial poster, Tecún Umán was shown fighting a Spanish conquistador, but this time Alvarado took the form of a Guatemalan Army soldier equipped with an M-16. As Diane Nelson writes, the poster was “an economical representation of five hundred years of power-drenched relations” between Indians and the state.⁶⁷ Nelson describes a similar twist on Tecún Umán in the northern Quiché community of Nebaj in 1985, an area devastated by state counter-insurgency violence in the early 1980s. Tecún Umán is traditionally a protagonist in annual re-creations of the “Dance of the Conquest,” which feature the symbolic encounter of the Indian warrior and Alvarado. In Nebaj the performance typically ends when Tecún Umán is placed in a coffin and carried through the town. As Nelson writes regarding the 1985 events,

⁶⁵ Otzoy, “Tekum Umam,” p. 164.

⁶⁶ “Tecun Uman en la historia y la leyenda,” by David Vela, published in “*Revista Cultural del Ejército*,” Publicación Semestral, enero – junio 1979, año 6, vol. 16-17, 30 de junio de 1979, Guatemala, Ministerio de la Defensa Nacional, Relaciones Públicas del Ejército. Other editions of the Army’s *Cultural Review* in the same period included articles such as “Llanto por Tecún Umán,” “Atanasio Tzul,” “Don Juan Ma Tac Batz, Auténtico Héroe Nacional,” “Popul Vuh,” “Etnografía: Mopan Maya,” “Etnografía: El Pueblo Chortí,” and “Historia Quiché de don Juan de Torres.” See *Revista Cultural del Ejército*, 1979 through 1982.

[at] the moment of his death, and throughout the day as the coffin moved through the streets of Nebaj, a torrent of grief accompanied it. People fell upon the coffin shrieking and crying, some cursed the army and called out the names of dead friends and relatives⁶⁸

As we will see in later chapters, as opposition to the state mounted and a leftist insurgency grew in the highlands, the shift in state understandings of the Indian was profound. Where *indígenas* had been rendered folkloric, fixed, apolitical, and submissive, in the late 1970s and 1980s it was assumed instead that by definition, by virtue of being Indian, *indígenas* were subversive or potentially so. Ironically, state celebrations of folklore continued, even grew, during *la violencia*. A glaring example of the irony involved in state positioning on the Indian in the midst of violence involves the woman currently featured on the nation's twenty-five *centavo* coin. A familiar symbol to virtually all Guatemalans since her profile appeared on the coin in 1964, the woman's name is Concepción Ramírez Mendoza. (She replaced the indigenous figure on the coin first minted in 1948.) A Tzutujil from Santiago Atitlán, she was herself a victim of the violence that hit her community and the *pueblo indígena* in general in the 1980s. Her father, an evangelical pastor named Pedro Ramírez, was tortured and killed by the Army in January 1981 along with over twenty others in Santiago Atitlán's first massacre, near a

⁶⁷ Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound*, p. 16.

coffee finca in Chacayá. She was made a widow nine years later when her husband, Miguel Reanda, was murdered with three other men by unidentified assailants.⁶⁹

A well-known face but anonymous, since no identifying information appeared on the coin bearing her image, in 1996 (just after the indigenous rights accord) Ramírez Mendoza, at that point a widow with six children, was recognized by the Guatemalan state as a “national symbol” after thirty-two years of appearing on the coin. With her recognition as a “symbol” came a government pension.

Her son, who translated Ramírez’s Tzutujil into Spanish for me, pointed out that names and information accompany all other figures on Guatemalan currency. I asked Ramírez Mendoza why she believed her name hadn’t appeared on the coin. She said that she had been anonymous through the entire process. Her father had arranged her participation in the contest and had received the government’s two quetzales, approximately two dollars, when she was chosen. “A curious thing,” she said, “is that they never asked me my name.”⁷⁰

A defining component of the national history of Guatemala has been the process of “making” or defining race, and through it, envisioning and bringing into being a racially binary nation. The racialized Indian, and inversely, the ladino, have been constructed through many means – ideological, economic, legislative, political. Since at least the 1920s, pre-Columbian Indians have been celebrated in Guatemalan nationalism

⁶⁹ Interview with Concepción Ramírez Mendoza, July 6, 2002, Santiago Atitlán. See also the newspaper *Día*, May 27, 2002, p. 6. The army’s murder of her father seems to have been a mistake, as he was someone known to have been cooperating with the military.

⁷⁰ Interview with Concepción Ramírez Mendoza, July 6, 2002, Santiago Atitlán.

while contemporary Indians have been disdained. Regarding Mexico, Joshua Lund argues that this apparent split is actually no separation at all: it is rather “the constitutive ambivalence of a single, expansionist nationalism. It is a nationalism enabled by a gesture that appropriates while vanquishing, sacralizes while destroying: simultaneously a rescue and an erasure.”⁷¹

While such articulations have been powerful in Guatemala in both psychological and material terms, they have also been contested and incomplete. Racializations of the present-day Indian that rest on ideas of inferiority and degeneracy could not achieve an easy hegemony in a context where half the population continued to identify itself as indigenous, where ethnic discrimination, geography, and language prevented indigenous integration into ladino society, and where growing numbers of students and activists – the subjects of this study – resisted racist assumptions that denigrated *indígenas*. Moreover, whatever disputed claims the state may have had to representing the *pueblo Maya* collapsed in the early 1980s as state counterinsurgency terror against the rural indigenous population reached the level of genocide.

The remainder of this dissertation is about the emergence in the latter half of the twentieth century of activist movements that challenged the racialized Indian depicted by the state, and the political, social, and economic projects it naturalized and justified. We now turn to their stories.

⁷¹ Lund, “They Were Not a Barbarous Tribe,” p. 175.

Chapter 3: Politicization in the Highlands, 1940s – 1977

State positioning on the Indian – discursive, political, and economic – met with increasing contestation and resistance by *indígenas* as the second half of the twentieth century unfolded. This chapter and the next examine the development of local, regional, and national mobilization by *indígenas* over the course of four decades. It was a period of growing politicization across Guatemala, culminating in the bloody confrontations of the late 1970s between the state and social movements of many kinds. As we will see, *indígenas* were prominent among the newly politicized of the era, and among those targeted by the state during *la violencia*.

We first examine the roots and catalysts of many different forms of rural organizing that emerged since the 1940s. State policies on rural education, land, “developmentalism,” and programs of the Catholic church, for instance, spurred activism in communities all over the highlands. Organizing produced and was shaped by new ideas about Indian identity, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1970s, significant numbers of young people had become involved in local organizing, and many began to embrace notions of a broad *pueblo indígena* in Guatemala. Activists talked of a pan-Indian *pueblo* with a shared past – shaped by Maya heritage along with centuries of ethnic discrimination – and shared problems in the present. As chapter four will demonstrate, mobilized *indígenas* held many different opinions about how to respond to those problems, and differences after the mid-1970s became sharpened by a climate of leftist insurgency and the tremendous violence of state counter-insurgency. Yet that same violence would, fleetingly, bring together many activists in defense of the *pueblo indígena*, despite disagreements about race, class, and revolution.

1944-1954

The October Revolution

The October Revolution is seen as a foundational period by many reform-minded Guatemalans, indigenous and ladino. Democratically elected by a coalition of teachers, students, and the labor movement, the two presidents of the “revolution,” Juan José Arévalo (1945-51) and his successor Jacobo Arbenz (1951-54) initiated important, if short-lived, economic, political, and educational reforms in urban Guatemala and in the rural countryside. Envisioned by President Arévalo as a “spiritual” socialism, the reform program sought to modernize the country by supporting small businesses, promoting education, securing labor rights for urban and rural workers, and initiating agrarian reform. The governments of the October Revolution generally did not single out *indígenas* as beneficiaries or subjects of state programs; on the contrary, ideas of equality between Indians and ladinos underlay Arévalo and Arbenz policies. Nonetheless, 1944-54-era reforms directed at the countryside greatly affected *indígenas*, as they represented the majority of the rural population, the landless, and the illiterate.

The reforms were limited, but important. By decree, the government made less onerous the Ubico-era vagrancy laws that had required those without legal title to land or an “adequate profession” to work up to 150 days a year on plantations, although vagrancy was still a crime.¹ Illiterates were granted new suffrage rights in national elections, and

¹ Decree no. 76, March 10, 1944, in Skinner-Klée, *Legislación indigenista*, pp. 123-25. Such reforms were limited in scope, fiercely resisted by landowners, and often incomplete in practice. See Greg Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*, ch. 1, for a discussion of the limited nature of revolutionary policies as applied in Alta Verapaz and the sharply conflicting interests at play between reformers and landowners. Regarding the 1945 vagrancy laws, Grandin reports that in the municipality of Carchá an average of 200 “vagrants” a month were arrested in 1946. *Last Colonial Massacre*, p. 38.

the state established schools in some highland communities. The government also began the enormous task of constructing roads to connect the interior of the highland departments with their department seats.² Most significantly for rural Guatemalans, the state not only tolerated agrarian organizing, it encouraged and supported such efforts; local agrarian committees, in particular, set the stage for widespread rural mobilization and served as the basis for the land redistribution program initiated in 1952.³

A 1950 agricultural census documented the extremely skewed land tenure patterns in Guatemala: three-tenths of one percent of the *fincas* in Guatemala controlled a full fifty percent of the productive land. 88% of agricultural plots – over 300,000 holdings – were *minifundios* of less than 10 *manzanas* each and accounted for only 14% of productive lands. Nearly the same amount of land, 13%, was owned by just 22 families.⁴ Some 250,000 campesinos were landless, of a total rural population of two million.⁵

² A Catholic Maryknoll report states that until 1953, there were few roads where Maryknolls worked in the department of Huehuetenango, for example. “From 1943 [when Maryknoll arrived in Guatemala] to 1958 road connections within the country and within the Department of Huehuetenango were so poor that frequent communication and coordinated pastoral action were greatly inhibited.” “Maryknoll in Central America, Part I: 1943-1969,” no date, p. 3. In Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers Archives, Box 11, folder 1, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York. Parish priests generally made their rounds of small villages on horseback or mule.

³ For the effects of October Revolution reforms in Alta Verapaz, see Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*. See also Jim Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside: Rural Conflict and Agrarian Reform in Guatemala, 1944-1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁴ 1950 Agrarian Census. 1085 *fincas*, or .003 of the total, controlled 2,676,584 *manzanas*, 50% of Guatemala’s productive land.

⁵ Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (ODHAG), *Guatemala Nunca Más, Informe proyecto interdiocesano de recuperación de la memoria histórica*, 4 vols. (Guatemala: Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, 1998), vol. 3, “El Entorno Histórico,” p. 7. 1950 census figures show a total national population

The centerpiece of the October Revolution, the June 1952 Law of Agrarian Reform, or Decree 900, struck at the heart of rural poverty and landlessness by reforming Guatemala's system of land ownership and relations of production that the legislation termed "feudal."⁶ Decree 900 outlawed debt peonage and all forms of servitude, and regulated land rents. Its most ambitious and controversial provisions went much farther: the Law of Agrarian Reform provided for the expropriation of uncultivated plantation lands to be distributed to campesinos through local agrarian committees, or CALs.

Throughout the country, local leaders channeled labor and land struggles through the Revolution's new legal mechanisms, supported by the labor federations General Confederation of Workers of Guatemala (CGTG) and the National Peasant Confederation of Guatemala (CNCG). Local leaders quickly set up agrarian committees, with a reported 400 CALs established within the first month of the reform and more than 3000 set up within four months.⁷ CALs challenged the labor practices of landowners and corrupt officials, and most significantly, petitioned for land redistribution. Jim Handy's study of the agrarian reform indicates that in its first three months, the National Agrarian Department (DAN) received nearly 5000 petitions for land. National fincas were distributed almost immediately, and some 800 private fincas were subject to expropriation over the course of the next two years. A total of 17% of the country's productive land had been expropriated or was in the process of expropriation by June

of 2,790,868, of which 75% or 2,093,151 were rural inhabitants. 1950 Censo de Población, p. 23.

⁶ Decree 900, Law of Agrarian Reform, in Skinner-Klée, *Legislación indigenista*, pp. 134-35.

⁷ Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, p. 93.

1954, with many more petitions waiting to be considered.⁸ An estimated 100,000 campesino families received land, although in many cases landowners fought the expropriations and refused to cede their holdings.⁹

In addition to agrarian organizing, indigenous community leaders took part in other changing forms of politics that accompanied the 1944 reforms, with indigenous candidates quickly gaining mayors' posts. The IIN reported that in 1948, of forty-five municipalities with large indigenous majorities, sixty percent had elected indigenous mayors; the following year, two K'iche's from Totonicapán were elected deputies to the national congress.¹⁰ In the decades to follow, these political processes would serve as important foundations for mobilization. As Greg Grandin explains, the mobilization of the October Revolution "tore up and remade social relations and expectations throughout Guatemala." It had tremendous effects especially for those local leaders who were literate in Spanish, Grandin argues, "sharpening their understanding of rights and political power backed up by state intervention."¹¹

⁸ Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, pp. 93-4.

⁹ ODHAG, *Nunca más*, 3:7. The REHMI report points out that the reform process was subject to abuses by petitioners in some areas, and landowners fought expropriation, unleashing a wave of violence that included assassinations of agrarian organizers. See pp. 7-9. For a fascinating history of rural organizing during this period in the department of Alta Verapaz, see Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*.

¹⁰ Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus, *Entre el mecapal y el cielo*, p. 28.

¹¹ Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*, p. 62.

The Counter-Revolution

Opposition to the reformist October Revolution came early and strong, led by the nation's oligarchy and the Catholic church. Government reformers were immediately attacked as Communists, even though state initiatives were relatively limited in scope and the influence exercised by the Communist party seems to have been modest, at least during Arévalo's term.¹² Despite the government's moderate approach to social reform, the few foreign priests permitted in the country at the time watched the October Revolution warily, as several missions – the Maryknolls, the Franciscans, and the Misioneros del Inmaculado Corazón de María – had just been expelled from Communist China and feared a repeat of the experience under Arbenz.¹³

The vehemently anti-Communist archbishop of Guatemala, Mariano Rossell y Arellano, installed in 1939, was highly pro-active in his opposition to the regime, using the newly-founded Catholic Action (AC) program and its networks of rural catechists,

¹² See Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). The Communist party had more influence during Arbenz's regime (1951-54) than during Arévalo's. The Guatemalan Workers Party, PGT, was founded in 1949, and in the elections of 1951, Communists in the PGT won four congressional seats of a total of 61. Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, p. 193. While no PGT members were named to Arbenz's cabinet, REHMI reports that they were a significant presence on the radio, in the state press, and in working for agrarian reform and social security, and the friendship between President Arbenz and PGT leader José Manuel Fortuny gave the Communist party access to the executive. ODHAG, *Nunca más*, 3:9, fn. 11. Grandin notes that Fortuny wrote the first draft of the Agrarian Reform Decree 900. Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*, p. 224, fn. 37. For a discussion of the influence of the party during the Arbenz administration, see ch. 2.

¹³ As the Maryknolls wrote, "The Arbenz regime had all the signs of a Communist government. The Maryknollers who had been in China could see the same process of political procedure taking place after Arbenz entered power in 1952. [They] did not know whether or not they would be allowed to stay." "Maryknoll in Central America," p. 3. Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

mostly young *indígenas*, to spread anti-government sentiment as part of the church's bulwark against Communism. Established in the community of Momostenango in the late 1930s, AC and similar catechist programs such as the Maryknoll's Delegates of the Word grew quickly in indigenous areas in the 1950s and 1960s. The catechist programs were seen as a key means both to dampen Communism's appeal and to counter what many priests saw as an unacceptably high level of traditional ritual life in the countryside, a syncretic blend of Catholicism and "pagan" spirit worship.¹⁴ Priests and catechists worked closely together, with the young catechists the vital link between the *pueblo* and the church's goals. AC enabled the church and its anti-Communist teachings to reach into the smallest *aldeas*, using young catechists who spoke local languages and were part of local communities.

Archbishop Rossell went beyond the use of catechists in his anti-Communist crusade, employing the nation's patron saint, the Christ of Esquipulas, extremely popular and revered throughout Guatemala, as a symbol of the anti-Communist struggle. He took a replica of the figure on an extensive tour in 1953 of community after community in the Indian highlands, the *Peregrinación Nacional de la Imagen del Cristo de Esquipulas*. As one catechist from El Quiché, Emeterio Toj Medrano, saw it, Rossell "took advantage" of *indígenas'* attachment to the figure and at the same time wildly distorted the Arbenz

¹⁴ As Father James Curtin wrote in 1963, "The catechist movement has been the most important movement in bringing about better spiritual life in the rural areas. In the cities and towns, the *Cursillos de Cristiandad* seems to be the best instrument for changing the mentality of the future leaders and the present ones among the professional men. It has its effect in giving greater concern for one's neighbour and community, extending the influence of the Church, ... and lessening the dangers of Communism by creating a social consciousness among Catholics." Letter to Rev. Eugene Higgins, July 5, 1963, p. 4, in James Curtin Media, Box 128, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

record.¹⁵ Shortly before the coup that unseated Arbenz in 1954, the Archbishop called explicitly for all Christians to join the effort to defeat Communism, to “rise up as one man against the enemy of God and the Nation.”¹⁶ Heeding such calls, many *indígenas* supported what Toj later came to view as the “overthrow of hope” represented by Arbenz’s ouster.

Elite and Catholic opposition to the October Revolution reached fever pitch when the state passed its land reform legislation in 1952, a program vehemently opposed by the church, US business interests, and the US State Department. The US pressured the Arbenz regime through Ambassador John Peurifoy, explicitly protesting the expropriation of fallow plantation lands belonging to the Boston-based United Fruit Company. Within two years Guatemala’s experiment in structural reform was halted, then quickly reversed: the CIA-backed coup in 1954 overthrew Arbenz and installed Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas as Guatemala’s head of state.

The Post-1954 Guatemalan State: “Liberation,” Development, and Counter-Insurgency

The US-backed “Liberation” of Guatemala in 1954 would wed state policies of an army-controlled developmentalism, fervent anti-Communism, and soon, counterinsurgency. The new regime overturned most of the reforms of the Arévalo and Arbenz governments, returned most expropriated lands to their former owners, and disbanded local agrarian committees that had been established during the 1944-54

¹⁵ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, August 24, 2002, Guatemala City.

¹⁶ Archbishop Mariano Rossell y Arellano, Carta Pastoral Sobre los Avances del Comunismo en Guatemala, Guatemala, April 4, 1954, in Diócesis del Quiché, *El Quiché: El pueblo y su iglesia, 1960-1980* (Guatemala: Santa Cruz del Quiché, 1994), p. 33.

period.¹⁷ The state repressed organizing, targeting labor leaders and peasants who had supported Arbenz. The recent Truth Commission of Guatemala's Archdiocese (REHMI) established that 12,000 people were arrested in the immediate aftermath of the coup; many more fled their communities. Two thousand labor leaders were exiled and hundreds were reportedly assassinated. A new National Committee of Defense Against Communism registered a list of 72,000 people accused of Communist activities.¹⁸

At the same time that it cracked down on organizing, the state sought to modernize the countryside, beginning with subsistence-based agricultural production. Working in partnership with the US Alliance for Progress after 1961, government development programs provided chemical fertilizers to campesinos and promoted new cash crops. Road paving projects aimed to connect rural Guatemala and its producers to national markets, replacing the dirt roads that made vast areas of the highlands impassible by truck or bus during the long rainy season. Of course, roads permitted access to the countryside for trade and "development," and simultaneously facilitated political control.

State-approved agricultural and credit cooperatives were an important component of official developmentalism in the late 1950s and 1960s. After doing away with the October Revolution's local agrarian committees, the post-1954 governments promoted the establishment of state-sanctioned and controlled cooperatives. Despite on-going

¹⁷ Jim Handy's research shows that 79% of expropriated lands were returned after the overthrow of Arbenz. Much of the land not returned either belonged to officials of the Arbenz administration or was located in areas where officials feared peasant unrest. Handy, *Revolution*, pp. 197-202.

¹⁸ ODHAG, *Nunca más*, 3:16-17. See also Handy, *Revolution*, pp. 194-95. As Handy notes, even the US embassy noted the extreme violence: "Their continued imprisonment of large numbers of campesinos and often indiscriminate arrests ... [are] opening up the Guatemalan Government to charges from abroad of operating a police state."

repression and the limited nature of their aims, these cooperatives grew at a prodigious rate. There were a total of only twenty-three cooperatives in eight departments of the country during the October Revolution, but the number reached 227 by 1967, located in all but two of the departments of the republic.¹⁹ The state controlled these institutions and their many members by controlling access to resources, especially credit. In 1965 the Peralta Azurdia regime founded the National Federation of Savings and Loan Cooperatives, uniting some 80 cooperatives with 27,000 members.²⁰

Gaining control of the countryside was a primary aim of the post-1954 military regimes, but also an elusive one. The experiences of the October Revolution were fresh in the minds of campesinos. Agrarian organizing networks during the Arévalo and Arbenz regimes had extended beyond local communities, linking campesinos to the national labor movement and to the October Revolution itself, and these experiences were not forgotten. After the overthrow of Arbenz, rural organizing was not ended by the counter-revolution, but emerged in new forms. Like what had come before, it continued to link its aims and strategies with those of regional and national struggles.

Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, a K'iche' who became a leftist leader in the 1970s, grew up in this early counter-revolutionary era. Born just months before the overthrow of Arbenz, he was the last son of a campesino family from the department of El Quiché. He describes the 1960s as a time when experiences of the reform period remained

¹⁹ Carole Snee, *Current Types of Peasant-agricultural Worker Coalitions and their Historical Development in Guatemala* (Mexico: Centro Intercultural de Documentación, 1969), pp. 49-50. Peasant unions had been strong during the October Revolution, with 334 receiving legal recognition between 1946 and 1954. Only 25 peasant unions or leagues were recognized between 1955 and 1967. Snee, *Current Types*, pp. 49-50.

²⁰ Taracena, *Etnicidad, estado y nación*, vol., 2, p. 287.

strongly in the minds and conversations of his family and community.²¹ His parents talked much of what had taken place in Guatemala, he recalls, comparing their own experiences with those of revolutionary Cuba, informed via a brother-in-law's short-wave radio. Domingo and the other men of the family would gather together at night to listen to the radio, with news of the outside world translated by his father, a Spanish-speaker. There was a great deal of anti-Communist propaganda on the radio, he remembers, from Voice of America and the Guatemalan stations, condemning the former Guatemalan regime and the Cuban government for stripping people of their liberty. "But we in El Quiché, ... campesinos who traveled to work on the *fincas*," he says, "had a different opinion." His family and campesinos in general had experienced Guatemala's reform period not as a time when freedoms were lacking, Hernández Ixcoy argues, but quite the contrary: an era when workers could organize and unionize, salaries increased, and lands were attainable.²²

These memories, combined with difficult economic circumstances faced by campesinos in the 1960s, fueled social organizing. Campesinos used the state-approved cooperatives as forums for political activism, or when they could, formed independent cooperatives. Organizing took place through other forms as well, as we will see below: through the Catholic church and Catholic Action; through political parties, especially the new church-sponsored Christian Democrats, or DC; and for some, clandestinely. It was no accident, says Hernández Ixcoy, that the first guerrilla uprisings in the 1960s were in areas where campesinos had been most politicized by the October Revolution and its

²¹ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, August 10, 2002, Chimaltenango.

²² Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, August 10, 2002, Chimaltenango.

aftermath, had received – then lost – lands in the agrarian reform, prominent among them the Achí of Rabinal, Baja Verapaz.²³ Violence over land and campesino mobilization in San Martín Jilotepeque, Chimaltenango, likewise can be traced to the agrarian reform period and the counter-revolution. The reform, and specifically petitions by San Martín agrarian committees, resulted in the redistribution to workers of area *fincas de mozos*, where landowners had previously – for generations – provided access to land only in exchange for labor on coastal plantations. With the undoing of the agrarian reform, the state returned the *fincas* to their former owners. These experiences helped convert San Martín into a hotbed of agrarian organizing, social unrest, and insurgency for the next three decades.²⁴

The Catholic Church and Indigenous Mobilization, 1954-1970s

Official state developmentalism and anti-Communism in Guatemala following the ouster of Arbenz had a close ally and partner in the Guatemalan Catholic church and its programs of Catholic Action (AC). Where programs of state developmentalism did not reach, as in the largely inaccessible department of Huehuetenango, the Catholic church took up the slack, adopting many of the same goals as the state and foreign aid organizations.²⁵ Such work was made possible through the widespread establishment of catechist programs.

²³ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, March 1, 2002, Chimaltenango.

²⁴ See ODHAG, *Nunca más*, 3:7-9.

²⁵ One priest in the department of Huehuetenango wrote in 1963 that while many priests wanted to work with USAID, none had had success. “The same is true of the Alliance for Progress,” he wrote to a fellow priest. “The large Indian areas do not have much of a

Catholic Action was built on the philosophical foundations of anti-Communism. For many people, however, Catholicism would become a mobilizing and sometimes radicalizing social force. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the left wing of the church employed the catechist model in the same manner that had proven so successful in the 1950s. But for second-generation catechists and the priests around them, AC functioned not just to spread church doctrine, but as the basis for indigenous education and broad social organizing. Through AC, parish priests supported and trained young community leaders. The catechist movement resulted in young *indígenas* in communities large and small becoming politically active, involved in and leading diverse forms of organizing, some connected to the church, others beyond church control.

With the coup of 1954, the Catholic church regained its legal standing and the right to own land, and religious teachings were permitted in the public schools. It entered a new era of growth, due to the government's lifting of restrictions on foreign priests entering the country, although Archbishop Rossell reportedly had reservations about such an influx and the decentralization of power that came with it.²⁶ A meager 132 Catholic priests in Guatemala in 1950 rose to 346 by 1959, and then to 608 by 1970, most of them foreign.²⁷ US Maryknolls established parishes throughout the department of

priority. It is too bad that the missionaries are not consulted on the needs of [the] country because they have a greater knowledge than the officials who never get out there." Letter from Father James Curtin to Rev. Eugene Higgins, July 5, 1963, p. 4, in James Curtin Media, Box 128, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

²⁶ ODHAG, *Nunca más*. 3:13.

²⁷ Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (ODHAG), *Guatemala Never Again!*, abridged English translation of ODHAG, *Guatemala Nunca Más*, 4 vols. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 188 and 204. A Maryknoll publication listed a total of 522 Catholic priests in Guatemala in 1968, with 81% of them foreign

Huehuetenango, with a few priests arriving in 1944, and the mission growing rapidly between 1953 and 1963; Spanish Sacred Heart priests arrived in the department of El Quiché in 1955, and were joined by the Jesuits in the 1970s; US, Belgian, and Salesian priests were an important presence in the Q'eqchi' and Poqomchi' communities of Alta Verapaz by the late 1960s; and an Oklahoma mission established itself in the Tzutujil community of Santiago Atitlán, Sololá in 1964.

Despite the conservative leadership of Archbishop Rossell and his successor, many of the newly-arrived priests by the mid-1960s began moving in a markedly different direction.²⁸ The branch of the church aligned with Rossell held onto positions of power in the capital and continued to staff some rural parishes, but after 1962, other parish clergy adopted a new “theology of liberation” in the countryside. Inspired by the bishops’ conferences known as Vatican II (held in sessions from 1962 through 1965), and the 1968 Medellín Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Council, priests in many rural communities focused their work not just on the spiritual needs of their parishioners, but also their social and economic needs. Based on the guidance of the Second Vatican Council, they adopted a “preferential option for the poor,” a philosophy that intertwined biblical teachings with issues of social justice, or as Maryknoll William Price put it, sought to “save men, not only souls.”²⁹

born. See *5 Year Plan, Maryknoll Fathers, Guatemala-El Salvador Region* (Guatemala City: Maryknoll Fathers, 1969), p. 7. Also ODHAG, *Nunca más*, 3:13, fn. 13.

²⁸ Rossell presided over the Guatemalan Catholic church until 1964, followed by Archbishop Mario Casariego.

²⁹ William Price, “New Wine in Old Bottles,” no date, but from the text, apparently written in 1974. In William Price, *Creative Works*, box 33, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

While not specifically geared toward indigenous communities, programs based on liberation theology in Guatemala nonetheless tended to focus on *indígenas*, since the highlands where many priests concentrated their efforts were inhabited by large indigenous majorities. According to the census of 1950, the population of the department of Totonicapán, for example, was 97% indigenous, Sololá 94%, Alta Verapaz 93%, El Quiché 84%, and Huehuetenango 73%.³⁰ As one priest explained, the preferential option for the poor in many parishes became the preferential option for the Indian.

A liberation theology philosophy did not mean that parish priests abandoned their anti-Communist message. Quite the contrary, many continued to condemn Communism as a dangerous force to be defeated. What changed was their approach to that struggle. Social justice in the countryside – and specifically for Indians – was viewed as a means to diminish Communism’s appeal.

A major focus for priests working in indigenous communities was educating the Indian masses. Access to education was a tremendous problem in all of Guatemala, and especially in rural Indian areas. According to a 1960 agricultural census, 35% of school-age children had access to some form of instruction, but only 8% of those at the lowest levels of income received schooling.³¹ When available, instruction was generally provided only in Spanish, a tremendous barrier for indigenous children who were monolingual speakers of a Maya language. In their rural missions, priests began to teach Spanish to children and young people, and some priests studied Maya languages.³² They

³⁰ Dirección General de Estadística, *Sexto censo de población*, April 18, 1950, p. 32.

³¹ ODHAG, *Nunca más* 3:42.

³² In the early 1960s, the Maryknolls provided linguistic training for missionaries, each year sending six priests to study linguistics at the University of Oklahoma. They soon

founded parochial schools specifically for *indígenas* in areas where education had previously been available only to ladino children, or not at all. Gradually some indigenous families began to send at least one of their children to primary or even secondary schools within and outside of their communities, with support from the Catholic church, as well as the Guatemalan Ministry of Education.³³

Scholarships allowed limited numbers of students to study in departmental capitals and Guatemala City. Especially promising students were recruited for regional Catholic seminary high schools, in Quetzaltenango, Sololá, and the capital, for example, as the training of indigenous priests was seen as an important means to reach the *pueblo indígena*.³⁴ Other talented students were chosen to attend two national level educational institutions, the Instituto Indígena Santiago for indigenous boys, and its sister school for girls, the Instituto Indígena Nuestra Señora del Socorro. Archbishop Rossell established Santiago and Socorro in 1945 and 1955, respectively, as part of the church's anti-

offered courses for English-speaking *religiosos* in Guatemala and established the Francisco Marroquín Linguistics Institute in Antigua, Guatemala.

³³ A majority of the indigenous activists whom I interviewed were among those students attending parish schools, and receiving Catholic church and Department of Education scholarships to regional secondary schools and seminaries. As we will see, these experiences politicized *indígenas* from all over the highlands.

³⁴ It must be noted that these students were a select few. Maryknoll sister Bernice Kita wrote in 1977 that a priest from a seminary came to the community where she worked to talk to parents about sending their sons to the school. As Kita wrote, "The priests encourage boys to study there, hoping that something might rub off so that they will serve their communities and the church even if they don't become priests. But in our town, with so few students even reaching the sixth grade, it's hard to think of any boy going on to the seminary." Bernice Kita, *What Prize Awaits Us: Letters from Guatemala* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 25.

Communist crusade.³⁵ The two institutes were designed specifically to train indigenous teachers from the highlands who would then return to service in their rural communities, extending the reach of the Church – and its anti-Communist message – into the *pueblos*. As the Maryknolls report, the Archbishop “gladly put the [Instituto Indígena Santiago] at the disposition of the priests” for their similar goal of staffing parishes with Catholic-trained *indígenas*.³⁶ Again, these were limited opportunities, but parish priests even in small highland towns managed to secure positions for local students. Records at the girls’ secondary school Instituto Indígena Nuestra Señora del Socorro indicate that in 1973, a total of 105 students were enrolled, coming from small, often remote, communities all over the highlands: Tecpán, Patzún, and Comalapa in Chimaltenango; San Pedro La Laguna (on the shores of Lake Atitlán), Santa Lucia Uvatlán, and Nahualá, in the department of Sololá; San Francisco el Alto and Momostenango in Totonicapán; Chiché and San Martín Jilotepeque in the department of El Quiché; Santa Eulalia, San

³⁵ Rossell y Arellano championed Catholic educational institutions for *indígenas*, but was suspicious of public schools. Regarding public education under Ubico, he commented that “books are too fragile a staircase for our Indians to climb to civilization.” Cited in Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*, p. 80. Concern about Communism seems to have outweighed any misgiving he had about educating the *indígena*, however, at least if that education was in the hands of the Church. References to similar preoccupations appear in many Catholic mission documents, such as a 1966 Maryknoll report that lamented that, “In the ... [public] schools ... of Guatemala City no one was teaching religion even though it was allowed. These are a special target of the Communists, who aim for recruits at between 14 and 19 years of age.” “Maryknoll in Guatemala – El Salvador,” 1966, p. 5, in Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers Archives, Box 128, James Curtin Media, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

³⁶ “Maryknoll in Central America,” p. 8.

Miguel Acatán, and San Idelfonso Ixtahuacán in Huehuetenango, as well as a few from the larger towns of Quetzaltenango and Cobán.³⁷

Despite the anti-Communist beginnings of the Santiago and Socorro institutions, the schools experienced some of the same changes affecting local parishes with the growing influence of Vatican II philosophy. In 1965, following the death of Archbishop Rossell, administration of the schools was turned over to the Catholic La Salle order and the Bethlehemite Sisters, respectively. In the early 1970s, they became important centers of an emerging pan-indigenous consciousness in Guatemala, bringing together priests, nuns, and bright young *indígenas* from all over the linguistic map. In time, a few indigenous teachers took positions at the schools and, students recall, began to infuse classroom discussions with topics like discrimination and national politics. As competing ideas of about ethnic identity and class struggle were taking hold in universities in the 1970s (see chapter four), secondary school students like those in Santiago and Socorro analyzed the “indigenous reality” in Guatemala, and the problems facing their communities. Ideas generated in school, like notions of a “*pueblo indígena*” and the need for mobilization, soon made their way back to local communities. They spurred community and regional organizing, shaping indigenous student associations and youth groups that sprang up in large and small *pueblos* alike, as we will see below.

Formal education for a relative few was becoming available at a time of other opportunities for greater numbers, again given impetus by the progressive wing of the Catholic church. Priests in indigenous communities, equipped with liberation theology-

³⁷ Incripciones, Instituto Indígena Nuestra Señora del Socorro, book beginning with the year 1973. (The 1973 inscriptions are actually labeled 1974, but are corrected in the following years.) Instituto Indígena Nuestra Señora del Socorro, Antigua, Guatemala.

inspired methods, helped establish literacy campaigns, self-help and discussion groups, and agricultural, credit, and weaving cooperatives. Indigenous language radio stations and radio schools became important new means of activism and great facilitators of the *concientización*, or consciousness-raising, that went along with liberation theology.

Priests founded parish-based radio stations in many areas as early as the mid-1950s. By the 1960s and 1970s, the stations and their radio-based literacy programs led by young *indígenas* reached vast numbers of *indígenas* and spawned study groups in rural communities, aiming both for adult literacy and “consciousness-raising.”

Pensemos Juntos, Let’s Think Together, was a liberation theology-based study guide developed by indigenous students Marco Antonio de Paz and Vinicio Aguilar, and used in the mid-1970s by radio schools all over the highlands: for K’iche’-speaking audiences in Santa Cruz and Nahualá; Kaqchikel and Tzutujil communities around Lake Atitlán; Ch’orti’s in Chiquimula; and Q’eqchi’s in Alta Verapaz. With other indigenous students, de Paz and Aguilar conducted investigations in communities to learn about local needs and concerns. Following the methods of Paulo Freire, they developed “generating themes” from those investigations, grouped under the headings of “family,” “agriculture,” “social relations,” “education-orientation,” and the category “ladino-*indígena*.”³⁸ Simple images and questions formed the basis of the materials and were designed to facilitate group discussions. The idea, de Paz explained, was based on Freire: group leaders would present images and people would “de-code” or interpret them through their own experiences. “The objective was not to tell them something, or even

³⁸ Federación Guatemalteca de Escuelas Radiofónicas, *Pensemos Juntos* (Guatemala: Centro de Investigación y Experimentación Pedagógica, 1976).

teach them, but to facilitate their gaining consciousness of ‘reality,’ of their problems, and the need to develop solutions.”³⁹

Santa Cruz del Quiché

We can examine the development of these processes of politicization more closely in the community of Santa Cruz, the department seat of El Quiché. El Quiché was (is) a heavily rural, agrarian department, and according to the 1960 census, 74% indigenous. Foreign (Spanish) priests and Catholic Action had a significant impact in the area, and it was the birthplace of what would become an important, national level campesino movement, the Comité de Unidad Campesina, or CUC. It was also the place where the revolutionary Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP) first emerged in 1972. The EGP, as we will discuss below, had close ties to CUC and enjoyed significant support in the area in the mid- and late-1970s. Santa Cruz-area catechists and CUC founders were among its first recruits.

Area activists, mostly K’iche’s, were profoundly affected by the liberation theology movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. One of them, in some ways typical, in others ways quite an extraordinary figure, was Emeterio Toj Medrano. A catechist, CUC founder, and member of the EGP, Toj was born in 1940 in a small cantón in the municipality of Santa Cruz, a few years before the October Revolution. The grandson of an *indígena* who had lost his land through debt peonage in the years before the reform governments, Toj was raised in an environment of agrarian mobilization and what he

³⁹ Interview with Marco Antonio de Paz, November 21, 2002, Guatemala City.

calls the “*pensamiento de lucha*,” or fighting spirit, that accompanied it.⁴⁰ During the Arévalo and Arbenz years his grandfather joined the local agrarian committee in the hopes of recovering his land, while Emeterio’s father traveled to the city, working as an itinerate merchant.

Toj attended a year of primary school in 1949, then joined Catholic Action in the early 1950s. *Indígenas* like Toj joined AC in large numbers in El Quiché. By 1968, there were some 3,600 catechists in the department, according to an evaluation done by Catholic Action leaders, and more than 80,000 members; if these figures are correct, over half the youth and adult population of the department participated in the movement.⁴¹

AC was at once a religious, political, and cultural movement. Toj and other young activist *indígenas* began to take part in formal politics through the Christian Democrats, or DC, a political party linked to Catholic Action. Founded in Guatemala in the late 1950s, DC built its bases directly through Catholic Action networks. Mostly through this party, *indígenas* in many communities voted, ran for office and won mayorships. Soon after its founding, Toj joined the youth group of the DC, and in 1960, the party managed to win the local mayor’s post.⁴² With other catechists Toj became

⁴⁰ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁴¹ Diócesis del Quiché, *El Quiché: El pueblo y su iglesia* (Santa Cruz del Quiché: Diócesis del Quiché, 1994), p. 79. Toj recounts that his entire family became members, except for his grandparents. Only his grandparents, Toj insists, though they could not read and had no education, had the prescience to reject the church’s condemnation of the revolution on which they had pinned their hopes. Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁴² The Diócesis del Quiché, in its historical account of the evolving role of the Catholic church in the department, points to the DC as the institution that channeled indigenous political potential into formal politics connected to national politics: “between the 1950s and the early 1960s there was very little or no political consciousness among the indigenous population besides the anti-Communism inspired by the ideological work of

involved in culturally-focused community organizing as well. There was a growing emphasis by priests and young people in the early 1970s on the need to value indigenous culture and foster pride in “*la raza*.” With area students and catechists, Toj founded the Asociación Pro-Cultura Maya-Quiché, one of many cultural groups formed in highland communities as ideas spread about pride in indigenous identity. He and fellow activists fought for and won changes in the community’s *reina indígena* contest, for example, discussed in chapter five.

Toj recounts personally experiencing the turning point in AC and local organizing movements after the Vatican II conference. Many priests in the department began to question the conservative dogma of the church in the mid-1960s. Young catechists, Toj explained, “those who accepted and understood that we have to struggle here on *earth* for the body and soul,” began to work in community development. With area priests like Sacred Heart Father Luis Gurriarán, catechists established the first cooperative in the area, the Savings and Loan Cooperative of Santa Cruz, with Toj serving as its first secretary. Soon Gurriarán set up similar cooperatives in other areas of the department, in the communities of Joyabaj, Chinique, Zacualpa, Chicamán, Uspantán, and Sacapulas. These were alternatives to the state-sanctioned cooperatives mentioned above and were eyed suspiciously by the state and area elites. As we will see in more detail, the Guatemalan military regimes showed little tolerance for organizing outside of state control. When Father Gurriarán petitioned the state for recognition of the cooperatives,

the church or the ... struggles ... during the decade of the [October] revolution (1944-54). But these were not ideas or interests that sprang from within the *pueblo indígena*. They came from outside. It is Acción Católica that provided community-level bases for this awakening, and DC that channeled this potential into party politics, with a national vision that had not existed in the communities until that moment.” Diócesis del Quiché, *El pueblo y su iglesia*, p. 73.

he was attacked in the press for intending to “introduce Arbenz’s Communist system and imported models of organization foreign to the *indígenas*.”⁴³

The changing ideology of the church was reflected in multiple ways. Local priests began to face the congregation rather than the altar during mass, Toj recalls, and to deliver sermons in Spanish instead of Latin.⁴⁴ Sacred Heart fathers in Santa Cruz started study groups so that people in the community could know the Bible and its connection to the struggle for social change. Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, also a catechist and future CUC and EGP leader like Toj, describes young indigenous catechists like himself pushing the church farther in the direction of social engagement. They fought for positions on the local AC board of directors.⁴⁵ As another catechist, Gregorio Chay (again, also a CUC and EGP member) explained, “AC had been led by elite groups in Santa Cruz, resistant to social change, to a more open Christianity in the social sense.”⁴⁶ His own family members were among those AC founders, he said, part of the anti-Communist movement that had risen to local prominence after the mid-1950s and who struggled to hold onto power. The two generations of AC came into direct confrontation in Santa Cruz and similar communities throughout Guatemala. In Santa Cruz the young activists prevailed, with organizers like Toj, Hernández Ixcoy, and Chay gaining positions on the local board in the mid-1970s. Their impact was significant. “Masses in

⁴³ ODHAG, *Nunca más*, 3:72, fn. 47. The cooperative organizing resulted in his expulsion from the country, and the state kidnapped several of the cooperativists working with him.

⁴⁴ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁴⁵ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, August 20, 2002, Chimaltenango.

⁴⁶ Interview with Gregorio Chay, September 5, 2002, Guatemala City.

El Quiché began to change radically,” recalls Hernández Ixcoy. “Rather than the hymns the priests taught us, ... we began to sing “*No basta rezar*” [It is not Enough to Pray], “*Casas de cartón*” [Cardboard Houses, referring to inadequate housing] The mass was greatly politicized.”⁴⁷

In the early 1970s, Jesuit priests from the capital began working in Santa Cruz, among them Ricardo Falla, Fernando Hoyos, and Enrique Corral. Emeterio Toj was a well-known radio broadcaster by that time, working at Radio Quiché, a station supported by the church and airing programs of liberation theology, civic education, and literacy training. Toj was approached by Father Hoyos and his team of young ladino university students from the capital, many active in a Guatemala City-based group called Cráter.⁴⁸ They recognized that Toj, as a catechist and a broadcaster, could link them to the broader *pueblo*, the distant communities of the department. “Emeterio opened up the *campo*,” Jesuit Ricardo Falla remembers.⁴⁹

Together the priests, students from the city, and local *indígenas* began more politicized literacy and “consciousness-raising” work in the rural communities surrounding Santa Cruz. They formed small groups and studied civics and laws. Toj and Hernández Ixcoy speak of learning and then teaching about the national constitution in combination with analysis of the Bible. “None of us had read the constitution, we didn’t

⁴⁷ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, August 20, 2002, Chimaltenango.

⁴⁸ Established in the mid-1960s by Maryknoll missionaries Thomas Melville and Marian Peters, Cráter brought together ladino students from the middle and upper classes and exposed them to the indigenous countryside. Many Cráter members became prominent revolutionaries and/or leftist intellectuals, including Gustavo Porras and Mirna Mack. A number later joined the EGP, and the Melvilles were forced to leave Guatemala due to suspected links to the insurgency.

⁴⁹ Interview with Ricardo Falla, November 12, 2002, Santa María Chiquimula.

know [it],” remembers Hernández Ixcoy. But quickly “the Bible and the constitution ... became our lecture materials.... We found that [in the Bible] they denounced injustices ..., that there had been oppressor classes throughout history, and that *pueblos* had risen up and challenged oppression.”⁵⁰

The new AC board members took responsibility for weekly Bible classes in the community and were “in charge of deepening questions of religion among the people,” explains Hernández Ixcoy. Spiritual issues were immediately infused with issues of economic justice: “More than talking about God and spiritual questions, ... we talked about ... material things – injustice, exploitation, [raised questions such as] who are the owners of the land? What do they do? How do they treat the workers?”⁵¹

Marxist discourse shaped activists’ approach, concepts brought to Santa Cruz by the ladino students and priests from the capital. The causes of problems in the *pueblo*, catechists like Toj came to believe, were deeper than could be addressed through existing institutions. Toj describes years of trying to work through various groups and institutions to defend the rights of the *pueblo*: through cultural organizations (discussed in more detail in the next chapter), cooperatives, the Christian Democrats, literacy programs. Regarding the problems of the *pueblo*, Toj recalled, “We began to realize that there were other much stronger causes, structural causes. So now what? We searched for other avenues.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, September 7, 2002, Chimaltenango.

⁵¹ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, August 20, 2002, Chimaltenango.

⁵² Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

They formed a more “political” group in the mid-1970s, recalls another activist, Pablo Ceto, an organization they called Nukuj, a K’iche’ term meaning preparation for a party.⁵³ The experience was a stepping stone to larger scale national-level organizing: within a few years Toj, Hernández Ixcoy, Ceto, and other young activists founded the campesino organization CUC. Like several of the Jesuits who inspired them (Falla, Hoyos, Corral), their next step would be to enter the armed revolutionary movement.

Santiago Atitlán

Santiago Atitlán, a Tzutuhil community on the shores of Lake Atitlán, offers another example of processes of politicization that were underway in the 1960s and 1970s. A new progressive Catholicism grew in the village when a US mission from Oklahoma established itself there in 1964. The mission opened a health clinic and formed a credit union. Within a few years it purchased a piece of land and founded an experimental farming cooperative, started a primary school, and set up a radio station, *La Voz de Atitlán*. A thirty-three year old priest joined the mission in 1968, Stanley Rother, who set out to find ways in which community residents could make a living in Atitlán, rather than migrating to coastal plantations for work, as was the norm for growing numbers of village residents. The agricultural cooperative prospered under his oversight, and he also helped set up fishing and weaving cooperatives.⁵⁴

⁵³ Interview with Pablo Ceto, September 28, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁵⁴ For more on Stanley Rother and the Santiago Atitlán mission, see the collection of his letters, *The Shepherd Cannot Run: Letters of Stanley Rother, Missionary and Martyr* (Oklahoma City: Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, 1984). Information about organizing in Santiago Atitlán was gathered through interviews with former members of the radio association *Voz de Atitlán*, campesino organizers, literacy workers, and families of the dead and disappeared.

Gradually indigenous children began to attend the mission's primary school. A young *indígena* named Gaspar Culán was one of the first to complete primary school, followed by other young men who soon became community activists, among them Diego Mendoza, Cruz and Miguel Sisay, Felipe Vásquez Tuíz, and Pedro Esquina. They managed to attend school, but they were not well off economically. Like activists in Santa Cruz, they came from families of campesinos and also weavers (a local cottage industry), and several from a young age had migrated to the coast for plantation work. Vásquez Tuíz was the first in his family to attend school, and Esquina was the only one of five children to finish sixth grade, which his parents permitted at the urging and with the support of his older brother and the mission priests.⁵⁵

Soon two of the young men, Culán and Mendoza, began to study at the Catholic seminary in nearby Sololá. After finishing primary school, the others formed a cooperative secondary school in the community, with the help of primary school teachers, the church, and their parents. Father Rother and another priest in the community arranged for Felipe Vásquez Tuíz to join the Francisco Marroquín linguistics project in Antigua, and helped Cruz and Miguel Sisay and Pedro Esquina gain admittance to the Instituto Indígena Santiago in the capital. Political dynamics in the community would change significantly as a result.

Cruz Sisay (like many area activists, later a member of the guerrilla Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas, or ORPA), trained at the Instituto Indígena Santiago as a teacher and was the first to return to the community in 1974. With other young people he formed the Indigenous Students' Association of Santiago Atitlán,

⁵⁵ Interviews with family of Felipe Vásquez Tuíz, June 27 and October 5, 2002, Santiago Atitlán, and interview with Pedro Esquina, July 6, 2002, Santiago Atitlán.

ADEISA.⁵⁶ His brother Miguel (likewise an ORPA member) describes ADEISA beginning as a group made up of what few students there were, along with local AC catechists and others who worked in the community, perhaps thirty in all. One of their first priorities, Sisay remembers, was to focus on discrimination against *indígenas* in the community:

In those days in Atitlán [it was understood that] the mayor had to be a ladino, the secretary, the treasurer, ... no *indígena* had [this] right.... The basketball court was for ladinos, the *salón de baile* was for ladinos [For] the *indígena* ... many things ... were prohibited, many places were off-limits....⁵⁷

Members of ADEISA questioned these limits, he says, and directed attention to such discrimination. “These were the kinds of barriers we broke [One year] we decided to dance in the *salón* on the day of the [community] fiesta. We entered with partners and there was nothing anyone could say....”⁵⁸

Pedro Esquina, another ADEISA member and campesino leader, remembers young people in the organization pushing for change in multiple arenas, sometimes calling on the *principales* or elders for help. Like in Santa Cruz, they gained control over the community’s *reina indígena* contest.⁵⁹ Activists in Santiago Atitlán infused such “cultural” projects with economic, social, and political demands. Felipe Vásquez Tuíz

⁵⁶ Sisay was part of a class of twenty-two to graduate from the Instituto Indígena Santiago in 1974, listed in a class seminar report, Instituto Indígena Santiago, 1974.

⁵⁷ Interview with Miguel Sisay, July 2, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁵⁸ Interview with Miguel Sisay, July 2, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁵⁹ Interview with Pedro Esquina, July 6, 2002, Santiago Atitlán.

and Miguel Sisay started a musical group to re-discover the songs of their elders, and put political lyrics to this traditional form of expression. Vásquez Tuíz, a linguistics student, and Cruz Sisay translated the ancient K'iche' text *Popul Vuh* from Spanish into Tzutuhil and made a radio program of it, broadcasting in Tzutuhil on the Voz de Atitlán. The students addressed the problem of lack of education for *indígenas*. Esquina recalls that of the thirty or so children finishing primary school in the community each year, only a few were indigenous. The group talked to parents and tutored young students, arranging extra lessons during vacations and in preparation for exams. They began nighttime adult literacy training, a program that proved to be hugely popular. Esquina tells of getting permission from the parish priest to use one classroom in a church building; soon the literacy project was occupying five.⁶⁰

Santiago Atitlán is one of thirteen villages that surround Lake Atitlán. Wanting to reach the wider lake-area population, ADEISA activists became involved in area cooperatives, campesino organizing, and larger programs of literacy and *concientización*. The young activists had taken over the radio station Voz de Atitlán in 1970, forming their own Radio Association and Board of Directors independent of the parish, and in the mid- and late-1970s, they broadcast literacy programs in Tzutujil and Cakchiquel (spoken in most area communities) all around the region.

Miguel Sisay described the group's radio-based literacy project. Some of them, he explains, were radio broadcasters – Gaspar Culán and Felipe Vásquez Tuíz two of the best-known – while others were literacy facilitators. Using *Pensemos Juntos* and other materials, they broadcast around the lake, where young people and adults got together in

⁶⁰ Interview with Pedro Esquina, July 6, 2002, Santiago Atitlán.

small study groups with facilitators to learn to read, write, and “analyze.” They studied economics, Sisay recalls, along with science, math, and “practical questions.”⁶¹ The project was very popular, and eventually 150 facilitators worked with some 1500 students.⁶² “We used the method of ‘generating words’ to analyze the reality of Guatemala,” Sisay explains, “the reality of each pueblo. It was a very pressing question for us, because we had been outside [the community], we had studied.”⁶³ They encouraged people to get involved in education, in mutual aid, and in community development. They discussed indigenous identity on the radio programs and explicitly raised questions about economic exploitation and unjust land ownership that plagued their *municipio*.⁶⁴

As in communities all over Guatemala, these efforts were met with state repression. Culán and Vásquez Tuíz began to condemn army violence in broadcasts, and soon the army targeted the Radio Association specifically. By the early 1980s violence brought community organizing almost to a standstill, with the important exception of revolutionary organizing. As in Santa Cruz, when non-violent movements were repressed, many in this new generation of young leaders headed for “the mountains,” joining the revolutionary movements. We will pick up their story in chapter six.

⁶¹ Interview with Miguel Sisay, July 2, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁶² Unpublished manuscript, “La verdad está en la historia,” Asociación Voz de Atitlán, Santiago Atitlán, n.d.

⁶³ Interview with Miguel Sisay, July 2, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁶⁴ See excerpts from a radio address by Gaspar Culán in chapter six.

Huehuetenango

For a third case study, we turn to the department of Huehuetenango, where the US Maryknoll mission helped shape local processes of indigenous politicization. It was another largely rural department, 73% indigenous according to the 1950 census. The Maryknolls arrived in Guatemala in 1943 and established themselves in the mountainous Huehuetenango area, a department where seven different language groups were (are) concentrated.⁶⁵ The mission focused on educating rural *indígenas*, setting up schools for indigenous students even in distant communities like Soloma, where a parish school was founded in 1958. In all, the mission established fourteen primary schools throughout Huehuetenango, along with several secondary and two radio schools.⁶⁶ Maryknoll priests, sisters, and brothers also worked to improve community social services in the department, founding two hospitals, thirty-one health clinics, and a “barefoot doctors” program of para-medical training; twenty-seven credit unions; and eight cooperatives, artisan and agricultural.⁶⁷ In 1965 and 1966 they established new agricultural “colonization” settlements in the unsettled jungle of northern Huehuetenango and the Petén, clearing land, developing cooperatives, and planting cash crops, with the support of the developmentalist Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria (INTA).

A primary goal of the mission was the training of young leaders. To that end, Maryknolls in 1968 established a Centro Apostólico and a Centro de Desarrollo Integral,

⁶⁵ By 1969, there were thirty-two Maryknolls in the department, along with four in Quetzaltenango, one in the Petén, and three in Guatemala City. “Maryknoll in Central America,” p. 30.

⁶⁶ William Price, “Guatemala Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win,” no date, p. 5, in William Price, Creative Works, box 33, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

⁶⁷ William Price, “Guatemala Dare to Struggle,” p. 5.

located in the department seat. From the late 1960s to the late 1970s, priests in these centers brought together *indígenas* from the many parishes of the diocese, young catechists and leaders from Mam communities, Jacaltecos, Kanjobales, and Chuj, thirty or forty at a time, sometimes more, according to a priest at the center, Father Daniel Jensen.⁶⁸ They combined in two-, three-, or four-week sessions lessons in civics, democracy, and leadership, and discussed issues of discrimination and justice. These in turn were combined with what priests termed *trabajo de fortalización*, “strengthening work,” an explicitly pan-Indian program of consciousness-raising among more literate indigenous students and local leaders, stressing the value of their communities, indigenous culture, and history. Father Jensen estimates that 1500 young people, 90% *indígenas*, attended those courses during the Center’s ten years of operation.⁶⁹

Father Jensen, who worked at the Centro Apostólico throughout the 1970s, tells of sessions he taught on Mayan history. He would start by describing students’ ancestors crossing the Bering Straits, he recalls, discuss the origins and value of Maya customs, analyze the common descent of the five or six Maya languages that might be represented among seminar participants. “That was part of our overall vision,” he said, “to give people a greater sense of their own dignity, to recognize the beauty of their own languages.” The seminars stressed the need for pride in a pan-Indian identity. “It was at that moment,” Jensen said, at the close of the history lessons, “that [participants] would be sitting up straighter, and talking to one another.” The goal, he explains, was that students together would recognize their worth and dignity, that they would say “we are

⁶⁸ Telephone interview with Father Daniel Jensen, March 30, 2004.

⁶⁹ Telephone interview with Father Daniel Jensen, March 30, 2004.

beautiful people, we have a culture, traditions that are very important to us, ... [that] ... are not backward.... They may not [all] prepare us to live in the twentieth century, but then there are areas we can change.”⁷⁰

Students in the Maryknoll seminars were expected to return to their communities, Jensen explains, “challenged to see what they could do for other people.”⁷¹ Typically seminar attendees were invited back to the Centro de Desarrollo Integral six months later for more intensive training in specialized areas like agronomy, literacy, or medicine.

As such projects indicate, by the late 1960s, many Maryknolls in Huehuetenango had adopted the Vatican II approach to their mission. Of this transition, Maryknoll William Price wrote that rather than simply converting their subjects, “the poor, the humble and simple people who struggle ... are converting us.”⁷² It is important to note that some priests clearly did not embrace the philosophy of the Second Vatican Council. Sixteen Maryknolls chose to leave the region in what one report termed a “Post-Vatican II exodus.”⁷³ Tensions among clergy surrounded – and still surround – initiatives in the

⁷⁰ Telephone interview with Father Daniel Jensen, March 30, 2004.

⁷¹ As Maryknoll Sister Bernice Kita describes in a letter, catechists from the Kaqchikel community where she worked attended these seminars, then gave classes to the community based on what they had learned. “The themes are not the usual, old-style catechism lessons,” she wrote. “Instead they deal with topics like the relations between men and women as equal human beings, and God’s plan for humanity.” Kita, *What Prize Awaits Us*, p. 18.

⁷² William Price, “Guatemala: Dare to Struggle,” p. 9.

⁷³ “Maryknoll in Central America,” pp. 18 and 26.

countryside, tensions between a more traditional approach and the newer focus on social justice.⁷⁴

For the Maryknolls, such tensions were brought to a head in 1967 in what is known as the “Melville affair.” Working in the region since 1957 and 1961 respectively, Thomas and Arthur Melville, along with Maryknoll sister Marian Peters, established ties with the leftist insurgency. According to a Maryknoll report, they went even further by “not [only] supporting but ... initiating violent revolution [by] forming their own guerrilla movement.”⁷⁵ They had been working with Guatemalan students in Cráter, the same organization that would soon organize catechists and campesinos in the department of El Quiché, in partnership with the Jesuit priests. With these students, the Melvilles and Sister Peters apparently founded an incipient guerrilla movement. In late 1967, the Maryknoll Superior discovered their plans and asked them to leave the country.

As one Maryknoll report indicates, priests in Guatemala had mixed feeling about the Melville incident. “The issues the Melvilles supported were so close to the interest of the work and effort to help the poor,” it states, “that it was impossible to disregard their conviction.”⁷⁶ This suggests just how tenuous the distinctions became for many between reform and revolution in Guatemala.

Maryknoll William Price, who began working in the Mam community of San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, Huehuetenango in 1965, wrote in 1974 that *indígenas* in the

⁷⁴ Regarding the Maryknolls, Father John Breen wrote in the Regional Superior’s Diary in December 1968 that he found “a lack of unity and direction among the men in Huehuetenango.... I find a split as regards trends in theology and mission apostolate approach.” In “Maryknoll in Central America,” p. 28.

⁷⁵ “Maryknoll in Central America,” p. 18.

⁷⁶ “Maryknoll in Central America,” p. 19.

community were “awakening.” “Signs of dynamism are multiplying,” he wrote. “A significant development in present-day Ixtahuacán is the entry of the masses into the deep and moving stream of social change. The pressures for change have built up enormously in recent years at Ixtahuacán, as the Indians feel a new strength in numbers.... The rural population is beginning to organize and shows capabilities for effective change.”⁷⁷

Price was working with *indígenas* employed in the tungsten and antimony mines, many of whom were catechists, in their struggles with management over unionization and labor rights.⁷⁸ Just after writing the article quoted above, in April 1974, he was expelled from the country by the Guatemalan government for this work. Just over three years later, a strike by these same Ixtahuacán miners would catch the nation’s attention, as they walked 250 miles from Ixtahuacán to the capital, mobilizing indigenous campesinos all along the path.⁷⁹ The efforts of these Mam catechists and unionists were watched closely and supported by other activists – *indígenas* from El Quiché like Toj, Hernández

⁷⁷ Price, “New Wine in Old Bottles,” p. 7.

⁷⁸ For William Price’s involvement with the miners, see Price, “Guatemala: Dare to Struggle.”

⁷⁹ One of the main figures behind the strike, Mario (Guigui) Mejía Córdova of Huehuetenango, an organizer from the National Confederation of Labor (CNT), had been a development and literacy worker at the Maryknoll Centro de Desarrollo Integral for several years, and as Price put it, at his “beck and call.” Maryknoll sister Bernice Kita describes Mejía staying in remote villages throughout Huehuetenango for a month at a time, working with local catechists and leaders in the course of his work for Maryknoll. Kita, *What Prize Awaits Us*, p. 48. Mejía would be one of the hundreds of young people associated with the Maryknoll centers to be killed for his organizing work, shot in July 1978, eight months after the miners’ strike. Kita attended his funeral, as did thousands of other mourners, and was “struck,” she said, “by the women wearing orange miners’ helmets who lined up to embrace [Mejía’s] widow.... Now they were conspicuous by their presence at his funeral, as he had been conspicuous by his presence on their march [to the capital].” Four miners, Kita recounts, carried a banner saying “If the seed does not die, it will not sprout.” Kita, *What Prize Awaits Us*, pp. 48-49. Mejía was in his late twenties.

Ixcoy, and Ceto, for example – and helped spark the rise of a national-level campesino movement.

All of the local programs discussed in this chapter, from parish-based primary and secondary schools, to AC-driven community discussion groups and projects of literacy and *concientización*, cooperatives, campesino organizing, and unionization, produced young indigenous leaders. These women and men formed the basis of continued activism during the 1970s, local, regional, and national.

In case after case, disparate local efforts and activists like these became linked more closely to one another as the 1970s unfolded. The next chapter will explore some of the ways in which that happened.

Chapter 4: Organizing by *Indígenas*: the Regional and National Levels, 1960s – 1977

Local-level organizing like that in Santa Cruz, Santiago Atitlán, and Huehuetenango was taking place across the highlands in the 1960s and 1970s. As was the case in the 1944-54 period, organizing spilled over municipal boundaries, and people involved in community activism became engaged in efforts outside their *municipios*. While identity for *indígenas* had been tied predominantly to the local *pueblo*, in the 1960s and especially the 1970s, schools, priests, cooperatives and agrarian organizations, radio programs, and the Spanish language facilitated connections among different communities, and across the language barriers that had impeded the development of a collective indigenous identity. Both informally and in more formal meetings, young *indígenas* working in different areas and with different organizing experiences began to get together, focusing their attention on shared problems of poverty, discrimination, and political exclusion. There was also a growing interest in cultural revitalization among young *indígenas*, in discovering and promoting indigenous history and identity.

This chapter traces regional and national organizing that developed as *indígenas* became engaged in broadening struggles for cultural, economic, and political rights and justice. It also explores the relationships between two basic forms of activism by *indígenas* that developed in the mid-1970s, efforts based on “race” or indigenous identity specifically, and organizing based on ideas of class struggle. Ideological and practical differences separated race-based and class-based mobilization. Yet *indígenas* in diverse efforts in many ways became linked to each other, creating a web of relations that reached from the western highlands to the eastern Verapaces, relations which activists would draw on as state violence intensified and became directed at the *pueblo indígena*.

The Ideological Context: Race, Class, and Revolution

Forms of mobilization by *indígenas* in the 1960s and 1970s, and especially their regional and national manifestations, emerged amidst intense ideological debates among students, intellectuals, and activists on issues of race, class, and social revolution.

Attention to the competing ideas that shaped these debates is important for contextualizing the movements of the 1970s and subsequent decades.

Guatemala's national University of San Carlos, or USAC, was the intellectual home to a leftist critique of the nation and its socio-economic and political structures, a critique most famously articulated by Severo Martínez Peláez in *La patria del criollo*, first published in 1970.¹ Regarding Guatemala's "Indian problem," Martínez Peláez argued that Indian identity was constructed during the colonial period and functioned in modern Guatemala to divide and weaken the struggle between the rich and poor. This perspective was embraced by activists in what is known as Guatemala's "popular" movement. They were mostly ladinos, unionists, students and intellectuals, especially at USAC, where Martínez Peláez was a faculty member. But through ladino students working in the countryside, these ideas came to be shared by indigenous campesino organizers like Toj and Hernández Ixcoy. Drawing on Martínez Peláez, leftist revolutionary theorists in Guatemala argued that racial injustices, fundamental to the system they sought to overthrow, would disappear in a social system based on equality. While not denying discrimination against Guatemalan *indígenas*, the theory insisted that focusing on ethnicity was, in fact, counter-revolutionary, as it undermined a unity of the oppressed crucial to a successful revolution.

¹ Severo Martínez Peláez, *La patria del criollo: Ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1970).

Sociologists Carlos Guzmán Böckler and Jean-Loup Herbert at the same time articulated a contrasting perspective, arguing that ethnic discrimination against *indígenas* undermined would-be revolutionary unity. They set out the notion of on-going race-based internal colonialism in Guatemala and challenged the inevitability and desirability of ladinization. Also affiliated with USAC in the capital, Guzmán Böckler and Herbert undertook “social investigations” around Quetzaltenango in 1967, in conjunction with local indigenous students and intellectuals. Three years later, in 1970 (the same year that *Patria del criollo* appeared), their most well-known work was published, *Guatemala: Una interpretación histórico-social*. The Guzmán Böckler/Herbert treatise argued that racial ideologies based on superiority of the ladino and inferiority of the *indígena* underlay Guatemala’s problems, which would not be resolved through “integration” or “acculturation” while these rested on assumptions of inequality. Only if a “real and objective dialectic” between ladinos and *indígenas* took place, they said, and only if *indígenas* could recuperate their lands and their history, could *guatemaltecos* together work for a more just “appropriation” of the nation. If colonial domination were destroyed, they argued, ladinos could cease being ladinos, *indígenas* could cease being *indígenas* – and most significantly in the intellectual context of the early 1970s – a multi-ethnic revolutionary movement could be built to challenge the state: “Only with the disappearance of the colonial relation,” they wrote, “will there be revolutionary *compañeros*.”²

The ideas of Guzmán Böckler and Herbert were embraced by a different set of students, intellectuals, and activists, prominent among them *indígenas* who lived in or

² Carlos Guzmán Böckler and Jean-Loup Herbert, *Guatemala: Una interpretación histórico-social* (Mexico: XXI Editores, 1970), pp. 99-100.

near Quetzaltenango, in Chimaltenango, and to a lesser extent, the city of Cobán. These were *indígenas* of a different social position than the catechists and campesino activists we encountered in the last chapter. Though not well-off, necessarily, many of them were a step (or more) removed from an agrarian subsistence economy. They lived in small communities or urban areas like Quetzaltenango and Cobán, studied or worked as teachers, health promoters, in law or social services. Inspired by the arguments of Guzmán Böckler and Herbert and motivated by their own experiences of discrimination, they grounded their activism in issues of indigenous identity.

In Quetzaltenango, Guatemala's second largest urban area and unofficial K'iche' capital, *indígenas* link the local indigenous activist movement to the Sociedad El Adelanto, established over a century ago as Guatemala's first school for *indígenas*. Jerónimo Juárez, who was involved in 1970s municipal politics and with the indigenous periodical *Ixim*, explains that for local *indígenas*, the Sociedad was an important beginning. While its founders had to work within the patriarchal conditions set by the Guatemalan government, he says, sending flowers to Guatemalan presidents on their birthdays or marching in government parades, the Sociedad nonetheless was the first association to demand that the *pueblo indígena* be respected for what it was and that it be allowed to hold onto and promote K'iche' culture.³

As a city with a relatively prosperous indigenous middle class, Quetzaltenango, or Xela as it is known in K'iche', offered more educational opportunities to area *indígenas* than were available elsewhere in the highlands. As a result, it was a center of emerging ideas about identity. In the 1960s discussions of indigenous identity began to develop in

³ Interview with Jerónimo Juárez, February 15, 2002, Quetzaltenango. For more on the Sociedad El Adelanto see Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala*, p. 144.

secondary schools, according to Jerónimo Juárez, and soon within the local branch of the national university, USAC. In Juárez's personal experience, he and a small group of indigenous secondary school students in the 1960s began to discuss identity and the racial discrimination they confronted inside and outside the classroom. Later in the decade several of the students, including Juárez, entered the local university and began more intense discussions with the few *indígenas* at the university from other departments in the region. *Indígenas* from nearby Totonicapán, Juárez remembers, were already engaged in race-based activism. They had started a local organization in the late 1960s, naming themselves Los Insumisos, the Rebels, and calling attention to issues of indigenous identity. At the university in Quetzaltenango, they joined with Juárez and other students to form a group called *Castajik*, K'iche' for "awaken." The group focused explicitly on indigenous consciousness, Juárez recalls, and the need to "revindicate *nuestro pueblo, lo nuestro*, our beginnings, our values."⁴ Another of these students, Isaias Raconcoj, recalls that their thinking in *Castajik* "developed" over time as a result of intensifying debates about race, class, and revolution taking place in the university.⁵

Indigenous students remember USAC – the local Xela campus and in the capital – as an environment in which ethnic difference was magnified. With *indígenas* a small minority of students at the university, Juárez remembers, discrimination was experienced as a "great *choque*," a direct confrontation between *indígenas* and ladinos. In a setting dominated by Marxist discourse, discussions were highly charged, he remembers, taking place among university students and faculty both from the local university and the

⁴ Interview with Jerónimo Juárez, February 15, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

⁵ Interview with Isaias Raconcoj, November 13, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

capital, including sociologist Guzmán Böckler. Most ladinos, Juarez recalls, firmly supported the left's position on ethnicity, as argued by Martínez Peláez. In response, *indígenas* like those in Castajik began to stake out a position on the specificity of ethnic discrimination and exploitation in Guatemalan society. "We wanted to develop our own ideological positions," Isaias Raconcoj remembers, "develop an ideology, valorize ourselves, ... build on historic social bases to revindicate the *pueblo indígena*."⁶ Their emerging critique was voiced in a publication they simply titled *Castajik*, the first indigenous publication to claim any sort of national presence, if only for a short time, and something of a precursor to the periodical *Ixim*. Raconcoj became a social worker in the departments of El Quiché and Alta Verapaz and used his access to the countryside to distribute *Castajik* to local community leaders.

Several of these young Quetzaltenango-area *indígenas*, like Juarez and a teacher and unionist named Ricardo Cajas, at the same time were active in local politics. They helped form a predominantly indigenous Xela-area civic committee in 1972 called Xel-jú, as a means to voice their demands and gain political power in municipal government. Fraud in the elections of 1974 kept Xel-jú candidates out of office, but the group kept the committee together and soon won seats on the community council.⁷ In the next several years *indígenas* in Xel-jú were politically active inside and outside Quetzaltenango. The civic committee helps illustrate how different forms of indigenous activism overlapped in practice: Xel-jú members became closely tied to the popular movement, but with an ongoing ethnic focus. In 1978, as state repression mounted, they campaigned in Xela

⁶ Interview with Isaias Raconcoj, November 13, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

⁷ Xel-jú still exists and finally won the mayor's post in 1995, with the election of Rigoberto Quemé Chay, who also entered the presidential race in 2002.

under the slogan “only the *pueblo* saves the *pueblo*.”⁸ In the context of growing revolutionary movements, the motto set out both a racially-specific identity and linked their struggle to leftist oppositional politics.

Other important figures in a growing indigenous movement came from Cobán, a Q’eqchi’ community and the department seat of Alta Verapaz. Prominent among them was a Q’eqchi’ seminarian and law student, Antonio Pop Caal, a figure whom Luis Sam Colop has described as the patriarch of today’s Maya movement. Born in 1941 in a rural community near Cobán, Pop Caal as a child was one of the promising young *indígenas* identified by parish priests as a gifted student. He was sent to primary school in Guatemala City, then to the Catholic seminary Espiritu Santo in Quetzaltenango. When he graduated in the early 1960s, the church sent him to study theology and philosophy in Spain.

Pop Caal returned to Guatemala in 1969, but rejected Catholicism and the church. He began to study law at USAC in Guatemala City in 1972. In the capital, Pop Caal took an active part in emerging discussions and debates about indigenous identity and led a small group of activist *indígenas* which called itself Cabracán. (The term connotes the idea of *indígenas* standing on their own two feet and also refers to the earthquake that devastated the indigenous highlands in 1976). He quickly made a name for himself by authoring – and publishing – a scathing critique of ladinization and spelling out basic rights of *indígenas*. His “Replica del indio a una disertación ladina,” appeared in a December 1972 issue of the Guatemalan journal *La Semana*, and caused a stir among

⁸ Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus, *Entre el mecapal y el cielo*, p. 50.

fellow indigenous organizers and intellectuals, and ladinos as well.⁹ Ladinos were always writing about *indígenas*, Pop Caal explained in an interview, but *indígenas* were never allowed to respond, at least not in print; his was the first major rejoinder he and other activists recall appearing in the mainstream press.¹⁰

In the article Pop Caal took issue with ladinos claiming to be authorities on all things indigenous. He catalogued a range of ideas explaining the problems confronting the *indígena*, some of them echoes of Guzmán-Böckler and Herbert, and virtually all of them still part of Mayanista politics three decades later: on-going colonialism, internally and externally; agricultural exploitation and land loss; political domination; and denial of the right to use of native languages. He discussed the “anxiety” of ladinos over their own ambiguous identity. To suggestions (in *La Semana*) that all Indians needed to become ladinos, Pop Caal had this to say: “anyone who analyzes this cultural entity of the ladino with sincerity and scientific exactitude ... must conclude that this idea has nothing to offer the Indian.”¹¹

Pop Caal used the term “*indio*” in the title as a purposeful political act, meant to mobilize indigenous students and intellectuals, which it did. Normally used in a derogatory manner by ladinos, *indio* conjured up stereotypical notions of stupidity,

⁹ Antonio Pop Caal, “Replica del indio a una disertación ladina,” *La Semana*, December 12, 1972, pp. 41-43. Pop Caal also delivered the piece before the Congress of Americanists in Puebla, Mexico in 1974. It was subsequently reproduced in Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *Utopía y revolución: El pensamiento político contemporáneo de los indios en América Latina* (Mexico: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1981), pp. 145-152, and translated into English and published under the title, “The Situation of Indian Peoples in Guatemala,” by the organization *Indígena* in Berkeley, California, in partnership with *Akwesasne Notes*, no date.

¹⁰ Interview with Antonio Pop Caal, January 23, 2002, Cobán.

¹¹ Pop Caal, “Replica del indio,” p. 43.

laziness, and dirtiness. In 1972 Pop Caal challenged activists to use it themselves: “We know that [*indio*] is a word ... which reflects a ‘fetish’ of slanderous character by those who use it,” he wrote, “but we have accepted it, and it brings us honor rather than denigration.... [W]e have accepted it, and such an identification signifies nothing less than a challenge to ladinos.”¹² The term was appropriated by activists, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Miguel Alvarado, a K’iche’ from Cantel, Quetzaltenango, remembers, *indígenas* asserted that “with the name [*indio*] with which they’ve destroyed us, with the same name we’ll revindicate ourselves.”¹³

The Catholic Church and Pan-Indian Organizing in Guatemala

As we have seen, the post-Vatican II Catholic church acted as an important catalyst for local indigenous mobilization in Guatemala, and the same holds true for pan-Indian organizing. There was a clear desire on the part of important sectors of the Catholic church to “know” the *pueblo indígena* in order to better serve and support it. There were also efforts on the part of priests to link *indígenas* from different regions to each other, to foster a more collective identity and, as Maryknoll William Price had put it, promote “a new strength in numbers.” For some priests involved in pan-Indianism, it was a matter of instilling a cultural pride in *indígenas*; others, like Price, had more explicitly political motives. Price believed, as he wrote in 1974, that “Christianity must

¹² Pop Caal, “Replica del indio,” p. 43. For discussion of a similar use of the word *nègre* as a term of defiance, see René Depestre, “An Interview with Aimé Césaire,” in Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), pp. 88-94.

¹³ Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

become more of a catalytic force in the development of a new type of opposition to the Ladino power structure,” an opposition that arguably depended on pan-Indian unity.¹⁴

Within a few years of the 1968 Medellín conference, the Catholic church in Guatemala convened regional and nationwide meetings for priests and lay pastors focused on indigenous issues and established an overarching Pastoral Commission on the Indian. These meetings and the Pastoral Commission itself brought together church workers to discuss local experiences, issues of indigenous culture and history, and to analyze the needs of indigenous communities and parishes. Jesuit Ricardo Falla describes the gatherings as a means for local priests and the capital-based church leadership to meet with each other, but also with representatives of the *pueblos indígenas*, and to engage young indigenous leaders in discussions about the work of the church.¹⁵ By the early 1970s, the first Catholic indigenous priests and sisters had been ordained, among them Tomás García, Arnulfo Delgado, and Juana Vásquez, three figures active among organized *indígenas* in the following years. They and others took part in the meetings, as did indigenous catechists and local community leaders. Jesuit Ricardo Falla describes the gatherings of *religiosos* ranging from 15 to 100 people, from all parts of the country. “Historically, the Church and its priests taught,” he explains, but the *encuentros* of the early 1970s were an attempt to take a new approach: “‘we aren’t going to teach,’ we said, ‘we are going to learn.’”¹⁶

Maryknoll Daniel Jensen recounts that what priests “learned” from indigenous participants came as a surprise to many. The *indígenas* whom many thought of as

¹⁴ William Price, “New Wine in Old Bottles,” p. 6.

¹⁵ Interview with Ricardo Falla, November 12, 2002, Santa Maria Chiquimula.

¹⁶ Interview with Ricardo Falla, November 12, 2002, Santa Maria Chiquimula.

passive and childlike, he said, were in fact able and willing to contradict the church and stand up for themselves. Jensen recalls a meeting in the early 1970s at the Catholic seminary in Sololá when the presiding bishop, Father Juan Gerardi, referred to Guatemala's indigenous population as "*nuestros inditos*," our little Indians. One of the indigenous participants jumped up, Jensen recounts, and said, "we're not yours, and we're not little children." As Jensen explains, "I think that was a moment of conversion for the bishop. No one would ever speak to a bishop that way. And this guy had no qualms about it."¹⁷

Bishop Gerardi soon organized another such *encuentro* in his own diocese of the Verapaces, in early 1973. Academics – an anthropologist, a sociologist, and a theologian – from the Centro Nacional de Ayuda a las Misiones Indígenas (CENAMI) in Mexico were guest speakers at the conference in Cobán, as they would be at several other seminars on the Indian for *religiosos* in Guatemala. One priest working in Carchá, Alta Verapaz, Father Luis de León, described the meeting's purpose in *indigenismo* language: "The Catholic church recognizes," he wrote, "that its traditional methods of christianizing the *indígenas* were not good in all respects; [recognizes] that a change of mentality is needed ...; that to work successfully among the *indígenas* requires knowing them, appreciating them, loving them." As de León continued, "The missionary has to have great sensitivity to and understanding of the environment in which he works, know the

¹⁷ Telephone interview with Father Daniel Jensen, March 30, 2004.

history, culture, language, the customs of the *pueblos*.” Priests must not, he warned, “come with the airs of a *conquistador*, a reformer, a know-it-all.”¹⁸

Some *indígenas* did not think priests at such conferences succeeded in leaving their traditional mentalities and methods behind. Tomás García, a K’iche’ from Totonicapán and one of the first indigenous priests ordained in Guatemala, attended the first *Encuentro Pastoral para Naturales de Quetzaltenango* in October 1973. The dynamics of the meeting reflected priests’ intent, as Falla pointed to above, to learn rather than teach. There were one hundred people attending, 80% of them *indígenas* – mostly catechists from rural communities – and the other 20% non-indigenous priests. (García himself was the only indigenous priest at the meeting). As observers, the priests were not to speak, García later recounted, but to listen. For García, however, this hardly meant that priests were getting an “indigenous” point of view. Sharply criticizing the church’s patriarchal positioning on *indígenas* and the acculturation he saw as fundamental to Catholic Action, he argued that catechists at the meeting simply supported the ideas of the non-indigenous priests. The conference did not address real indigenous issues, “*lo que es propio del indígena*,” he wrote. “Many *indígenas* spoke,” but not as *indígenas*. “Their language [as catechists] was already corrupted/contaminated [*viciado*] by the process of acculturation.”¹⁹

Such tensions continued, but priests involved with the Pastoral Commission on the Indian, including Tomás García, kept the dialogue going. An agenda of a month-long

¹⁸ Father Luis de León V., “Encuentro Indigenista de alto nivel en Cobán,” *Boletín Misionero Salesiano*, no. 3, May 1973, p. 1.

¹⁹ Manuscript by Padre Tomás García entitled “Experiencia Indígena,” in the Biblioteca Parroquial, Santiago Atitlán, no date, p. 8.

seminar convened the following year by the Pastoral Commission reveals some of the concerns and interests of priests and participants, and suggests a truly national scope for Pastoral Indígena meetings. It was held at the Instituto Indígena Santiago in the capital, with academic assistance again from CENAMI in Mexico. According to a participant list, the course was attended by eighty-one *religiosos*, including *indígenas* García, Arnulfo Delgado, and Sister Juana Vásquez. Priests and sisters came from departmental capitals and small towns all over the highlands.²⁰ Nearly as wide-ranging were the topics covered in the seminar, themes of politics, economics and society, culture and anthropology, religion and justice. Meeting five days a week, attendees discussed “the *indígena* in Guatemala’s socio-political, economic, and religious reality,” and current indigenous policies in Guatemala. There was a panel by *indígenas* on the indigenous “*problemática*.” Attendees received lectures on theories of cultural relativism, functionalism, and structuralism, and discussed “new interpretations” of the Bible and liberation theology. They were offered a lecture by Tomás García on the theological meaning of the sacred K’iche’ text, the Popul Vuh. And the conference addressed the

²⁰ Attendees came from the communities of Olinstepeque, Cabricán, and San Juan Ostuncalco in Quetzaltenango; from Momostenango in Totonicapán; from Chiantla, Jacaltenango, Barrillas, San Pedro Necta, and Santa Eulalia in Huehuetenango; from Nahualá, San Andrés Itzapa, and Patzún in Sololá; from Rabinal, Tactic, Cahabón, Carchá, and Cobán in the Verapaces; from Santa Cruz, Sacapulas, Uspantán, Chichicastenango, Chicamán, Joyabaj, and Jocopilas in the department of El Quiché; and from Tejutla, San Pedro Sacatepéquez, and Comitancillo in San Marcos. List of participants, *Curso de antropología y teología para la actividad misionera en Guatemala*, held November 18 – December 13, 1974. Document from the parish archive, Momostenango.

pressing issues of the links between evangelization and culture, and evangelization and justice.²¹ Clearly “knowing” the Indian was on the church’s agenda.

Seminarios Indígenas and the Coordinadora Indígena Nacional

In the early 1970s, at the same time Pastoral Indígena was examining indigenous issues and Pop Caal set out his “Replica,” *indígenas* attending university in the capital, once again working with Catholic priests, established the Asociación de Estudiantes Universitarios Indígenas. The Association brought together indigenous students in the capital and organized workshops, speakers, and discussions about culture and identity. The discussions, first held in the National Conservatory, featured speakers such as Father Esteban Haeserijn, a Belgian priest and anthropologist working in Alta Verapaz, who compiled a dictionary of the Q’eqchi’ language. In the dictionary’s preface, participant Ricardo Cajas recalls, Haeserijn, like Pop Caal and Guzmán-Bockler, had articulated an argument that would be adopted by many indigenous activists in the years to come, the idea of ladinos as the colonizers in Guatemalan society, and *indígenas* as the colonized. In the Conservatory Haeserijn spoke to the young *indígenas*, Cajas remembers, about on-going race-based colonialism, and its tendency to pass for class relations.²²

²¹ Agenda of the *Curso de antropología y teología para la actividad misionera en Guatemala*, held November 18 – December 13, 1974. Document from the parish archive, Momostenango. A rather unusual type of primary document that informed discussions in the 1974 Pastoral Commission seminar were speeches by young candidates for local indigenous community queen. Called *discursos*, several of the speeches were transcribed and reproduced for the seminar, apparently used as a window into contemporary demands of the *pueblo indígena*. See chapter five for more on *reinas indígenas* and the church’s role in queens organizing.

²² Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, August 29, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

Soon these discussions took place in yearly Seminarios Indígenas. These were novel and important because young activists from all over Guatemala attended, including *indígenas* from the departments of El Quiché, Huehuetenango, Sololá, Chimaltenango, Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán, San Marcos, and Alta Verapaz. One of the first of the national meetings, according to participant Ricardo Cajas, was held in Quetzaltenango's Casa de la Cultura, ironically with seminar folders printed by INGUAT, the Guatemalan tourist bureau.²³ (Indigenous activists would soon rail against INGUAT for viewing the *pueblo indígena* as a commodity for tourists.) Others were held in Tecpán in the department of Chimaltenango, and in Santa Cruz del Quiché.

The Seminarios were organized by *indígenas* in race-based movements, who formed an umbrella group called the Coordinadora Indígena Nacional to formalize links and maintain communication among indigenous activists. Participants remember the forceful presence in the Coordinadora of Ricardo Cajas, from Xela, for example; Antonio Pop Caal, from Cobán; and Kaqchikel activist Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, who (re)emerged as a leader of the pan-Maya *culturalista* movement of the 1990s. These leaders were mostly intellectuals who, as one campesino leader put it, had little or no experience “living under the oppression of a *finca patrón*.”²⁴ Yet the Coordinadora eventually had members representing all of Guatemala's language groups and included a broad cross-section of activist *indígenas*. Participants describe the Seminarios, which took place over several

²³ Almost no documentation is available about the Seminarios Indígenas, and there is some confusion over their dates and venues. While Cajas remembers the Quetzaltenango meeting being held in 1974, Demetrio Cojtí, another participant, writes that they were held first in Tecpán in 1974, then in El Quiché in 1975, and in Quetzaltenango in 1976. Demetrio Cojtí, *El movimiento maya*, p. 97.

²⁴ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, September 7, 2002, Chimaltenango.

days during December holidays, as involving as many as one hundred fifty people. There were *religiosos*, participants remember, anthropologists and academics from Guatemala City, and community leaders and organizers of all kinds – catechists, literacy workers, cooperativists and campesino leaders like Emeterio Toj.

In those first years, Toj remembers, “we got together ... [simply] in search of an identity that could represent or be the voice of the *pueblo indígena*.”²⁵ Ricardo Cajas recalls discussing very basic issues in those first meetings: what should *indígenas* call themselves, for example, *indígenas*, *naturales*, *mayas*?²⁶ In the early 1970s the latter was more an academic, anthropological term than one used by young activists, but some would adopt it for its rhetorical value.²⁷ Reflecting the influence of intellectuals like Antonio Pop Caal, participants discussed whether and how to use the term *indio*, Cajas remembers. Precisely because it symbolized oppression, leaders argued, they should use it for its power of *reivindicación*.²⁸ We see these concerns formalized in a (rather dense) declaration from the 1974 Seminario Indígena:

We consider that for the attainment of our betterment [*superación*], of justice, the defense of our interests and our identity, the formation of our own defined ideology with clear and precise objectives and arguments is imperative, based in our own circumstances and characteristics, ... so

²⁵ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, August 24, 2002, Guatemala City.

²⁶ Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

²⁷ In 1973, for example, local indigenous queen and Rabín Ahau América Son Huitz of San Cristóbal, Totonicapán, called on the present-day “mujer maya, hermana mía” to have pride in her connection to the pre-Columbian past. “Palabras pronunciadas por la Rabín Ahau saliente en el Festival Folklórico de 1973,” *Boletín Misionero Salesiano*, no. 8, August 1974.

²⁸ Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

that we would achieve the unification of all Guatemalan *indígenas*, the planning and organization necessary for the re-appropriation of our history, the preeminence of our culture, and the penetration of power.²⁹

Given the diversity of Seminarios attendees, participants debated a range of topics that included Indian identity, culture and history, economic exploitation, poverty, violence, and class struggle. Distinct tendencies emerged early in these discussions, however: one relatively *clasista*, focused on economic problems and tied to the cooperative and campesino movements, the other more *culturalista*, centered on indigenous identity and led by teachers and young professionals. There are differences of opinion today regarding these tendencies. Some remember them more as evidence of diversity than division, although differences may have felt more profound at the time and seem modest today only in comparison to what followed. Toj, for instance, portrays the Coordinadora as a single body with multiple ways of “seeing reality ... and proposing solutions.” “There were debates,” he explains, “but with a ... richness, we were alike/twins [*cuates*], we were friends joined together in the Seminarios and the Coordinadora.”³⁰ Ricardo Cajas of Xel-jú similarly describes the Coordinadora’s character, linking disparate interests and areas and facilitating discussions of culture and politics:

The agenda was mixed. The *indígena* at times made class demands, at times ethnic, it was a combination of the two.

²⁹ In Bastos and Camus, *Entre el mecapal y el cielo*, p. 40. The document dates the Tecpán meeting 1974.

³⁰ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, August 24, 2002, Guatemala City.

[Participants] talked of the need to revitalize indigenous languages but also spoke of *latifundismo* and *minifundismo*, like crossing currents.³¹

Others remember a greater gulf between *culturalistas* and *clasistas* from the very beginning. Domingo Hernández Ixcoy from El Quiché asserts that each group paid lip service to the interests and demands of the other but continued to stress their own positions and interpretations, failing to address issues of race and class in an integrated manner.³²

Whatever the initial relationship between the indigenous movement's *culturalistas* and *clasistas*, in the context of intensifying civil unrest and violence in the mid- and late-1970s, the "mixed agenda" of race- and class-based organizing became increasingly polarized. As a leftist insurgency grew in strength and state repression followed, differences in emphasis among activists and their struggles became polemical disagreements about how to achieve change.

A massive earthquake hit the Guatemalan highlands on February 4, 1976, and had an important impact on indigenous organizing, local, regional, and national.³³ It also

³¹ Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

³² Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, March 1, 2002, Chimaltenango.

³³ Earthquakes have had similar effects on political organizing in other times and places: Miguel Angel Asturias marks the 1917 Guatemala City earthquake as contributing to the downfall of dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera in 1920, although the class dynamics were quite different than in 1976. "I remember a Guatemala where people dressed in tails and top hat," he said, "they wore gloves and carried canes.... But now suddenly the earth shook and everyone was left out in the street. And it's curious but undoubtedly the earthquake not only shook the earth but also jolted consciences.... People from all walks of life suddenly found themselves thrown together in the streets in nightshirts and pajamas.... So what was the result? Those who had lived withdrawn, out of touch with

reinforced notions among activists of belonging to a broad “*pueblo indígena*.” The earthquake killed 26,000 people and left a million homeless, and the vast majority of both groups were *indígenas*. Dozens of interviewees point to the experience of the earthquake as an awakening, a moment when they and indigenous activists in general became aware of the racial profile of poverty in Guatemala and the national scope of problems for *indígenas*. It was called the earthquake of the poor and the earthquake of the *indio*, and generated widespread discussion of the connections between race, poverty, and injustice in Guatemalan society, on indigenous language radio stations, in churches, study groups, and organizations. It prompted the Catholic church to speak out officially in the name of justice and rights, and publicly to champion the rights of the *pueblo indígena*.³⁴ As one activist describes it, the earthquake consolidated an indigenous movement: “We didn’t know at the time that the earthquake, a national tragedy, could bring the unification of so many *indígenas*.”³⁵

The enormity of the destruction wrought by the 1976 earthquake motivated young *indígenas* from around the country to assist in recovery, especially in earthquake-ravaged communities in the departments of Chimaltenango, El Quiché, and Baja Verapaz. Pablo Ceto of El Quiché describes traveling with other students to help earthquake victims, a process which opened up the country to young activists, he says, and allowed *indígenas*

the rest of the population, joined the crowd.... In 1917 my generation, no longer intimidated by memories of previous reprisals, entered the political arena.” Quoted in Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, “Miguel Angel Asturias, or the Land Where the Flowers Bloom,” in Asturias, *Men of Maize*, p. 417. Earthquakes in Managua in 1972 and Mexico City in 1985 also come to mind.

³⁴ See “*Unidos en la esperanza, presencia de la iglesia en la reconstrucción de Guatemala*,” mensaje del Episcopado de Guatemala, July 25, 1976.

³⁵ Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

from many areas to meet each other. “When the earthquake of 1976 hit,” Ceto explains, “all of us were involved We ... helped in Tecpán, Joyabaj, Chimaltenango, helped people organize brigades to repair houses, held meetings with the people, got to know other areas.” They worked nearly the entire year of 1976, he recalls, intensively for three months, and continuing throughout the year on weekends.³⁶

Immediately following the earthquake, Emeterio Toj left his broadcasting position at Radio Quiché and went to Joyabaj, El Quiché, to assist in rebuilding. He soon began working with the Instituto de Desarrollo Económico-Social para América Central, IDESAC, the development wing of the Christian Democratic party, on recovery in the departments of Chimaltenango and Baja Verapaz. Like Ceto, he describes the experience as leading to a heightened awareness of the problems confronting *indígenas* in Guatemala, and at the same time, facilitating connections among activists from the affected areas and those coming to their aid. Why were *indígenas* the ones most affected? they asked. Why were *indígenas*’ dwellings the ones to fall down? As Toj tells it, the work allowed him “to widen my field of knowledge/action [*cancha*], to know more of the country’s reality, because the earthquake showed Guatemala for what it is.”³⁷ Toj traveled to Rabinal, to Rio Negro, to Chimaltenango, to San Martín Jilotepeque, meeting indigenous leaders and campesinos in communities struggling to rebuild.

Connections like these spurred the creation of an indigenous-led organization that changed the face of the Guatemalan popular movement: the Comité de Unidad Campesina, or CUC.

³⁶ Interview with Pablo Ceto, June 4, 2002, Guatemala City.

³⁷ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, August 24, 2002, Guatemala City.

National Campesino Organizing: The Committee for Peasant Unity

Local activists like Toj and Ceto, with years of experience working with campesinos and in the cooperative movements, began to coordinate efforts in the aftermath of the earthquake. From the wreckage, activists like to recount, the national campesino movement CUC was born. Among its founders were Ceto, Toj, Domingo Hernández Ixcoy and other former catechists and organizers from El Quiché, *indígenas* from Chimaltenango, and from Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. The organization eventually linked campesinos from across the highlands, pooling local agrarian organizing experiences developed through the Catholic church and its cooperative movement and grounded in the liberation theology discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As CUC was in the process of formation, its organizers helped support the 1977 strike by Mam miners from Ixtahuacán, Huehuetenango, mentioned in the previous chapter. Like the tragedy of the earthquake, the miners' struggle, which grew into a national level mobilization, was a catalyst in the organization's development. Pushing for better wages and working conditions, the Ixtahuacán miners on November 11 began the 250 mile march from their community to Guatemala City. Starting with a group of 70, the miners wound through the indigenous highlands on a nine-day journey down the Pan-American highway, growing in strength along the way. Soon-to-be CUC activists coordinated food and support along their path, and accompanied the workers toward the capital. The protestors soon numbered in the thousands. The Guatemalan government, in an effort to stop the march before it reached Guatemala City, forced mine owners to give in to workers' demands, but they kept going, taking up banners to support striking sugar workers near the capital, in Pantaleón. An estimated 100,000 protesters finally entered Guatemala City on November 20, 1977.

Maryknoll father William Price, who had been working with the miners in Ixtahuacán, was clearly moved by their efforts and felt a personal connection to the march: “When they arrived in the capital,” he wrote, “they began to sing ‘The Song of Ixtahuacán’ (that I had taught them in the ‘60s) to the tune of ‘Anchors Away’ (from my Navy days). Through this simple but beautiful song, I was part of their march.... Never before had workers and peasants, Indians and Ladinos, the Indians of different ethnic groups showed such solidarity with each other.”³⁸

Activists remember the event similarly, especially its power in linking indigenous and ladino campesinos and activists all along its path – Huehuetenango, El Quiché, Chimaltenango, Sololá, Totonicapán. Domingo Hernández Ixcoy describes the event as the first time indigenous campesinos held up banners and proclaimed demands “that came from their hearts, [that] were their own.” Some had worked politically through the Christian Democrats, he said, but the miners’ march was different, more personal, a struggle by *indígenas*. “The solidarity with the miners of Ixtahuacán ... was born in the hearts of our communities,” he explains. “We recognized [the miners] as our brothers – brothers as *indígenas*, and brothers in the same poverty as us....”³⁹ After activists triumphantly entered Guatemala City with the miners, he said, they returned to their communities to discuss the experience and share what they had learned.⁴⁰ Five months later, in April 1978, CUC was officially founded.

³⁸ William Price, “Guatemala: Dare to Struggle,” p. 8.

³⁹ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, March 1, 2002, Chimaltenango. Contrast this view with the Diócesis del Quiché explanation (ch. 3, fn. 44) that the DC was the means by which *indígenas* (finally) were able to express and pursue their own interests.

⁴⁰ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, August 20, 2002, Chimaltenango.

The new organization did much more than connect distant local organizing efforts: due to its leaders' connections to university activists, the ladino-led popular movement, and the Jesuits, CUC would quickly link campesinos from various parts of Guatemala to national-level politics. And while founded and led by *indígenas*, CUC was explicitly cross-ethnic: its campesino members included ladinos and *indígenas*. It connected the *cuadrilleros indígenas* – Indian work gangs that traveled to the coast to work in the cotton and sugar fields – with the more permanent ladino coastal workers in Escuintla and other plantation areas. It was important and unique because it was the first national-level campesino organization in Guatemala, and the first major political movement to link Indians and ladinos.

CUC was also shaped by a clandestine alliance with the revolutionary Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP). As a mass peasant organization, CUC provided the EGP with vital access to the Indian countryside. The formal relationship between CUC and the EGP is somewhat murky, but Pablo Ceto – a member of both – maintains that he and many others established their first contacts with the EGP shortly after the 1976 earthquake.⁴¹ By the time CUC became public, Emeterio Toj explains, the EGP was involved in the organization and significantly shaped its discourse and political positions. In its first public statements, the influence of a Marxist position on ethnicity is clear. CUC refrained from any reference to Indian identity, simply using the word “campesino” to describe most of those who filled its ranks and whose cause it championed. Gregorio

⁴¹ Interview with Pablo Ceto, September 28, 2002, Guatemala City. The degree to which CUC members in general knew of the organization's relationship with the EGP is unclear. Many CUC leaders, like Ceto, Toj, Hernández Ixcoy, and Gregorio Chay became EGP combatants or leaders, but many others remained local activists without becoming active *guerrilleros*.

Chay describes Jesuit Fernando Hoyos, who was later killed in his role as an EGP combatant, presenting *cursos de formación* to campesinos on the class-based explanation of ethnicity – in direct opposition to the seminars being offered to indigenous students by educators like Father Haeserijn mentioned above.

While closely tied to national politics, CUC's strength lay in the fact that from its inception the organization focused on the most pressing concerns of local campesinos, like the high cost of living and prices of equipment and fertilizer. It pushed for just wages on plantations and for better prices for agricultural production. A number of CUC's founders had been involved in Seminarios Indígenas and earlier culturally-focused activism, but by the time they organized CUC, their thinking was focused on class struggle. As Gregorio Chay argues, CUC felt that the primary needs of campesinos were not ethnic revindication, or language and *traje*, but better wages, working conditions, land; "*lo étnico*," he says, was a subject more for intellectuals than the rank and file of CUC.⁴² Emeterio Toj, looking back on this history, offered a similar explanation. "We fought hard in the beginning of the 1970s for cultural issues, but nonetheless, we weren't able effectively to unite [culture] with political questions." Culture, he argues, would not have resonated with CUC's constituency. "If CUC had said, '*muchá*, you need to wear *traje* [indigenous dress],' it would not have had echo. The questions felt by the people [were economic].... You could exist without *traje*, but not without food – that was our thinking, and I think it is still valid."⁴³

While CUC's rhetoric, as we will see, changed somewhat over time and came to incorporate ethnic language and symbolism, its initial position on ethnicity was alarming

⁴² Interview with Gregorio Chay, September 5, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁴³ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, August 24, 2002, Guatemala City.

to activist *indígenas* drawn to the ideas of Carlos Guzmán-Böckler. They insisted that Indians' ethnic identity could not take second place to their class identity. Participants in the Seminarios Indígenas remember real divisions emerging for the first time in a meeting held in Santa Cruz del Quiché in the mid-1970s, at the very time and place of CUC's formation.⁴⁴ The ideology and rhetoric of class struggle prominently shaped the meeting's agenda, they remember. Emeterio Toj recalls "tremendously strong" discussions among Seminario Indígena attendees, in which *clasistas* like himself argued that cultural activism would not resolve major problems. "The issue is land!" he told fellow activists.⁴⁵ Toj describes a delegation of fellow indigenous *clasistas* coming to the Santa Cruz meeting from Chiapas, Mexico. Despite the fact that Toj was quoted above praising the "richness" of debates between *clasistas* and *culturalistas*, he remembers being thrilled that the Mexicans attended, giving the Quiché activists intellectual allies in the meetings.

Participants recall that others attending the Seminario, like Antonio Pop Caal and Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, insisted on the importance of ethnicity and protested the class struggle-focused agenda. While activists in the *culturalista* camp were not necessarily opposed to the idea of revolution and some clearly supported it (see below), they were distrustful that the "Indian problem" would be resolved by a ladino revolutionary government as the left promised. They began more forcefully to speak of a double oppression suffered by *indígenas*, ethnic and economic, and argued that one could not be

⁴⁴ One participant places the meeting in 1975, another in 1976. See fn. 28 above.

⁴⁵ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, August 24, 2002, Guatemala City.

privileged above the other.⁴⁶ At that moment there was greater clarity in the arguments, Ricardo Cajas recalls, greater differentiation between a struggle based on identity as *indígenas* and one based on class. “We resisted joining a revolutionary struggle,” says Cajas of the Santa Cruz meeting, “without first addressing the ethnic issue, [the issue of] inter-ethnic relations in our country. I think that is where the group divided in two.”⁴⁷

After a vote won by the *culturalista* camp, the agenda was revised to include a greater focus on ethnicity, the struggle of *indígenas* as *indígenas*, as activists put it. We insisted, Cajas recalls, that *indígenas* had to have their own, well-defined culture and their own movement. “We were radical ...,” he says, “it’s a radical issue.... That’s where we began to develop the idea of *nacionalidades indígenas*.”⁴⁸ Emeterio Toj, Cajas remembers, countered with the argument that only as a single nation could they defeat the state, and create a new nation.

Clasistas, Culturalistas and the Catholic Church

In the capital, two separate institutions functioned as resources for the *clasista* and *culturalista* tendencies among indigenous activists, both located in impoverished urban areas. The first was a center in Zone 5 of the city, the Centro de Investigación y Acción Social, CIAS, run by the Jesuits. The other was a house in Zone 8 run by the Maryknolls. The Jesuit project began in 1973, and housed a community of eight priests who considered themselves “vanguard” or “radical,” as Ricardo Falla put it, “Jesuits who were no longer tied to the University, but to the countryside.” Among them were “organizers”

⁴⁶ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, September 7, 2002, Chimaltenango.

⁴⁷ Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

⁴⁸ Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

and “investigators,” Falla explained, and they focused on work among campesinos in the highland communities of Comalapa, San Martín Jilotepeque, San Antonio Jilotenango, and Santa Cruz del Quiché. They became intimately involved with the formation and development of CUC.⁴⁹

A few years after CIAS was formed, the Pastoral Indígena envisioned another gathering place in the city, a center for indigenous organizing and discourse. The Centro Indígena in zone 8 of the capital was opened in 1977, financially supported and run predominantly by the Maryknolls.⁵⁰ Father Jim Curtin was initially at its head, followed for a short period by Father Daniel Jensen. The Center served many purposes: it was a resource for growing numbers of young *indígenas*, men and women, who were coming to the city in search of jobs, a place for domestic workers, students, and activists to gather, meet, learn, and organize. Curtin and his fellow teachers gave workshops on how to speak Spanish, the language of work and the city, and the means for *indígenas* from different areas to communicate with each other. They taught basic arithmetic for young men and women working as gardeners and maids. The Center organized student work brigades, teams that helped in earthquake reconstruction in nearby communities. It offered a meeting place for a wide variety of organizers. There were also Sunday afternoon dances, activists remember fondly, where young women and men came to

⁴⁹ Interview with Ricardo Falla, November 12, 2002, Santa Maria Chiquimula.

⁵⁰ The Centro Indígena also received funding from an association of German bishops, Adveniat, although funds were cut in 1980 due to the dissatisfaction of the Germans with the Center’s Vatican II-inspired activities. According to Father Daniel Jensen, who was running the program at the time, an Adveniat representative came to the center with one question: “Do you believe in liberation theology?” he asked. Jensen answered in the affirmative. “... [With] his pencil,” Jensen recalls, “[the Adveniat representative] drew a big X right across the funding request.... He never even gave me a chance to answer.” Telephone interview with Father Daniel Jensen, March 30, 2004.

socialize. Members of Antonio Pop Caal's organization Cabracán were some of the most active at the Centro Indígena, several of them living in student quarters there and in another nearby house as they attended university. One young woman in Cabracán described the meetings taking place at the Centro Indígena, with *indígenas* in the city gathering every Sunday. "It was happy, lively when we met there," she remembers. "I wanted to be part of all of it. I used *traje* again, wanted to help my compañeros." She was always humiliated when she wore *traje* in the city, she said, but did it anyway, to work to change discrimination.⁵¹

Ixim: Notas Indígenas

By 1977, the broad meetings held by the church to discuss indigenous issues had broken down, perhaps, as Ricardo Falla suggests, a result of the Jesuits pushing the church to be more radical in its approach to justice for the *pueblo indígena*, and also due to escalating violence.⁵² The Maryknolls, on the contrary, were more cautious and tended toward an *indigenista* rather than a Marxist approach, although the Melvilles discussed in chapter three were important exceptions. The Centro Indígena was geared more toward ethnic-focused organizing, an important component of which was a new periodical supported by the Maryknolls, *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*.

Ixim offered an indigenous critique of both the state and the left. It was produced by a team of indigenous students and activists, among them Jerónimo Juárez and Ricardo Cajas from Quetzaltenango, with four or five in charge of production at one time: one to raise money for printing, several more to work as reporters, others to serve as editors and

⁵¹ Interview with former Cabracán member, January 24, 2002, Cobán.

⁵² Interview with Ricardo Falla, November 12, 2002, Santa Maria Chiquimula.

take care of meetings and correspondence. The publication used the connections of the Coordinadora Indígena Nacional to solicit articles and circulate the issues, with local community activists handling distribution. *Ixim* was officially registered with the state, a move its founders say was intended to signal an independence from the popular left. *Ixim* quickly blurred any such distinctions that the state might have perceived, however, by forcefully condemning state policies and practices related to indígenas and at times calling for revolution.

Ixim offers a fascinating window onto activists' thinking and strategies in its short period of existence, October 1977 through October 1979. It purportedly aimed for an indigenous audience that included intellectuals like its founders along with campesinos, or perhaps more realistically, literate agrarian leaders. With rather lengthy articles and small print, it was a far cry from the simple CUC publications produced for the campesino masses, yet its first editorial introduced *Ixim* as a means to link the city with the countryside and its front cover depicted an indigenous fieldworker. The periodical also sought explicitly to connect *indígenas* of different linguistic groups in Guatemala to each other, its editors wrote, and had adopted the name *Ixim* because it had the same pronunciation and meaning – maize – across Maya languages. The editors expressed the hope that *Ixim* would nourish readers and inspire action by facilitating the sharing of experiences in the countryside and in the city. It sought, “in a small way, to fulfill the request of our ancestors written in the *Popul Vuh* ...: May all rise up, may all be called, may not one group nor two among us be left behind the others.”⁵³

⁵³ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, vol. 1, no. 1 (October 1977), p. 2.

The subject matter of the first issue dealt both with “culture” and with issues driving the campesino movement. Articles asked, “What is culture? What is folklore?” and discussed in basic terms the idea of cooperativism. One article, reflecting an early CUC concern, described campesino organizing to secure reform in the forest laws to ensure access to wood. Still another piece detailed a protest by diverse *indígenas*, described as “organized indigenous groups from different communities ..., both student groups and campesino organizations,” to demand indigenous women’s right to wear *traje* in public institutions and schools. Addressed to the Minister of Education, it noted the contradictions inherent in state-sponsored exhibitions like the National Folklore Festival that celebrated *traje* and “cultural values,” while rules existed prohibiting the wearing of indigenous dress in public schools. “What is going on, Señor Ministro? What does this mean? Would this be the way to promote our cultural values?” Calling on the basic tenets of democracy, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and quoting the Guatemalan constitution’s equal protection and non-discrimination provisions, the protestors had called on the Minister to respect the dignity and liberty guaranteed to all human beings, by ensuring *indígenas*’ right to dress: “... WE DEMAND: FREE ACCESS, WITH *TRAJES TÍPICOS*, FOR ALL PERSONS WHO DESIRE IT, TO ANY EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT IN THE COUNTRY AND THAT AT NO TIME WILL USE OF MATERNAL LANGUAGES BE PROHIBITED. RATHER, WE ASK THAT THESE CULTURAL VALUES BE RESPECTED.” (Emphasis in original). The Minister’s response was published alongside it, guaranteeing students’ right to wear *traje* and calling on all schools to respect it.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, vol. 1, no. 1 (October 1977), p. 4.

While it was a relatively modest demand, the effects of such a piece resonated throughout highland communities. At its height only 500 copies of each *Ixim* issue were produced, but it was enthusiastically received by indigenous activists, passed around and reproduced, sometimes surreptitiously. Gregorio Chay, a CUC member, but also a student in Santa Cruz at the time, recalls making hundreds of copies of the *Ixim traje* article when it appeared, secretly using his school's mimeograph machine. He and other students plastered the school with them, he remembers, put them in the bathrooms and halls, slipped them under the doors of all the teachers and school officials. "It was my first clandestine action," he says. School officials were furious: the school's director threatened that if students did not appear in the upcoming community parade in proper uniform, they would be held back a grade and would risk not graduating. The protest primarily involved the female indigenous students, Chay explains, because they were the ones who wore *traje*, but their male counterparts pledged solidarity, agreeing to boycott the parade if the women were not allowed to wear indigenous dress. The day of the parade arrived. "The *compañeras* arrived in *traje*," Chay recalls. "We stood firm, ... joined the parade, and no one threw us out. We all passed on to the next grade. It was the greatest victory!"⁵⁵

Subsequent articles in *Ixim* focused on links among *indígenas*, in Guatemala and abroad. One piece detailed indigenous last names in the Guatemalan highlands, for example, and the similarities found in different areas and language groups, an obvious effort to suggest a pan-indigenous affiliation across geographic and linguistic space: the name *Xom* was common among Quichés in Chichicastenango, for example, *Oxom*

⁵⁵ Interview with Gregorio Chay, September 5, 2002, Guatemala City.

among Kekchís in Cobán, Xoyom among Kakchiqueles in Chimaltenango, Oroxom among Quiches in Quetzaltenango, and Coroxom among Kakchiqueles in Sololá.⁵⁶ Another article reported on a September 1977 meeting in Geneva of *indígenas* of the Americas, convened by the UN Human Rights Commission. *Indígenas* across the continent “are waking,” reported one contributor, “and seeking [their own] solutions to their problems. Many of their problems are the same as ours here in Guatemala, and we have to recognize ... as brothers and be in solidarity with *indígenas* of América.”⁵⁷ This became a theme prominent in the periodical and in the writings of *indígenas* tied to this movement: the need for *indígenas* to define their own solutions to the problems of the *pueblo indígena*.

Editors continued to combine themes such as the need to reconstruct indigenous history in Guatemala with contemporary issues relating to the campesino, but the way they wrote about the latter issues reveals much about the differences between Ixim activists and campesino leaders in CUC. The first issue’s very simple treatment of cooperativism, through an imagined discussion among campesinos, for example, was picked up in the second issue and turned to a discussion of the Ixtahuacán miners’ march for illustration, which was underway at the time of publication. That is “cooperation,” said a character named Cristóbal, “what many men and women, mostly *indígenas*, are doing to offer food and ... more ... to the brother miners who, coming from San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán ... are on their way to the capital to demand justice ..., carrying out a protest march to demand better salaries.” The writer, in this case “Kakul’ja” (contributors often

⁵⁶ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, vol. 1, no. 2, November 1977, p. 4.

⁵⁷ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, vol. 1, no. 2, November 1977, p. 7.

adopted indigenous pseudonyms for publication), wanted to inform his readers about the march, but his impressions of it differed in important ways from those of campesino activists themselves, like Domingo Hernández Ixcoy above. “What is really astonishing,” Kakul’ja wrote, “is that the march is on foot.”⁵⁸ While Ixcoy had seen the miners as brother *indígenas* and brothers in poverty, Kakul’ja’s imagined campesino stressed the miners’ and supporters’ ethnic identity and was “astonished” that they would make the 250 mile journey on foot. Ixim activists’ backgrounds and education levels differentiated them from the masses they sought to represent.

Before long, the *Ixim* editors, increasingly bold in their writing, profoundly insulted their Maryknoll sponsors. On the cover of one issue they took an aggressive position on what they called the colonialist church, with a drawing depicting an *indígena* carrying a cross on which sat a priest, his hand held out for money.⁵⁹ “We aren’t referring to you [the Maryknolls],” Ricardo Cajas remembers telling the priests at Centro Indígena, but they were deeply offended nonetheless. “They wanted us to be grateful, but not critical,” Cajas remembers.⁶⁰ Father Daniel Jensen recalls the church’s perspective, with people beginning to say, “we’ve nurtured an asp in our bosom!” “There is a saying in Spanish,” Jensen remembers, “nurture crows, and they’ll take your eyes out. And they were always quoting that, because these people were not being the docile little Indians

⁵⁸ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, vol. 1, no. 2, November 1977, p. 8.

⁵⁹ The issue appeared in early 1978. In my copy of the April 1978 issue, the cover is missing, but the same graphic is reproduced on another page, no number. It may have appeared on that cover, or it may have been published in an earlier issue that I have been unable to find. The April 1978 issue was the last one produced at the Centro Indígena.

⁶⁰ Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, February 15, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

that people thought they were.”⁶¹ Production of the publication moved from the Centro Indígena in the capital to Quetzaltenango, where it was overseen by Xel-jú activists Cajas and Juárez at a distance from its Maryknoll sponsors, although they continued to support it financially.

By issue number eight, May 1978, produced in Quetzaltenango, the initially cautious and simple tone of the periodical was abandoned completely. The authors were now clearly writing for an educated indigenous activist readership. They condemned army practices of forced recruitment, and demanded to know why recruits were predominantly *indígenas*. The front cover depicted indigenous soldiers in the army, with a caption asking them, “Brother, who are you going to defend, your *pueblo* or the world of the whites?” Accompanying this racial critique of army forced recruitment was a vitriolic condemnation of the state-sponsored National Folklore Festival, which we turn to in the next chapter.

Throughout its issues, *Ixim* activists challenged the left’s argument that ethnicity was a “false” identity and stood in the way of change. “We can’t pretend we are all *sanjuaneros*,” wrote L. Yaxcal Coyoy regarding community politics in San Juan Sacatepequez. “It is only an intellectual exercise and there will always be *sanjuaneros indios* and *sanjuaneros ladinos*.” The “refuge in false solutions” represented by ignoring ethnic identity, he charged, took place at the national level, too:

the concept ‘*guatemalteco*’ pretends to supercede the concepts of ‘*indio*’ and ‘*ladino*.’ The territorial reality is put forward as a substitute for the racial reality. And this is an error because a nation cannot be constructed negating

⁶¹ Telephone interview with Father Daniel Jensen, March 30, 2004.

the identity of the human elements that constitute it.... [T]o reconcile *indios* and *ladinos* is not to negate the existence of *indios* and *ladinos*.⁶²

Activists would go on debating these issues, in an increasingly tense context. The stakes would rise precipitously in the next several years as repression against the *pueblo indígena* mounted. Relations among indigenous activists, *clasistas* and *culturalistas*, were ambiguous and in constant flux: disagreements were sometimes heated. At other times activist *indígenas* drew closer together in national-level protests, despite their differences. As we will see in the next chapters, state violence against the *pueblo indígena* had the (short term) effect of solidifying indigenous opposition to that state. An important turning point both in patterns of state violence and indigenous opposition to it was the Panzós massacre of 1978, to which we now turn.

⁶² *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, May 1978, p. 4.

Chapter 5: Protesting Panzós: Community Queens and Indigenous Opposition to the State in Guatemala, 1970-1978



Reinas indígenas protest the Panzós massacre, *El Gráfico*, July 30, 1978

Hermanos de Panzós, su sangre la tenemos en la garganta.
Brothers of Panzós, your blood is in our throats.¹

With these words, spoken in her native K'iche' and in Spanish, a young indigenous woman in the photograph above addressed a plaza crowded with spectators gathered for a local *reina indígena* pageant in Guatemala's western highlands. The year was 1978, and the "brothers" the indigenous community queen referred to were not fellow K'iche's, but rather Q'eqchi' campesinos from Panzós, Alta Verapaz, on the other side of the country, who had been massacred by Guatemalan army troops just weeks before. In one of the first major assaults of the civil war against a civilian population, army soldiers in Panzós on May 29, 1978, shot indiscriminately into a crowd expressing demands for land, killing an estimated fifty-three and wounding forty-seven. State

¹ From a *reina indígena*'s speech, as remembered by the 1977 *reina indígena* of Cantel, Emila Salanic. Interview with Emilia Salanic, July 13, 2002, Cantel.

counterinsurgency violence that equated Indians with “subversives,” a practice that soon reached the level of genocide, had begun.²

The young woman who paid tribute to the victims of the army massacre was not alone in using a queen pageant and the space it provided to condemn injustices confronting both her own community and the broader *pueblo indígena* her words evoked. In communities across the highlands in the 1970s, young indigenous queen contestants, sponsored by local activists like those we have seen in previous chapters, mounted stages and took up microphones to demand justice in its many dimensions. In impassioned *discursos*, they called for pride in “*la raza*,” condemned ethnic discrimination and economic exploitation, and claimed the rights to land for their *pueblos*. After the bloody massacre of May 1978, some explicitly protested state violence and terror.

Indigenous queen pageants offer a surprising window into local and pan-Indian organizing in Guatemala and the radicalization of oppositional politics in the highlands. The events were not new; local *reina indígena* contests began in some communities as early as the 1930s. But the context shifted in important ways in the 1970s. As young activists became involved in growing opposition movements, they turned to *reina* contestants as spokeswomen.³

² On the massacre see CEH, *Memoria del Silencio*, 6: 13-23. See also Sanford, *Buried Secrets*, and Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*. National press coverage of the massacre was extensive. See especially *El Gráfico*, *La Nación*, *La Tarde*, *El Imparcial*, and *Diario de Centro América*, June 1-4, 1978.

³ For more on pageants, beauty queens, and their relationship to politics, identity and race, see the collection by Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje, eds., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*; and Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). See also Rick López, “The India Bonita Contest of 1921 and the Ethnicization of Mexican National Culture,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82:2 (May 2002), 291-328, for a discussion of the relevance of that contest to changing ideas of Indianness in Mexican nationalism.

Beginning in 1972, the *reina indígena* pageant also took on national – and nationalist – significance, with the naming of Guatemala’s first national Maya queen, or Rabín Ahau, in a state-sponsored Folklore Festival. With the inception of the national contest, the Rabín Ahau was assigned a visible role in Guatemalan nation formation and *indigenismo*, proudly held up by the state as an authentic symbol of the nation’s celebrated pre-Columbian heritage.⁴ But this state appropriation of the symbolic *reina indígena* was met immediately with heated resistance by indigenous activists, and opposition grew in the years to come. By 1978, state violence directed against Indians provoked the protest by the indigenous activists pictured above, who condemned a state which simultaneously celebrated “folklore” and massacred Indian campesinos. Directly confronting the state and its use of ethnic imagery, the queens announced a boycott of the 1978 Folklore Festival and the Rabín Ahau pageant in which they were to be contestants.

For the queens and their supporters, the state’s celebration of Maya “authenticity” a mere two months after the mass killings of *indígenas* in Panzós reeked of hypocrisy. While the blood of those they called “true/genuine [*verdaderos*] Guatemalan Indians” still soaked the ground in Panzós, the queens charged, “... all the ... festivals ... in supposed homage to the Indian of Guatemala are unjustified because in ... reality the right to life is not respected, [nor] the right to ... lands, [nor the right] to our own cultural practices without paternalism”⁵

⁴ For a discussion of the national *reina indígena* contest in Guatemala, see Carlota McAllister, “Authenticity and Guatemala’s Maya Queen,” in Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje, eds., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*, pp. 105-24; and Carlota McAllister, “This Pageant Which is Not Won: The Rabín Ahau, Maya Women, and the Guatemalan Nation” (MA thesis, University of Arizona, 1994).

⁵ *El Gráfico*, July 30, 1978, pp. 1 and 2.

It was a poignantly symbolic form of resistance. Literally occupying center stage were young women representing local indigenous communities from El Quiché to Huehuetenango, their claims made in the name of the *pueblos indígenas* they represented.⁶ In addition to being explicitly gendered, the boycott was highly visible, confrontational, and racial in its imagery: the photograph of twenty-two young Indians covered the front page of Guatemala's largest-circulation daily, the women and a few men dressed in traditional *traje*, several wearing clothing symbolic of mourning, one with his fist in the air. The content of their *denuncia* was unusually forceful for the mainstream press: condemning multiple forms of state violence against *indígenas*, the queens and their supporters simultaneously attacked both the massacre of their “indigenous brothers” in Panzós, and government cultural paternalism and ethnic manipulation they charged was exemplified in the National Folklore Festival.

I came upon the protest photograph while paging through newspapers in the National Library in Guatemala City. I was, frankly, astonished – by the language and imagery, by the fact that the young women and men had come together from indigenous communities all over the highlands, and by the sheer courage such a statement represented. “Disappearances” of activists and leaders had started well before this, and dead bodies along roadsides were the subject of ever-increasing numbers of vague articles in the press. In such a context, how had the protest come about? Who were these young people, and how were they connected to one another? What could this protest tell

⁶ The *reinas* in the photo came from Quetzaltenango, Cantel, and La Esperanza in the department of Quetzaltenango; Chichicastenango in the department of El Quiché; San Sebastián, in the department of Retalhuleu; San Pedro Soloma, in the department of Huehuetenango; and Nahualá and Santiago Atitlán, in the department of Sololá. The origins of friends and supporters in the photo included Quetzaltenango, San Sebastián, Nahualá, and Santiago Atitlán.

us about the largely hidden history of indigenous organizing in the 1970s? The many months to follow were spent seeking out the queens and their fellow protestors who had posed for the camera twenty-four years earlier. Beginning in the communities listed in the photo's caption, the search eventually took me to twenty *pueblos* in the western highlands and in the Verapaces, where I found and talked with women and men about their decisions to protest, their experiences, and the historical moment captured in the photo.

The queens' protest, I soon found, allows a glimpse inside the complicated processes of highland mobilization in Guatemala and reveals important connections between the many forms of organizing emerging in the 1970s. It was a protest against both state *indigenismo* and state violence against campesinos, and provides a means to examine an intense confrontation between indigenous activists and the state over identity, authenticity, and nation formation, closely intertwined with demands for economic and political rights for the *pueblo indígena*. The very language used by *reinas* wedded concerns about ethnic pride, economic exploitation, racial discrimination, poverty, and violence. At the same time, the protest leads us to outspoken *reinas* and activists all over the highlands, revealing diverse processes of community mobilization and their relation to broader regional movements. Among the men in the photo are activists from Santiago Atitlán, for example, Miguel Sisay, Felipe Vásquez Tuíz, Pedro Esquina, ORPA members and campesino leaders; the Quetzaltenango activists writing for *Ixim* were involved: pictured here are Ricardo Cajas, Jerónimo Juárez, Isaias Raconcoj; the young people from Santa Cruz del Quiché, like Emeterio Toj, were involved with *reinas* organizing as well, though only their *reina* is present in the photo.

As we have seen, the 1970s were years of significant contestation and re-shaping of representations of Indian identity in Guatemala. The *reina indígena* pageant became a focal point of new organizing efforts, in many places appropriated for cultural as well as political ends. The pageants and organizing that surrounded them reveals some of the ways in which vocal young activists participated in politics – locally, regionally, and nationally – and contested state repression. They illustrate how meanings and practices of indigenous identity and organizing were changing in the 1970s, with the articulation of racial identities centered on notions of community and blood lineage, but also newly-conceived ideas of rights and justice for a broad *pueblo indígena*. Indian identity and “authenticity,” as represented by the clothing, adornment, and eventually, the *words* of indigenous queen candidates, became hotly contested within local communities and in the national arena, by indigenous men, women, and the state. Finally, they show how these ideas were shaped in response to the highly problematic pairing of state *indigenismo* and counterinsurgency policies that targeted indigenous communities, with state violence a crucial catalyst in the construction of pan-Indian identity.

Maya Women and the Indigenous Queen Pageant

Maya women have long served as the visual markers of indigenous identity in Guatemala, weaving and wearing symbolic *huipiles* (blouses), skirts, and elaborate hair wraps whose designs and colors signify “culture,” place, and, in the eyes of the world, nation. Within Guatemala, each weaving pattern is recognized as specific to a given community, and thus a woman wearing *traje* is identifiable not only as indigenous but as a member of a certain *pueblo*. With a few notable exceptions, men have abandoned daily use of indigenous dress, instead wearing western-style “ladino” clothing, although often

combining elements of *traje* that subtly distinguish them from non-Indians.⁷ Generally speaking, indigenous men and Indian communities as a whole depend on Maya women to produce and display the symbols that mark them all as indigenous. For decades, the state similarly has relied on indigenous women and their weaving to represent the nation's colorful and exotic Maya heritage.

The history of local elections of *reina indígena* or *india bonita* dates back more than half a century in many communities, including Quetzaltenango and Cobán, where such pageants began in the 1930s. Ladina community queens had long presided over local fairs, even in communities with majority Indian populations, and in the 1930s and subsequent decades, *indígenas* began to fight for representation as well. It is important to note that *indígenas* did not, to my knowledge, advocate Indian inclusion in ladina beauty contests, but instead pushed for the establishment of parallel, racially-separate indigenous pageants. As ladina queen contests were “beauty” pageants, they excluded indigenous women since what constitutes beauty in Guatemala was and continues to be defined by race. From their inception and even today, indigenous queen contests have taken place *alongside* ladina beauty contests, and the *reina indígena* has represented something quite different from her ladina counterpart: surrounded from the very beginning by the trappings of culture, she has stood for Indian identity and authenticity, rather than femininity or beauty.

⁷ Men in some rural communities, among them Sololá, Santiago Atitlán, and Todos Santos, and within a new class of urban professionals, wear traditional and “neo-traditional” clothing. For more on Indian dress in Guatemala see Carol Hendrickson, “Images of the Indian in Guatemala: The Role of Indigenous Dress in Indian and Ladino Constructions,” in *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America*, eds. Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 286-306; and Hendrickson, *Weaving Identities: Construction of Dress and Self in a Highland Guatemala Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

In Quetzaltenango, the first *reina indígena* was elected in 1934, after the indigenous Sociedad El Adelanto, an indigenous educational institution established in 1897, petitioned community authorities to allow the naming of a “representative of the [indigenous] race” to participate in the annual community festival. According to a history prepared for the fifty-year anniversary of the elections, the 1934 naming of the *reina indígena* of Quetzaltenango was “the first time the *pueblo indígena* of Xelajú [Quetzaltenango] was permitted to take part directly in the fair”⁸ Greg Grandin has argued that these early contests were part of K’iche’ elites’ efforts to assert an Indian identity that unified and naturalized “tradition” and “modernity,” setting out these ideas not as incompatible, but as integral to progress and the nation.⁹ These first ceremonial representations of *la raza* thus reflected an elite, “modern,” Europeanized Indianness. The portraits of early *reinas indígenas* of Quetzaltenango show young queens with ladina-style ornamentation; elaborate crowns, high collars, and flowing capes are pictured, for example, although the latter were made “Indian” by intricately embroidering them with Maya symbols.¹⁰

⁸ *Historial del certamen de la belleza indígena de Quetzaltenango* (Quetzaltenango, 1985), no page numbers.

⁹ See Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala*, ch. 7.

¹⁰ Photos of the first fifty *reinas indígenas* of Quetzaltenango were published to commemorate a half-century of the events. See *Historial del certamen de la belleza indígena*. Quetzaltenango was not the only place where a Europeanized Indianness was reflected in the choosing of early *reinas indígenas*. The 1958 *India Bonita* of Cobán was a very white young woman of mixed German and indigenous descent, María Elena Winter Flor, who has been deeply involved in the controversial National Folklore Festival since its inception, and was president of the Festival Committee in 1986 and 1991. Interview with María Elena Winter Flor, December 8, 2002, Cobán, Alta Verapaz. Rick López has noted that in early “India Bonita” contests in Mexico as well, the public had difficulty conceptualizing “*indias*” who were “*bonitas*,” instead entering in contests photos of white women in Indian costume. López, “India Bonita Contest,” p. 301.

Over time, pageants came to be held in communities throughout the highlands, generally a feature of local festivals commemorating patron saints. Rather than events held by *indígenas*, however, many early *reina indígena* contests were in the hands of the same ladino municipal officials and festival organizers who presided over contests for ladina queen. On-going disagreements over control of the pageants made *reina indígena* contests from their inception sites of contestation between ladinos and *indígenas*.

Home from secondary school or university and brimming with ideas, a new generation of activists coming of age in the early 1970s – men and women – began to demand and win changes in the events in many communities. Struggles between activists and officials focused on demands for equality between ladina and indigenous queens, for example. In one early triumph, students in Santa Cruz del Quiché, among them Emeterio Toj, forced an end to blatant discrimination against their *reina* in 1974, demanding that the municipality end the practice of giving the ladina queen considerably more prize money than the indigenous representative.¹¹ As in many communities, the Santa Cruz students led efforts to change the representative's title from *princesa* (or even the diminutive *princesita*) or *india bonita*, to *reina indígena*, again on equal footing with the ladina queen. Later in the decade, many activists began to look beyond “equality” with ladininas, and pageant-related struggles all over the highlands centered on questions of symbolism, “authenticity,” and increasingly, the political content of the events. What

¹¹ Interviews with 1974 *reina indígena* of Santa Cruz, Catarina León Medrano, April 18 and November 4, 2002, Santa Cruz del Quiché. Other interviews about Santa Cruz *reinas* organizing conducted with former catechists, radio broadcasters, founders of the campesino movement CUC, and EGP, among them Emeterio Toj Medrano, August 24, 2002, Guatemala City; Gregorio Chay Laynez, September 5, 2002, Guatemala City; and Pablo Ceto, September 28, 2002, Guatemala City.

would be represented? Who would plan events and judge “authenticity,” ladinos or *indígenas*? What would the young candidates *say* before their *pueblos*?

In community after community, young activists, in contact with each other through schools or church organizing, advocated contests that they considered to be more culturally authentic. In many places, participants remember gaining ground in the latter part of the decade, organizing events that were “more indigenous,” with traditional food, music, and decorations, and less like ladina contests. Some activists sought to replace the title *reina* with something more in keeping with indigenous culture. The *reina indígena* of Santiago Atitlán, for example, was renamed *Rumam Tz’utjil Pop* in 1978, due to the work of organizers like Felipe Vásquez Tuíz, Miguel Sisay, and Pedro Esquina. The Quetzaltenango queen in 1979 became *Umial Tinimit re Xelajuj Noj*, or “Daughter of the *Pueblo* of Xelajú,” in K’iche’, with Ricardo Cajas and Jeronimo Juarez behind the efforts. Activists campaigned in San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz, and in other areas, to replace their representative’s ladina-style cape and crown with more traditional adornments specific to their community, in the case of San Cristóbal, a ceremonial *huipil* and skirt, a long red tape for the *reina*’s hair, a woven belt and silver necklace.¹²

Determining who would judge the contests was a thornier issue. In some communities, activists won struggles to place *indígenas* on contest juries; in others, ladinos continued to hold these positions as “experts.” In a few places, *reinas* were chosen by popular vote, and in others, judges seem to have taken into consideration the reactions of spectators to *reina* candidates. As we will see below, the composition of a jury had much to do with how outspoken queen contestants fared in local pageants.

¹² Interview with 1978 *reina indígena* of San Cristóbal, Amalia Coy Pop, San Cristóbal, March 17, 2002, Alta Verapaz.

While pageants varied from place to place, in the 1970s most involved the following: unmarried young women were eligible to take part, sponsored by a community group or institution of some kind. Contests were held in public, in a town's central plaza or a theater in larger communities, set up with a stage, microphone, and marimba, and frequently decorated with lights and symbolic renderings of the glories of the Maya past. The contests drew huge crowds throughout the decade. People speak nostalgically of plazas overflowing with spectators until past midnight, the festive feel of the nights, and the pungent aroma of pine needles and burning incense.

The *reina indígena* pageants began with each young contestant, sometimes accompanied by a small entourage, making her way through the crowd amidst clouds of smoke. Dressed in magnificent ceremonial *traje*, she moved forward slowly to the sound of marimba, sometimes carrying a basket loaded with goods symbolic of her *pueblo* and the fecundity of the land, or with her head bent and arms clasped, dancing a traditional dance called the *son*.

Some of the weighty identity issues at work in these pageants are apparent in the following exchange about the *son*, published in *La Nación/Quetzaltenango* in 1978. The writers, both men, are referring to a new monument to the marimba created by the latter of the two, ladino sculptor Rodolfo Galeotti Torres. The monument, which still stands at the entrance to Quetzaltenango, features an indigenous woman towering above the traditional instrument, dancing the *son*. An indignant Victoriano Alvarez, an indigenous lawyer, claimed that the dancing figure did not “reflect the historical truth” and was an inauthentic representation of indigenous identity, as symbolized by the *quetzalteca* indigenous woman:

For every *indígena quetzalteca*, the *son* is an ancestral ritual, and not a fleeting moment of recreation and entertainment. It is a spiritual communion between her being and the universal spirit. To this end, ... [the] *indígena quetzalteca* crosses her arms ... over her stomach, tilts her head to one side and a bit downward, and fixes her gaze on a point ... below the horizon. In this position she puts her spirit in communication with the music, with nature, our ancestors and their teachings. This position should have been immortalized [in the sculpture], because it is the authentic historical reality.¹³

The ladino sculptor Galeotti Torres, equally certain that he knew the proper and authentic form for the *indígena quetzalteca*, responded, agreeing that the dance was “a rite of the highest spirituality,” and one that he found to be profoundly emotional. But the figure, he retorted, was not in an improper position as Alvarez had claimed, but was most appropriately looking “... at the land, the earth.... [with] a noble look, reverent, absorbed in the solemn rite she was consummating.”¹⁴ For every *reina indígena* contestant, the ability to dance the *son* with *authenticity* – determined by contest judges in a manner likely as subjective as that evidenced in the newspaper debate here – was an important requirement for being chosen queen.¹⁵

¹³ “No es la mujer indígena Quetzalteca la que baila en el monumento a la marimba,” *La Nación/Quetzaltenango*, July 4, 1978, p. 3.

¹⁴ “Quetzalteca que sí danza el son,” *La Nación/Quetzaltenango*, July 12, 1978, p. 3.

¹⁵ Marisol de la Cadena provides another, quite startling, example of tests of “authenticity” in indigenous beauty pageants in Cuzco, Peru. Contestants (date unknown) “had to prove their indigenous ‘racial’ authenticity,” she wrote. “The judges required that the participants in the beauty contest pose nude; short legs, small breasts, and scant pubic hair were the physical characteristics that the gentlemen organizers chose as markers of the bodies of *real* Indian women.” Marisol de la Cadena, *Indigenous*

Perhaps even more important than the *son*, especially as the pageants became more politicized over time, were the words of *reina indígena* candidates. Each young woman addressed the community in her native language, followed in many places by the same speech, or *discurso*, in Spanish, a measure of a young woman's level of education. It was a unique, and likely often daunting, opportunity for women to speak before an entire *pueblo*. Spectators cheered on their favorites, hissed at the less articulate or those unable to speak Spanish well. Successful *discursos* have been described as highly poetic, full of symbolism, and delivered with passion.

Over time, ideas of race and justice came to figure prominently in queens' speeches. Recall the words on the tomb of Thelma Beatriz Quixtán Argueta, the 1970 *reina indígena* of Quetzaltenango, a young K'iche' who died shortly after being named queen: "We have been beaten and humiliated, but the race was never defeated."¹⁶ Interestingly, Quixtán Argueta, the thirty-sixth indigenous queen of Quetzaltenango, was one of the first to be shown in a commemorative history of the contests not in a formal portrait, but speaking into the microphone of a prominent radio station, addressing the pageant's vast audience in the theatre and beyond its walls.¹⁷

A growing politicization of many pageant *discursos* was directly related to and reflected the intensification of community activism and opposition politics in the highlands discussed in chapters three and four. The activists in El Quiché, Santiago

Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919-1991 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 181. In Guatemala, the "Princesa Tezulutlán" in Alta Verapaz to this day poses for her portrait with her blouse open, her bare breasts another marker of the authentic *india*.

¹⁶ Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala*, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Historial del certamen de la belleza indígena de Quetzaltenango*, no page numbers.

Atitlán, and Quetzaltenango, as in communities all over the highlands, were closely involved in their local *reina indígena* pageants throughout the 1970s. As such community and regional activism grew in many forms, organized *indígenas* like them spoke out in the community by sponsoring *reina* candidates. *Reina* contestants traditionally were drawn from relatively well-to-do indigenous families, often sponsored by area businesses or the mayor's office. A growing politicization of activists and of the contests, while it did not preclude candidates from wealthier families, opened the field to young women of more varied economic and political backgrounds. Activists involved in community development work, cooperatives, literacy and *concientización*, for example, chose *reina* candidates whose families – or who themselves – were politically involved, drawing on women who were promising students and young leaders. Consequently, a new type of *discurso* took its place alongside more traditional speeches: the words of a growing number of contestants were poetic as tradition dictated, but politically charged as well.

Discursos were typically prepared in consultation with a *reina* candidate's sponsors and tended to reflect sponsors' aims and politics. This subject, not surprisingly, is controversial, as critics tend to dismiss strongly-worded speeches as the work of others, memorized or parroted by *reina* candidates. Many were, in fact, given a script, and virtually all pageant participants I spoke with mentioned discussing speech themes with their committees. Yet this is not to say that they or their speeches were unimportant. With few exceptions, the women interviewed insisted that they themselves took responsibility for and gave voice to the words on paper. A few claimed to have discarded

a script altogether, drawing on their own experiences and ideas as they addressed their *pueblos*.¹⁸

Discursos in the 1970s generally incorporated themes of a glorious Maya past, and focused increasingly on present-day pan-Indian racial identity as well, and on the blood that connected one to the other. But complicating a blood-based discourse on race, the *discursos* of some candidates began to call for economic justice and land. In some cases, young women demanded an end to exploitation of Indians *by Indians*, and as repression mounted, an end to government violence against indigenous communities.

A student at the Instituto Indígena Nuestra Señora del Socorro and *reina indígena* of Quetzaltenango in 1973, María Elvira Quijivix, provides an early example. In her farewell speech in 1974, she repeatedly made use of the concept of a contemporary Maya identity, but intertwined references to blood lineage with calls for economic justice. From the podium of the municipal theater, she implored her “Maya brothers” to take pride in *la raza*, to demand justice, and in an explicit reference to class conflict in and beyond indigenous communities, to end economic exploitation of the campesino, whether by “foreigners” (meaning non-Indians) or other *indígenas*:

I, a genuine representative of the Mayas, feel proud to be a descendant of the greatest civilization of the Americas, the race of great wisdom, the race that will never die, a race that ... clamors for justice, an oppressed and bitter race
My race, become once again free and powerful! My

¹⁸ The *reina indígena* from Santiago Atitlán was one of the exceptions, for example, a queen who deferred most of my questions in 2002 to the young men who had sponsored her 1978 candidacy. She had been only fifteen years old when she participated in the Panzós protest. Interview with former indigenous community queen, March 13, 2002, Santiago Atitlán.

brother ..., do not hide your Maya lineage with a mask of indifference and acculturation ... because you are Maya no matter where you might go. [Ancestors] illuminate our path and our understanding, [so we may fight for] the well-being of our campesino brothers who are vilely exploited, not only by foreigners but also by our own race¹⁹

The *discurso* provides evidence of a growing radicalization among some young activist *indígenas*, male and female. Other *reinas* of the era I spoke with delivered speeches with a similar oppositional discourse, using their time on stage to condemn social and economic injustices against the *pueblo indígena*: exclusion, discrimination, disregard for the rights to lands and life. A K'iche' *reina* and land rights organizer from San Sebastian, Retalhuleu, Magdalena Tumin Palaj, demanded in a 1977 *discurso* that *indígenas* recognize their own worth.²⁰ According to one organizer who remembered her well, she presented herself as a simple woman, a market seller, but one who could recognize injustice and discrimination:

She [Tumin Palaj] said, '*this* is what happens in the market, *this* is what happens on the buses.... If I can understand and see [discrimination], why can't you? We have to understand that we aren't less than others. We are the ones

¹⁹ The 1973 *reina indígena* of Quetzaltenango, María Elvira Quijivix, in her farewell *discurso*, September 7, 1974, delivered in the municipal theater of Quetzaltenango. Her speech was transcribed and included as part of materials for a priests' seminar, "Curso de antropología y teología para la actividad misionera en Guatemala," November 18 through December 13, 1974, at the Instituto Indígena Santiago in the capital. Interview with María Elvira Quijivix, October 7, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

²⁰ Interview with *reina indígena* of San Sebastián, Magdalena Tumin Palaj, August 25, 2002, Guatemala City.

who produce everything in the market. If we stopped producing, what would they eat?’²¹

The young *reina* explicitly called for pan-Indian unity and for *indígenas* to rise up together in common political cause: “Our *pueblo* suffers so much exploitation, ... so much violence ...,” she told a reporter. “My *pueblo* will only move forward by unifying, because in unity is strength.” Like many other *reinas* of the 1970s would do, Tumin Palaj drew on the sacred K’iche’ account of origin and conquest, the *Popul Vuh*: “I exhort ... the *pueblo indígena* ... of Guatemala,” she said, “to take up the counsel of our ancestors, ‘*que no quede uno, que no queden dos, que todos se levanten.*’ [may not one, nor two be left behind, may all rise up together.]”²²

Some queens went even further in their *discursos*, urging their listeners not only to rise up, but to join a class struggle that united them in common effort with poor ladinos. Similar to the speech by María Elvira Quijivix four years earlier that had condemned exploitation of *indígenas* by *ladinos*, a contestant in the 1978 Quetzaltenango pageant, sponsored by the activist group Acción Juvenil, explicitly embraced class struggle in her *discurso*, and condemned a racial politics that divided indigenous and ladino campesinos.²³ In the context of the leftist armed insurgency, her *discurso* was nothing short of a call to arms.

²¹ Interview with organizer, August 22, 2002, San Cristóbal, Totonicapán.

²² *La Nación/Sur*, October 14, 1977, p. 6. Variations of the quotation from the *Popul Vuh*, the sacred K’iche’ account of origin and conquest, appear in many *reinas’ discursos*, most likely due to the influence of K’iche’ linguist Adrián Inéz Chávez. See below.

²³ See “Reina Indígena de Quetzaltenango electa el 12 de agosto,” *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, año 1, n. 11 (August 1978), 5.

Regional Organizing and the *Reina Indígena* Pageant

As *discursos* and interviews made clear, local activists – *reinas* and their supporters – were engaged in struggles within and outside their communities; in this context, local contests for *reina indígena* became more than just community events: they provided opportunities for activists from different areas to meet with each other, hold discussions, and organize. Queens activism expanded significantly in the mid-1970s when indigenous university students began to plan regional meetings and discussions with community groups and their *reinas* during local pageants. With support from the Catholic church, they offered workshops for queens about culture, history, and a variety of topics, inviting teachers and other professionals to take part. An especially important figure in this was Adrián Inéz Chávez, an indigenous linguist and translator of the ancient K'iche' *Popul Vuh*. Chávez traveled to communities all over the highlands, organizers recounted, to talk to *reinas* and their supporters about culture and history and especially to introduce them to the *Popul Vuh*, which helps explain the document's appearance in many *discursos*. A queen from Soloma, Huehuetenango described Chávez as playing a vital role for her and her friends, sharing a version of Guatemalan history that included the experiences of *indígenas*, absent from school textbooks. She participated in discussions with other queens and organizers from many communities, she said, sharing experiences, listening to marimba, and talking about themes ranging from cultural identity to political change. “Organizing at that time was ... limited,” she recalled, “but each brought the knowledge and objectives of his/her *pueblo*. [The *reina* coronations] were a moment for the *pueblo indígena* to discuss [and] claim our rights.”²⁴

²⁴ Interview with *reina indígena* Juanita González, September 10, 2002, Soloma, Huehuetenango.

As it reached municipios all over the highlands, very diverse individuals and groups became part of *reinas* organizing, *culturalistas* as well as young people involved in literacy work and campesino organizing. For some, the work with *reinas* was fundamentally about cultural revindication and education itself as a means to achieve social change. But for others it was explicitly about political activism: to raise queens' awareness of social injustices and shape the content of their messages.

As activism grew and the guerrilla gained support in the highlands, state repression increased markedly after the middle of the 1970s. In this context, many forms of expression and organizing were sharply curtailed. As a result, the space represented by the local *reina* pageants became more and more important, one of the last remaining public arenas for community *concientización*. As Ricardo Cajas explains, “the *reina indígena* [pageants] were a space we appropriated for political action. We were using the young women, we have to admit that. But there were no alternatives left.”²⁵

Symbolic young *reinas* in this way became positioned to act as activists' spokeswomen. The extent to which they were “used” or manipulated in this capacity is an open question. The women I interviewed usually described themselves as enthusiastic, if very young, participants in these efforts and seemed proud of their roles in “raising consciousness.” The women I interviewed are not representative of all queen candidates and were the most politicized of their class since they took part in a public protest. Most young queens, on the contrary, did not become protestors. But the ones who did are important despite their relatively small numbers. They were often engaged in and beyond their municipios, active in community development organizations, youth

²⁵ Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, February 21, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

groups, worked as literacy promoters through the Catholic church, and in at least one case, actively supported the armed revolutionary movement. They were savvy, articulate, and persuasive. Today, as we consider their stories, they teach us about highland mobilization and about demands made in the name of the *pueblo indígena*. As they spoke to the crowds and newspaper readers in 1978, they pushed the boundaries of what the symbol “*reina indígena*” stood for, what it conveyed to the community, and eventually, to the state.

Denouncing Paternalism and Massacre: *Indígenas* Confront the State

Many issues motivated indigenous activism in the 1970s, but a major focus of resentment was the government’s National Folklore Festival, and the national indigenous queen pageant – the Rabín Ahau – at its center. While activists generally supported their own local *reina indígena* pageants, their resentment of the state-sponsored Rabín Ahau event was intense. The national pageants reveal a heated dialogue between indigenous activists and the state over issues of Indian identity, authenticity, nationalist rhetoric, and ultimately, violence.

The annual National Folklore Festival was created in 1969 by Marco Aurelio Alonzo, a *ladino* teacher and “promoter” of indigenous folklore. He envisioned the festival not merely as a means to exhibit indigenous dances, artisan crafts and *traje*, but to “rescue” the “indigenous cultural patrimony” from its inevitable state of decline and corruption, and “keep watch over [*velar*] its authenticity.”²⁶ In 1972 other local *folkloristas* took control of the festival, including the Cobanera wife of soon-to-be

²⁶ “Los objetivos del Festival Folklórico,” unpublished, from Marco Aurelio Alonzo. Interview with Marco Aurelio Alonzo, January 25, 2002, Cobán.

president General Kjell Laugerud García. Along with the change in organizers came a new event, the first of its kind in Guatemala: a contest to name a national Maya queen.

The National Folklore Festival was a Cobán-area inspiration and has retained an aura of the region's peculiar form of *indigenismo*.²⁷ Yet the Festival fit perfectly into the national government's symbolic efforts to forge a nation of the fragments within Guatemala's borders, a modern nation of *guatemaltecos*, but one with a magnificent Maya heritage shared by all. The election of a national indigenous queen was an opportunity to personify, for Guatemalans and before the admiring eyes of the world, the authenticity and beauty of the Maya past.

Like the local-level contests in place for decades, the Rabín Ahau since its beginning was – and remains – racially segregated from the national (ladina) Miss Guatemala pageant. The national Rabín Ahau symbolizes not national beauty, but Indianness. One Folklore Festival organizer explained in 1974 that the Rabín Ahau was not just another beauty contest, “... not the same as the election of a ladina queen, chosen for her physical beauty. The Rabín Ahau,” he insisted, “is chosen for the way she expresses her identity, manifested by ... her maternal language; ... the purity of her *traje* ...; and her ... dance (*son*).”²⁸ (Emphasis in original.) The Maya queen did not threaten or

²⁷ Alta Verapaz was brought into the nation and world markets by German-born coffee producers who flocked to the area in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and became its largest landowners. Cobaneros maintain that relations between *indígenas* and ladinos in the land of “true peace” are more harmonious than elsewhere in Guatemala.

²⁸ Padre Esteban Haeserijn, letter, no addressee, November 23, 1974. Haeserijn was a Belgian priest in Alta Verapaz and a scholar of the Q'eqchi' language. He was involved in the early years of the Folklore Festival and Rabín Ahau, which he saw as an opportunity for young indigenous women to speak for their communities. The Rabín Ahau, he wrote in the letter referred to above, was “not an end in itself, ... but a means to something ... noble, communication of a message of social justice and mutual respect.” As it turned out, queens were explicitly forbidden by festival organizers to deliver any

even raise questions about national standards of beauty. She was, quite the contrary, an ideal symbol of Indian essence, a symbol, as Carlota McAllister has argued, understood as separate from and subordinate to national, ladina beauty.²⁹

State officials quickly embraced the Folklore Festival and its Rabín Ahau contest. Local-level *reinas indígenas* were summoned to the national festival and Rabín Ahau competition from municipios all over the highlands, sometimes forced to attend by the local ladino mayor and transported to Cobán in military buses. The army press office printed Folklore Festival brochures, one of which proclaimed that the festival represented the “indigenous spirit” of Guatemala, and would “conserve in their authenticity the genuine traditions of the *pueblos*, to bring to life an ancestral pride that with its art embellishes our communities, ... admired by all the world.”³⁰ Presidents attended the pageants, gave speeches, and posed for the cameras with queens. During his presidency General Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982), a Cobán-area landowner, attended and reportedly even paid for the festival himself.³¹

such messages and were permitted to speak only of “culture” in their *discursos*. Many contestants have flagrantly violated such rules governing their speeches. One woman I spoke with who participated in the national contest in 1974, described then-president General Kjell Laugerud García being visibly shaken by her speech, in which she condemned discrimination, racism, and mass poverty. The president, though apparently not scheduled to do so, took the stage afterward to declare that such injustices would come to an end during his presidency. He was still in office when the Panzós massacre took place several years later. Interview with María Elvira Quijivix, October 7, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

²⁹ McAllister, “Authenticity,” p. 106.

³⁰ From *Prospecto del Festival* of 1976, printed by the Army Editorial, July 1976, reproduced in the indigenous publication *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, May 1978, p. 4.

³¹ For more see McAllister, “This Pageant Which is Not Won,” pp. 79-80.

Upon its creation in 1972, indigenous activists immediately condemned the contest for national indigenous queen. State and local officials expected local *reinas indígenas* to take part in the Rabín Ahau pageant, but activists tried to prevent them from going, recounting rumors about mistreatment of local *reinas* in Cobán, of inadequate food and housing, of disrespect and disregard for the women inside the celebrated *traje*, and especially, condemning the event as yet another example of state manipulation of the *indígena* for its own gain. Already in 1974, only the third year of the Rabín Ahau, young activists in the Santa Cruz Asociación Pro-Cultura Maya-Quiché urged their local *reina* not to attend the contest, and opposition increased markedly over the next several years.³²

In May 1978, shortly before the Panzós massacre, a group of *indígenas* anonymously published an article in *Ixim*, taking aim at the National Folklore Festival.³³ The authors' critique in "Requiem for the Homages to the Maya Race," was fierce, and echoes of it resounded in the 1978 queens' *denuncia* in the press. Blasting the Folklore Festival as a modern vestige of colonialism and exploitation, the authors charged that under the pretext of maintaining cultural "authenticity," the state sought to obstruct social change, to immobilize the life of the *pueblo indígena* at a level and a stage of history convenient for ladino domination. The festival, the authors asserted, required *indígenas* to compete with each other to be the most culturally "authentic," and in the process, indices of exploitation became cultural elements to take pride in – bare feet, heavy loads,

³² Interview with 1974 *reina indígena* of Santa Cruz, Catarina León Medrano, April 18, 2002, Santa Cruz del Quiché.

³³ "El Colonialismo Cultural: Requiem por los homenajes a La Raza Maya," *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, año 1, n. 8 (May 1978), 4, 5, and 8. The piece was later republished in Bonfil Batalla, ed., *Utopía y revolución*, 153-64. There are striking similarities between the authors' 1978 critique and that advanced much earlier by K'iche' elites in efforts to contest class definitions of Indianness. See Grandin, *Blood of Guatemala*, chaps. 6 and 7.

the alcohol abused by the campesino worker. “Poverty is art,” they wrote, “a constitutive part of the authentic indigenous culture....” The ladino contemplates the beauty of indigenous poverty, they asserted, becoming a “connoisseur” of the misery of the Indian. With biting irony that highlighted the gulf that separated indigenous queens from their ladina counterparts, they wrote, “*Viva la belleza de la pobreza!*”, long live the beauty of poverty.

The authors observed the many sharp contradictions between that which was celebrated as “folklore” and repressed in real life. While Rabín Ahau contestants were praised and judged for their maternal language fluency, they pointed out, *indígenas* were kept from using maternal languages in schools, in the workplace, even in church. While the most authentic clothes were prized in the contest, indigenous women were routinely kept from wearing *traje* in state and private institutions and the workplace. And who were ladinos, the authors demanded, to judge and value indigenous culture? They suggested in a footnote that perhaps *indígenas* should begin to hold events to elect a “pretty ladina,” or offer homages to the ladino race. Or why not establish a “Ladino Institute” to “teach [ladinos] not to live at the expense of *indígenas*”?, a reference to the Instituto Indígena Nacional, established in 1945 and dedicated to (ladino) observation and documentation of indigenous life.

The piece is extraordinary for the boldness of its tone and for the ideas it expressed, several of which remain key components in the discourse of the pan-Maya movement today: continuing colonialism, rights to the use of indigenous languages and dress, the absence of any true ladino identity and culture, and most forcefully, the conception of a modern “Maya” race in Guatemala which explicitly rejected an identity

circumscribed by the past. In the passage which gives the piece its name, the authors wrote,

... may the HOMAGES TO THE MAYA RACE rest in peace, now that the Mayas of today need no type of homage ... [and] have no confidence ... in false actions in favor of the *indígena* [which] ... never ... give real benefit to the *pueblo indígena* (Emphasis in original.)³⁴

Already in May 1978, the authors of this piece and the activists around them were determined to put a stop to the National Folklore Festival. The subsequent massacre in nearby Panzós, coming just days after publication of the article, proved their fundamental point with shocking and brutal clarity: while the government “celebrated” and appropriated the Maya past, they murdered Mayas in the present.

In the wake of the Panzós tragedy, these same activists organizing *reinas*, writing for *Ixim*, and participating in broader, nationwide discussions through the Coordinadora Indígena Nacional, devised a plan involving the symbolic *reinas indígenas*: to sponsor a protest and boycott of the upcoming national Folklore Festival by local indigenous

³⁴ “El Colonialismo Cultural,” p. 8. Many of the ideas central to this piece had been presented five years earlier in the article by Antonio Pop Caal discussed in chapter four, “Replica del indio a una disertación ladina,” published in the Guatemalan journal *La Semana*, December 12, 1972. Pop Caal was an integral part of early pan-Indian organizing in Guatemala, was involved in organizing *reinas*, and was vehemently opposed to the Folklore Festival. The similarities between his 1972 article and “Requiem” are many: while Pop Caal’s article did not address “folklore” per se, he took issue with ladinos claiming to be authorities on all things indigenous. He discussed a range of fundamental problems facing the *indígena*: on-going colonialism, internally and externally; agricultural exploitation and land loss; political domination; and denial of the right to use of native languages. As we see in “Requiem,” Pop Caal in 1972 noted the “anxiety” of ladinos over their own ambiguous identity. When I spoke to Antonio Pop Caal, he did not deny a role in writing the anonymous “Requiem,” but he, like all of the other possible authors I asked, said it was a joint endeavor and the authors will remain anonymous. Interview with Antonio Pop Caal, January 23, 2002, Cobán.

queens, and to convince the 1977 national Rabín Ahau not to return with the ceremonial crown to Cobán. They turned to the network of queens and their supporters that had developed over the previous several years, and convinced a significant number to speak out against the Panzós massacre and to denounce the festival. *Reinas* from *pueblos* all over the highlands took to stages in their own communities to demand justice, and joined together for a symbolic national-level *denuncia*.

Condemning Massacre on the Local Stage

In Carchá, Alta Verapaz, the contest for local reina indígena took place just days after the Panzós massacre, and one local woman used her time on stage to condemn the killings.³⁵ Fidelina Tux Chub, sponsored by a local development committee, entered the stage walking slowly through the crowd, refusing to dance the son as required. When it was her turn to speak, she drew direct parallels between the lives and realities of those living – and dying – in Panzós, and in her community. Her discurso is preserved in a church publication, which now hangs on the wall of her living room:

Señoras y Señores, brothers, ... I am here with sadness I did not enter dancing because our *pueblo* is living a tragedy. Why am I sad? You know why, because of what our brothers of Panzós just experienced; you know that they were killed, and we don't know why. It could be because they are *indígenas*, or it could be because they are poor....

³⁵ Interview with 1978 *reina indígena* of Carchá, Fidelina Tux Chub, July 29, 2002, Carchá, Alta Verapaz.

I could not dance ... knowing that my brothers and sisters are crying for their loved ones.... I feel ... what [they] are experiencing. They have not a piece of earth to live on and for this they were demanding their rights to what truly belongs to them, their lands, and for this they have been killed. You have heard the news on all the radios, ... read it in all the papers, we all know it.... Tomorrow it could be us, *verdad?*³⁶

Her speech invoked issues of indigenous identity, land rights, poverty, lack of freedom of expression, abuse of power and violence. Intertwining questions of race and class, Tux Chub asked why the campesinos were killed – was it race or class? She then answered the question herself: it was both. They were killed because they were Indians pressing claims for land.

At the suggestion of a local priest, she asked for a minute of silence in honor of the dead, a minute which was observed in the plaza and on the radio broadcasting the event. She ended her speech, like other queens, with images from the *Popul Vuh*, calling for all to rise up, to walk forward together, leaving no one behind. “That is how we can lift up our pueblo,” she added, “... no longer will the landowners humiliate us....”³⁷ When she finished she was promptly disqualified by the ladino jury of the contest, reportedly for her refusal to dance; she and her committee believed her message was also

³⁶ *Boletín Misionero: Noticiero Trimestral de la Actividad Misionera de la Iglesia en La Verapaz*, no. 25 (October 1978): 4.

³⁷ When asked where she had learned the phrase from the *Popul Vuh*, Tux Chub told me that she had re-read the speech before I arrived for the interview and had wondered the same thing. She did not recall meeting Adrián Inéz Chávez, but said she had likely heard the slogan from her local priest. Interview with Fidelina Tux Chub, July 29, 2002, Carchá, Alta Verapaz.

unwelcome. The press seemed to agree, publishing an article about the contest with the headline, “*Reina* Candidate Disqualified for Requesting a Minute of Silence for the Victims of Panzós.”³⁸ The young woman went into hiding for a few days, she told me, but then returned home, saying, “if they come, they come.” They did not come.

In another nearby community, San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz, a *reina* candidate, Amalia Coy Pop, was sponsored by cooperative leaders, men who were also behind efforts that year to transform the local fair and *reina* contest into “indigenous” events.³⁹ Young people from many communities attended, as did Adrián Chávez, the K’iche’ linguist and teacher from Quetzaltenango. People still remember the evening vividly – the decorations, the traditional feast, marimbas, and young women and men from all over the *altiplano* dressed in vibrant *traje*.

The contest was held six weeks after the Panzós massacre, and the violence was on the minds of the cooperativists and their young candidate. Coy Pop described the contest to me with a mixture of pride and anger. The *discursos* of the other contestants were pretty, she said, poetic. They talked about the sky and flowers and butterflies. “Then I came, brave me! And my message was very different.” First she gave her speech in Poqomchi’, then in Spanish, protesting a multitude of ills facing her community: discrimination, the need for consciousness and valuing of indigenous identity and customs, economic exploitation, the lack of freedom of expression, and the massacre in Panzós: “... our brothers [in Panzós] are suffering too for speaking out,” she

³⁸ See *Prensa Libre*, June 10, 1978, p. 29.

³⁹ The following account comes from interviews with the 1978 *reina indígena* of San Cristóbal, Amalia Coy Pop, San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz, January 24 and March 17, 2002; the 1977 *reina indígena*, Estela Morán, San Cristóbal, March 18, 2002; and others in the community. My thanks to Victoria Sanford for first telling me of this case.

remembers saying to the crowd. “We cannot be afraid ..., and no one can silence us, no one can take away who we are....”⁴⁰

The crowd reacted enthusiastically, she remembered, and in this case the jury – which took into account the informal vote of spectators – declared that she had won. They presented her with ceremonial *traje* and took photos; there was marimba and visiting with guests. Finally she went home after midnight.

The young woman was *reina* for only two hours. Community residents, remembered as mostly ladinos, but some *indígenas* as well, gathered in the plaza after the pageant, accusing the outspoken queen of being a member of the insurgency. Threats were made against her life, and members of her committee arrived at her house in the middle of the night to take her to safety. Officials from the military base in Cobán arrived in San Cristóbal that night demanding to speak with her, but finally agreed to discuss the “content and meaning” of her *discurso* with the cooperative leaders. The festival committee wasted no time in appeasing the protesters and the military, pressing the previous year’s queen into service for a second time, against her wishes because she had plans to marry.⁴¹ In a long line of *reinas’* photos in the *Casa Cultural* in San Cristóbal, Amalia Coy Pop is absent; under her predecessor’s picture are two printed cards: “1977” and “1978.”

Despite threats, the young woman was unharmed. She returned to the secondary school she was attending in a community of Sololá, on a government scholarship. There she was urged by her teacher, an indigenous woman named Otilia Lux (recently

⁴⁰ Interview with Amalia Coy Pop, January 24, 2002, San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz.

⁴¹ Interview with Estela Morán, San Cristóbal, March 18, 2002.

Guatemalan Minister of Culture), to go to the press with her story. She did, and *El Gráfico* printed an article about the events in San Cristóbal, reporting that ladinos in the community had pressed for the removal of her crown.⁴² It is unclear whether Pop Coy had not acknowledged indigenous opposition to her election, or whether the paper found a “ladinos versus *indígenas*” story to be more compelling to readers. This version of events was immediately contested in another national daily by an association of women from Alta Verapaz, many of them *ladinas* living in the capital, who asserted that *indígenas* and ladinos *together* had opposed the queen, and that the local festival committee had rescinded her election “for the dignity of the [indigenous] race.”⁴³ Their explicit reference to the recent massacre in Panzós reveals the tremendous racial and political tensions that underlay events in San Cristóbal:

Considering the events of Panzós ... it was incorrect to blame ladinos, or the army, or the government [for what happened in San Cristóbal] Only disastrous events occur when there are resentful persons counseling the *indígena* to act outside the law.... Not wanting to convert our *pueblo* into a bloodbath [*campo de sangre*], we consider it prudent ... to assign responsibility to those who try to destroy the peace and order in San Cristóbal.⁴⁴

Insisting that outside instigators must be behind any indigenous action “outside the law” (without specifying what that action might have been – Coy Pop’s *discurso*?), the *Alta*

⁴² “Privan de su corona a reina indígena de San Cristóbal AV,” *El Gráfico*, July 25, 1978, p. 4.

⁴³ “Damas de San Cristóbal V., explican lo que ocurrió con la reina indígena,” *Prensa Libre*, July 29, 1978, p. 12.

⁴⁴ “Damas de San Cristóbal,” *Prensa Libre*, July 29, 1978, p. 12.

Verapaz women accused these same unnamed people of wrongly converting “a cultural and social act [the indigenous queen contest] into a political meeting,” in a community known for its “cordial and fraternal” relations between *indígenas* and ladinos. And in a scarcely veiled threat against the young woman and her school, they added:

Hopefully ... [she] will realize that the studies ... she is pursuing in the school of Santa Lucía Uatlán in Sololá as a student with a government fellowship, [are] not a weapon to bring *indígenas* against ladinos, ... unless that is the orientation she is receiving there, which would be distressing for the progress of education in Guatemala and for the prestige of said institution.⁴⁵

The newspaper refused to print a rebuttal from the de-crowned *reina*.

Repression and bloodshed in San Cristóbal became severe in the next few years, and two of her sponsors were later among the victims of state violence, likely targeted for their work organizing campesinos. Vitalino Cael was forced to move his family from San Cristóbal, then was dragged from his new home and disappeared by the army in 1982,⁴⁶ Ricardo Policarpio Caal was also disappeared in the early 1980s. Amalia Coy Pop continued to speak at contests for *reina indígena* in other communities and took part in the July 1978 protest, but feared returning to San Cristóbal and lived in another area of the country until 1998.

⁴⁵ “Damas de San Cristóbal,” *Prensa Libre*, July 29, 1978, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Tragic evidence of the ties of friendship and organizing that bound indigenous activists from all over Guatemala is the fact that Cael’s abduction in 1982 was witnessed by a former *reina* from Soloma, Huehuetenango, a community in the remote northwestern part of the country, as she was visiting his family in the department of Totonicapán, where they had relocated. Interview with *reina indígena*, September 10, 2002, Soloma, Huehuetenango.

National-Level Protest and the Reinas' Boycott

The 1978 Panzós massacre was met with massive public outcry. Several indigenous organizations explicitly referred to the inappropriateness of state-sponsored “folklore” in light of the killings, among them groups in the Verapaces region (home both to Panzós and the Festival), and in Comalapa, Chimaltenango. Representatives from indigenous communities in Alta and Baja Verapaz notified the news agency Inforpress that they would not send their local *reinas indígenas* to participate in the Cobán festival because “they did not want [them] to serve as entertainment for those who killed” campesinos in Panzós.⁴⁷ In the indigenous publication *Cha'b'l Tinamit*, an article signed simply “Kekchíes” held that if the Folklore Festival took place, the Rabín Ahau should bind her skirt with a black belt of mourning for the death of her brothers, “her crown and staff should be soiled with Kekchí blood, her eyes should shed ... tears like the waters of the Polochic, darkened with blood.”⁴⁸ The Polochic river runs through Panzós and after the massacre frequently bore the bodies of the dead.

Students and activists in Comalapa requested the Festival’s suspension in a message to President Lucas García, stating, “the Association of Indigenous Students and Professionals of Comalapa ... respectfully requests that in the interests of national dignity, the Folklore Festival of Cobán be suspended due to the bloody tragedy of Panzós which

⁴⁷ See *Inforpress*, no. 301, July 20, 1978.

⁴⁸ *Cha'b'l Tinamit*, año 2, n. 23 (June 1978), p. 6.

our country is mourning.”⁴⁹ The letter to Lucas García was signed by the group’s president, Antonio Mux Cúmez, who was disappeared by the army in the early 1980s.⁵⁰

Activists organizing the *reinas indígenas*’ protest, meanwhile, met with the Quetzaltenango *reina indígena* to share their plan to stage a boycott of the National Folklore Festival, and to ask for her help. It was vital that the Quetzaltenango queen participate in the protest, as she was something of a celebrity at the Folklore Festival due to the importance of Quetzaltenango as Guatemala’s second largest city and unofficial indigenous capital of the country. She readily accepted. As she told the press at the time,

Due to ... the massacre in Panzós, I have become part of the general protest [against] ... this bloody act.... I will not participate in the festival in Cobán.... [It] would not be acceptable, while our brothers in Panzós suffer the irreparable loss of their loved ones, ... that we their blood brothers would be traitors participating in a fiesta like that....⁵¹

Another crucial participant was the 1977 Rabín Ahau, a young woman from nearby San Francisco El Alto, Totonicapán. To the delight of organizers, the national *reina indígena* agreed to participate in the boycott, to join protesters rather than travel to Cobán to coronate her successor. She took an active role in the group, attending local pageants to protest the Panzós killings. The Rabín Ahau crown, in her possession, the group

⁴⁹ The letter addressed to Lucas García was published in *El Gráfico*, July 25, 1978, p. 4; and *Prensa Libre*, July 26, 1978, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Interview with local activist, November 1, 2002, Comalapa, Chimaltenango.

⁵¹ “Solidaria protesta por lo de Panzós; La reina indígena de Xelajú no irá a Cobán,” *La Nación/Quetzaltenango*, July 29, 1978, p. 8. Interview with 1978 *reina indígena* of Quetzaltenango, Teresa Leiva Yax, February 14, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

considered the key to the protest. They contemplated using it in their own counter-festival with a coronation in Quetzaltenango, or presenting it with their declaration to the press in Guatemala City; it would *not* be used to crown another Rabín Ahau.

Reinas, supporters, and organizers met in San Cristóbal, Totonicapán for a boycott planning event that participants remember involving hundreds of young people, as usual held under the auspices of the community's *reina indígena* pageant. Many reunited in Quetzaltenango a week later. As the boycott date neared, however, the group faced a huge disappointment: the 1977 Rabín Ahau had abandoned them, was in the final moment unwilling or unable to boycott the Folklore Festival. Rumors circulated that she had been threatened or paid off by army officials with links to the festival. According to one organizer, it was neither of these, exactly, but they were not far from the truth. She had, it was believed, been pressured to attend by two young women, both of whom were relatively wealthy *indígenas* whose families were linked to the government and army, a development that underscores the political and class tensions that were growing within an increasingly politicized indigenous movement.⁵² I talked with both of these women, and one admitted visiting and talking with the *reina* about her participation, and perhaps accompanying her to Cobán.⁵³

After discussing their options long into the night, the protestors emerged determined to go through with the boycott even without the Rabín Ahau and her crown.

The most “valiant” of the group, as one organizer put it, assembled for the group photo

⁵² Again, research into these conservative *indígenas* and their role in politics of the 1970s is needed.

⁵³ Interviews with María Elisa López, November 6, 2002, Quetzaltenango, and Norma Quixtán, November 14, 2002, Quetzaltenango. Interview with 1977 Rabín Ahau Yolanda Pastor Gómez, July 12, 2002, San Francisco El Alto, Totonicapán.

that would cover the front page of *El Gráfico*: a total of twenty-two were photographed, eight *reinas* in front, friends and organizers surrounding them.

A few hours after midnight approximately thirty-five of them boarded a bus and made their way to the capital, about six hours away, to deliver their manifesto to the press. They arrived at the offices of *El Gráfico*, then Guatemala's largest circulation daily paper and one sympathetic to the popular struggle, and presented reporters with the photo and the declaration of protest they had prepared condemning the Panzós massacre.

"The *reinas indígenas* believe," the press article stated, "that considering the events of Panzós, in which true/genuine [*verdaderos*] Guatemalan Indians lost their lives, this Festival should be suspended" The queens declared, the piece continued,

1. That all the [state] acts, festivals, monuments, commemorations in supposed homage to the Indian of Guatemala, are unjustified because in daily reality the right to life is not respected, [nor] the right to our ancestral lands, [nor the right] to our own cultural practices without paternalism of any kind.
2. That the recent massacre of our Indian brothers of Panzós ... [represents] the continuation of centuries of negation, exploitation and extermination initiated by the ... Spanish invaders.
3. That the Folklore Festival of Cobán is an example of [an] ... oppressor *indigenismo* that ... makes the *reinas indígenas* into simple objects for tourists to look at, without respect to our authentic human or historic values.
4. That while the wound of Panzós still bleeds, the failure of the organizing committee of this "show" ... to suspend it

... demonstrates ... the degree of disrespect [they have] for the lives of us, the Indians [*los indios*]⁵⁴

By using the very same images as the state – the revered indigenous queens – the activists contested the meaning of Maya authenticity. In the eyes of the state, the dead in Panzós, shot while demonstrating for land, were *not*, as the queens claimed, “genuine Indians;” they were *engañados*, the duped, unwitting tools of others, in this case, purportedly leftist ladino organizers and insurgents. Like the women of Alta Verapaz decrying the politicization of the San Cristóbal pageant, the mayor of Panzós stated that the campesinos in his community were incited by “agitators,” deceiving them with strange ideas about land rights. President General Kjell Laugerud García expressed a similar sentiment: “... I know the campesino as peaceful, honest and hardworking, but he has been incited, ... indoctrinated....”⁵⁵ These explanations reflect longheld stereotypes of the Indian as inherently docile, but now infused with a belief that he was able to be politicized, easily tricked into becoming the instrument of others, and thus not “genuine.” In statements to the press, the victims were not described by these officials as Q’eqchi’s, or even Indians.

⁵⁴ *El Gráfico*, July 30, 1978, pp. 1 and 2.

⁵⁵ For Mayor Overdick, see “Subversores disfrazados lanzaron a los campesinos a chocar con los soldados,” *Diario de Centro América*, June 2, 1978, pp. 5 and 6. For General Laugerud, see “Lo sucedido en Panzós es el resultado de un plan general de subversión,” Kjell,” *La Nación*, June 1, 1978, p. 4; and “Panzós: Conmonción sigue; Presidente señala a los culpables de la Matanza,” *El Imparcial*, June 1, 1978. Laugerud, president from July 1974 through June 1978, explicitly placed the blame for the incident on the guerrilla Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP). In doing so, he was not denying that the army did the actual killing; on the contrary, his explanation was that because of suspected guerrilla presence in the region, the guerrilla was responsible for an army massacre of unarmed civilians. For a strikingly similar argument about the causation of violence, see Stoll, *Between Two Armies*.

The *reinas*' protest and boycott challenged the state's characterization of what had taken place in Panzós, and most notably, its identification of the massacre victims, by claiming to *share* the victims' identity. It was the local protesting *reinas indígenas*, they insisted, and not the silenced national Rabín Ahau, who represented true, *verdadero* Guatemalan Indians – Indians who lived and breathed and bled and died.

Ricardo Cajas, who helped organize the protest, describes looking back on the event many times since 1978. The violence and repression following the Panzós massacre, he noted, included the disappearance and killing of scores of people linked to *reinas* organizing, but the queens themselves were spared. "It was for the best," he concluded, "that we did not manage to 'kidnap' the crown." Given the military involvement in the Cobán festival, especially with the *indigenista* and Cobanero General Lucas García assuming the presidency in July 1978, the response against the *reinas* could have been deadly.⁵⁶

As it happened, *reina indígena* pageants and the *reina* candidates themselves were protected from the violence that swirled around them. The queens were symbols, not only for their communities and the activists who sought them as spokeswomen, but for the state. Nationalist efforts by the Guatemalan government had for decades sought to claim the authentic *pueblo Maya* as its own. As the representation of that authenticity, the *reina indígena* was celebrated by the state, placed on display, embraced. Attacking the indigenous queens was *almost* unthinkable.⁵⁷ They were likely protected as well by

⁵⁶ Interview with Ricardo Cajas Mejía, February 21, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

⁵⁷ The infamous case of Rogelia Cruz, however, the 1959 ladina "Miss Guatemala" who was brutally killed in 1968 for suspected guerrilla involvement, should remind us that such symbolic protection had its limits. As Miss Guatemala, Cruz was a symbol even more dearly revered than the *reina indígena*. She was, nonetheless, murdered by the state

the very sexism of the Guatemalan state and army, which did target their male activist counterparts, but not the queens. Perhaps as indigenous women, they were seen as incapable of representing any serious political threat.

That was, of course, not the case for the campesino victims of the Panzós massacre, women among them. Nor was it the case for the thousands of indigenous men, women, and children killed when the Guatemalan army destroyed hundreds of Indian communities in the “scorched earth” campaigns a few years later. In that context, the state’s thinking about race and gender was quite different: indigenous women were massacred along with whole communities to prevent the “seed” of insurgency from reproducing. But in the infamous words of General Efraín Ríos Montt, it was not scorched earth, it was “scorched Communists.” Not, we might add, authentic Mayas.

The point of the July 1978 protest was to draw attention to the enormous contradiction at work in the government’s appropriation of Maya culture as the patrimony of the nation while pursuing a racist, and soon genocidal, counterinsurgency strategy. In an extraordinarily courageous use of their own symbolic identity, the queens contested the characterization of massacred *indígenas* as *engañados*, duped, no longer genuine, by insisting that they and the dead in Panzós were one and the same, *los verdaderos*, the authentic.

The power of their symbolism was limited. The National Folklore Festival of 1978 was not cancelled. Its organizers were able to assert in the same newspaper that had

she represented for her ties to the 1960s revolutionary group Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes, or FAR. See coverage in the Guatemalan press, January 1968, and Mary Jane Treacy, “Killing the Queen: The Display and Disappearance of Rogelia Cruz,” *Latin American Literary Review* 29:57 (January – June 2001), 40-51.

published the protest *denuncia*, that the festival was not, in fact, linked to politics.⁵⁸

Without incident the 1977 Rabin Ahau, despite her brief role as a protestor, passed the crown to her successor. *Reinas* organizing continued for another year or so, but was shut down like most public activism as Guatemala became an outright terror state from 1981 to 1983. As part of counterinsurgency strategies to win the hearts and minds of the rural Indian population, ladino officials and military commissioners reasserted control over local *reina indígena* pageants in the 1980s.⁵⁹ The young people who had participated in the 1978 boycott went their separate ways, as Miguel Sisay put it: most returned to their communities and families, or to schools or work, or varied forms of struggle as the full

⁵⁸ “Sí se realizará el X Festival Folklórico éste fin de semana,” *El Gráfico*, July 28, 1978; and “Festival Folklórico de Cobán está desvinculado de la política,” *El Gráfico*, August 1, 1978.

⁵⁹ Anthropologist Robert Carmack describes Santa Cruz del Quiché in the early 1980s: “Military control of the municipal government and church has given the army a vise grip over the Santa Cruz town,” he wrote. “Every aspect of social life is permeated by the army. At a recent celebration of the ‘Day of the Natives,’ pretty Indian girls dressed in full native costume danced before the base commander and the bishop.” Civil patrols in indigenous communities were key to military control, and “Miss Patrol” contests were held as part of the phenomenon. Carmack describes a new commander in Santa Cruz, Colonel Roberto Mata, boasting “about ‘his’ Indian civil guards and how they had once been guerrilla supporters.” Carmack writes that in 1985, “at a ceremonial gathering of more than six thousands Indian guards ... Colonel Mata addressed both their fears and their hopes. He reminded them of the ‘bad things’ that had happened to them, from which they were ‘to learn lessons for the future.’ Then, as the Indian girls selected by the town as candidates for “Miss Patrol” looked on, the civil guards marched in procession swearing allegiance to the Guatemalan flag carried by the colonel himself.” Robert Carmack, “The Story of Santa Cruz Quiché,” in Robert Carmack, ed., *Harvest of Violence*, pp. 62 and 66. A January 1983 publication entitled “Guatemala” by a group who called itself “Movimiento Indio” offers commentary on military involvement in queen contests. A drawing in the bulletin depicted side-by-side an army officer, a rural massacre, and indigenous queen contestants. The officer, dressed in army fatigues, holds a grenade in one hand and crowns a *reina indígena* with the other. The drawing also depicts bitter anti-US and anti-Israeli sentiment; the massacre scene shows US and Israeli helicopters dropping bombs in the countryside, and the officer has a US emblem on his uniform. The words “travel tour” in English mark the onlookers at the *reina indígena* contest as American tourists. “Guatemala,” January 1983, p. 7.

force of the counterinsurgency onslaught hit the Indian highlands.⁶⁰ Several in the photo fled into political exile, one remains abroad, and another lives clandestinely in Guatemala. The young man with his fist in the air, Felipe Vásquez Tuíz of Santiago Atitlan, was disappeared in 1982, his body never found.

In 2002, Cobanera María Elena Winter Flor, a prominent figure in the history of Alta Verapaz *indigenismo* and the Folklore Festival, echoed the 1978 Festival organizers' assertion that the event was non-political. The protesters had been misguided, she told me, because the Panzós massacre and the state's Folklore Festival had nothing to do with each other.⁶¹ The young *indígenas* protesting in 1978, on the contrary, felt themselves and their *pueblos* violated by both.

The fact that *indígenas* from all over the highlands could assert a common bond not only among themselves, but also with the victims of massacre, was not a foregone conclusion. It was the result of several years of discussions and organizing, of evolving ideas and consciousness of identity, rights, and justice. It was a product of intensifying state violence.

The queens protest shows us that Panzós was a turning point for many of these activists. In the next chapter we will explore how relationships among activists changed with Panzós and how violence radicalized indigenous oppositional politics.

⁶⁰ Interview with Miguel Sisay, July 2, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁶¹ Interview with María Elena Winter Flor, December 8, 2002, Cobán. As mentioned in note 10 above, Winter Flor was the very European-looking *India Bonita* of Cobán in 1958. She recently married cobanero General Benedicto Lucas García, the Guatemalan Minister of Defense during one of the bloodiest periods of counterinsurgency. Lucas García himself personifies the style of *indigenismo* peculiar to Alta Verapaz, speaks Kekchí, and has been known to tell people he feels like an *indígena*, feels the indigenous spirit in his blood. For a journalist's interview with Lucas García about ethnic relations, see the documentary film *Memoria del viento*.

Chapter 6: After Panzós: Ethnicity, Revolution, and the Counterinsurgency State, 1978-1983

Guatemala: land of eternal spring, land of eternal Panzós.

– *Ixim*, June/July 1978

It is of vital importance for the nation to get Indians out of their communities, so they understand they are part of Guatemala.

– General Otzoy, in defense of army forced recruitment of indigenous young men¹

The violence of Panzós in May 1978 was followed less than two years later by a massacre at the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City which resulted in the burning alive of over two dozen CUC activists. State violence of such magnitude radicalized significant numbers of *indígenas*. *Clasistas* like Toj, Ceto, and Hernández Ixcoy of El Quiché had by this time already joined the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres, or EGP; activists in Santiago Atitlán like Miguel and Cruz Sisay and Felipe Vásquez Tuíz, among others, soon joined the Organización Revolucionario del Pueblos en Armas, or ORPA.² At the same time, many activists in race-based organizing moved closer to, supported, or joined the revolutionary movements. As we will see, however, they wanted to do so on their own terms.

This chapter examines the evolution of indigenous opposition movements in the aftermath of Panzós, focusing on relations between *clasistas* and *culturalistas* and evolving positions on ethnicity in the revolution. It addresses the positions of the EGP

¹ Quoted in Diane Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound*, p. 91.

² The EGP was most active in the departments of El Quiché, Alta Verapaz, Huehuetenango, Sololá, and Chimaltenango. ORPA was prominent around Quetzaltenango, Sololá, and San Marcos.

and ORPA, and a related phenomenon: the emergence of small indigenous-only opposition factions, and their sometimes fractious relations with the ladino-led *guerrilla*.

The developments discussed in this chapter unfolded amidst increasing levels of state terror under Presidents Romeo Lucas García and Efraín Ríos Montt. The state adopted psychological counterinsurgency tactics related to ethnic identity and employed them alongside “scorched earth” practices aimed at eliminating entire indigenous communities. Opposition movements grew in strength in 1980 and 1981; by 1983, however, the opposition, deeply divided, was largely undone as state violence reached the level of genocide.

Protesting State Terror: CUC and *Ixim* Respond to the Panzós Massacre

Many of the same activists involved in and leading earlier organizing efforts took on prominent roles in protesting the killings in Panzós on May 29, 1978. The responses of CUC and *Ixim* reveal important differences between these organizations and their strategies. They also provide some evidence of a shared understanding of the ethnic undertones of the violence directed at *indígenas*. As state targeting of the *pueblo indígena* became increasingly obvious, CUC infused its activism with ethnic symbolism. *Indígenas* in race-based organizing at the same time called for revolution. As always, though, differences in thinking and strategy, if at times blurred in practice, greatly complicated efforts by *clásistas* and *culturalistas* to stand together against the state.

The Comité de Unidad Campesina, or CUC, had emerged from clandestinity only weeks before the Panzós massacre, timing its public appearance with May 1 Labor Day marches in the capital. Following the May 29 massacre, CUC leaders and members again

took to the streets, joining unionists and students in massive protests on June 1 and 8 against state violence.³

In a paid announcement in the press, CUC condemned the killings and called for unity among “all the workers of the countryside” in defense against army repression.⁴ Their choice of language, again, illustrated their strong alliance with the ladino left. In keeping with the logic and rhetoric of class struggle, CUC referred to the Kekchís killed in Panzós as “campesinos,” “honest workers,” and “workers of the countryside” rather than *indígenas*, reflecting their intention to build a multi-ethnic campesino organization connected to the leftist popular movement.⁵ CUC did condemn “discrimination” in its *denuncia*, which was likely understood as ethnic, and asserted the massacre victims’ historic rights to lands that they had worked for over a century, but in print they did not explicitly refer to the dead in Panzós as indigenous. Though an organization led by *indígenas* and whose members were mostly indigenous, CUC seemed consciously to take care not to appear too “Indian.”

Yet from the beginning, CUC’s careful rhetoric was an imperfect reflection of what took place on the ground, and over time, even official CUC statements came to

³ CUC joined student and union organizers, among them the *Asociación de Estudiantes Universitarios* (AEU); the *Central Nacional de Trabajadores* (CNT); the *Comité Nacional de Unidad Sindical* (CNUS); and the *Federación Autónoma Sindical Guatemalteca* (FASGUA). For press reports, see “Manifestación de Repudio Hoy ...,” *El Imparcial*, June 1, 1978, pp. 1 and 4; “20,000 en la Marcha de los Paraguas para Protestar por Matanzas de Panzós,” *El Imparcial*, June 2, 1978, pp. 1 and 7.

⁴ *La Nación*, June 4, 1978.

⁵ A list of dozens of protest signs and slogans was included in *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, June/July 1978, pp. 18 and 19. Some organizations on the left did include references to ethnicity in their protests: signs and slogans on June 8 included references to “hermanos indios” and “mártires kekchíes,” for example. But CUC was among the majority of organizations that paid tribute to raceless campesinos.

incorporate ethnic symbolism. Although the *guerrilla* EGP exercised a certain amount of ideological control over CUC at the leadership level, if we look beyond the official statements of the organization, more complicated positions on indigenous identity come through. In 1978, one (anonymous) CUC spokesperson expressed an explanation of the violence in Panzós that was quite different from CUC's official position. He gave the following address at an USAC roundtable on state violence held on June 20, 1978. This CUC member saw the ethnic identity of the victims of Panzós as something *not* to be ignored; rather, the fact that the victims were *indígenas* helped him to interpret the massacre for himself and his audience. He situated the killings as part of a pattern of exploitation of *indígenas* since the Spanish conquest:

We will try to give you a picture ... of what it is like to be an Indian in this context of repression, exploitation, and discrimination. The Panzós massacre is not an isolated incident. It is one link in a larger chain ... a continuation of the repression, the dispossession, the exploitation, the annihilation of the Indian, an inhuman situation that began with the Spanish invasion.... It is enough to mention the massacres that occurred in the colonial epoch, the slow massacres that took place when they forced Indians and poor Ladinos to work in the coffee fields. It is enough to mention the massacres that have been committed by the right since the fall of Arbenz, the thirty thousand or more dead during the last twenty-five years.... Our history has been this, and even more, because there are more that have been forgotten, buried, existing only in the heart.⁶

⁶ In Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*, p. 161.

The interpretation reflected in these comments, writes Greg Grandin, “saw colonialism and racism” not as ladinos tended to, “not as ... residues held over from Spanish rule that continued to deform social relations in the countryside – but as the central contradictions of national history, the fundamental conditions of an unbroken chain of exploitation and repression.”⁷ It was an understanding of Panzós, in fact, that had much in common with that of *indígenas* writing for *Ixim*.

Ixim published an explicit and ethnically-focused condemnation of the Panzós massacre, labeling the killings “ethnocide.” The editors dedicated the entire June/July 1978 issue – all thirty pages of it – to the massacre. The writers, much like the CUC member above, linked the massacre to a four-hundred-year history of violence since the conquest. The front-page headline read, “Massacre in Panzós: Another Night in the History of Cowardly Dispossession, Blood, Death and Exploitation against the Indian in Guatemala,” with the largest letters dripping blood. A front-page graphic depicted soldiers firing from the rooftops of the Panzós municipal building and church into the crowd of campesinos, dozens of them lying dead in the plaza.

Ixim’s editorial placed the beginning of the story with the arrival of Pedro de Alvarado in 1524. “May 29, 1978,” they wrote, “is for the *pueblo indio* of Guatemala another 1524.” Since the conquest, they asserted, “the massacre of *indios* has been continuous and [has taken place] in the most diverse ways.” Panzós was not an isolated case, but “a link in the chain of problems that daily confront the *indio* ... not only is he discriminated against, abandoned, but also dispossessed [of land] and massacred.”⁸

⁷ Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*, p. 161. For a discussion of ethnicity within CUC, see also Grandin, “To End With All These Evils.”

⁸ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, June/July 1978, p. 2.

The *Ixim* issue contained first-hand reporting. Immediately following the massacre, two young *quetzaltecos* involved in *Ixim* traveled clandestinely, with the help of priests, nuns, and Q'eqchi' activists in Cobán, to Alta Verapaz to interview survivors and witnesses. "I don't know how we did it," remembers one of them, "how we had the daring to cross the police and army lines." They managed to get into the hospital in Cobán to talk with victims and their families, he remembers, and his attempt a quarter-century later to describe the bullet wounds they saw was choked by tears.⁹ What the two learned in Alta Verapaz was portrayed in all its horror in the pages of the publication: in lengthy articles detailing what had happened, in crude but vivid sketches of weapons and "exploding" bullets used against the campesinos, the ten-centimeter exit wounds these produced in bodies, soldiers dragging dead bodies into mass graves.

Thirty-eight national press articles and paid advertisements protesting the massacre were reproduced in *Ixim*'s pages, including CUC's statement and others from student organizations, university associations, unions, and the Catholic church. The activists behind *Ixim* published their own work in a section headed, "the *pueblo indio* repudiates, condemns, and analyzes the massacre of Panzós." Again Panzós was placed in a long history of violence against *indígenas*, specifically that related to land dispossession. The liberal regime of Rufino Barrios in 1871 was singled out as the beginning of massive land loss, followed by post-1954 militarization of the countryside when army officials, national police, and local authorities took title to lands belonging to *indígenas*.¹⁰

⁹ Interview with former writer for *Ixim*, February 2002, Quetzaltenango.

¹⁰ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, June/July 1978, pp. 21-26.

The civic committee Xel-jú published a declaration in *Ixim* condemning the massacre of “our indigenous kekchi brothers,” pledging material and moral solidarity with them “in this crucial hour of our existence,” when “extermination” seemed the government’s objective. They explicitly called for agrarian reform. The Coordinadora Indígena Nacional issued a statement, signing it “Indigenous Groups of Guatemala.” They insisted that the dispossessed in Panzós were the true owners of the land and that their massacre was only the latest in a pattern of state violence in the highlands – kidnappings, massacres, dispossession – “a systematic repression against all those that demand and struggle for their legitimate rights.” These legitimate claimsmakers were contrasted with the “barbaric” state and army, an obvious twist on the notion of the savage Indian. None of these crimes had been investigated, they charged, but it is clear “who commits these truly savage actions.” “Guatemala, oh beautiful Guatemala,” they wrote, “land where corn is planted and cadavers are harvested, ... land of eternal spring, land of eternal Panzós.”¹¹

Despite the seemingly endless history of oppression, the *Ixim* editors insisted that the situation did not have to – nor could it – continue. The victims of Panzós, moreover, would not die in vain. Even endemic violence could not eliminate the Indian, they wrote: “the total extermination of the *indio* has not been achieved.... [H]e rises from his ashes like a phoenix.... Panzós, the death of your sons is the seed that will germinate tomorrow and whose fruit will give us strength to walk toward our liberation.”¹²

¹¹ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, June/July 1978, p. 26.

¹² *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, June/July 1978, p. 2.

The *Ixim* protest against Panzós placed its authors squarely within the opposition movement. Yet that last phrase, “walk toward our liberation,” captures a fundamental distinction between CUC and *Ixim*, before and after Panzós: activists in CUC, though many (the spokesperson above, and interviewees) seem to have interpreted state violence in part as ethnically based, aimed to effect change through multi-ethnic alliances with the broad oppositional movements in Guatemala; activists with *Ixim* expressed the desire that *indígenas* themselves provide the solutions to the problems suffered by the *pueblo*. The *indio* must be “the architect of his own destiny,” argued Victoriano Alvarez, a lawyer in Quetzaltenango and the civic committee Xel-jú’s candidate for mayor in 1978. Thousands are becoming educated, he wrote in *Ixim*. “[W]e have brains, intelligence, will, imagination These attributes were given to men precisely so he could construct his own destiny.... We ... must forget about calling others, non-Indians, to solve our problems.... [I]t would be an indignity for us, *los indios de Guatemala*, if others do what we ourselves can and should do. It would negate our glorious origins.”¹³

The organizations had significant philosophical differences, then, even as their concerns overlapped in important ways. CUC focused on campesinos as a class, usually without ethnic distinction, because it was dedicated to cross-racial organizing. *Indígenas* in race-based organizing championed *indígenas* as the leaders of the indigenous *pueblos*. This is not to say that CUC was unconcerned with rights as *indígenas*. Neither were *Ixim* activists unconcerned with issues affecting campesinos, in Panzós or elsewhere. Land issues were central to the claims set out in *Ixim*, as was violence against the social classes

¹³ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, August 1978, p. 3.

“dispossessed of the three elements of man: land, capital, work.”¹⁴ Should *indígenas* celebrate national independence, they asked in August 1978, when they have no real economic or political independence, “[w]hen land claims are met not with land but with machine gun fire, [when] capital and work demands are met with accusations of Communism ...?”¹⁵ On the first anniversary of *Ixim*, its editors noted with satisfaction that the periodical was “most read” in the countryside.¹⁶ But their writing was directed largely at people like themselves: regarding the problem of land claims being met by violence, they asked their readers, “what do *profesionales indios* say about this?”¹⁷

The issue of who would speak and act for the *pueblo indígena* arguably became the central concern for activists in the race-based indigenous movement, as the revolutionary left grew in strength in 1979 and 1980 and counterinsurgency violence escalated. The EGP and ORPA published statements on the “ethnic-national question,” but theory was not enough. The practical implications of positions on ethnicity were at the heart of negotiations and disagreements among *indígenas* inside and outside of the revolutionary movements, CUC, *Ixim*, the Coordinadora Indígena Nacional, and other organizations, shaping alliances and factions alike.

Ethnicity and Revolution

Differences among various forms of struggle by *indígenas* were expressed more and more forcefully in the late 1970s, while at the same time *clasistas* and *culturalistas*

¹⁴ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, August 1978, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, August 1978, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, October 1978, p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, August 1978, p. 2.

became more closely tied. This seemingly unlikely outcome was a product of escalating violence.

Figures like Ricardo Cajas and Victoriano Alvarez continued to advocate race-based activism in the pages of *Ixim*, but in doing so, allied themselves with the multi-ethnic opposition movement. *Ixim* demanded that *indios* find their own *camino*, while they condemned state violence and repression against campesinos and leftist organizers and advocated revolution. In September 1978, a month after Victoriano Alvarez's "*indio as architect*" essay quoted above, *Ixim* editors published another piece by Alvarez, this one from a newspaper column in *La Nación/Quetzaltenango* on violence in Guatemala. It was a lengthy and detailed article arguing that the causes of violence in Guatemala were multiple: economic, social, cultural, political, and structural. Racism since the conquest had relegated the Indian to an inferior status, Alvarez asserted, but "now there are *mestizos* among the oppressed as well," non-Indians among those without economic or political power. He advocated "total change ... [in] politics, economics, society, culture, because ... the causes of the violence ... are embedded in the structure and superstructure in which we live.... There is no choice," he asserted, "but to achieve the Guatemalan National Revolution."¹⁸

Alvarez advocated political opposition to the state after systematically recounting how the interests of the people and the government had become divorced from each other. He called not for clandestine insurgency, though, but rather "open and public thinking and action, in the full light of day." He continued to assert a political independence, but this time a multi-ethnic one: arguing that people must act for

¹⁸ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, September 1978, p. 5, reproducing columns published in *La Nación/Quetzaltenango*, September 1, 14, and 20, 1978.

themselves rather than follow others like “robots,” he urged his fellow Guatemalans – not just *indígenas* this time, but *nosotros los guatemaltecos*, we Guatemalans – to find their own paths rather than mimicking foreign models of change. He criticized the right and the left. Regarding army recruits, he said that they are made into fanatics for a nationalism they do not understand and made to hate Communism without knowing what it is. Criticizing the violence and dogmatism of the “extreme left,” Alvarez argued that revolutionaries embraced a worn-out ideology that did not reflect Guatemala’s reality and lived “obsessively immersed” in a schema of class struggle. Nonetheless, he placed *indígenas* like himself fully within the opposition movement, which by 1978 placed them *de facto* in league with the *guerrillas*: Guatemala’s struggle pitted the government on one side, he asserted, against the “workers, campesinos, students, *indígenas*, and other popular sectors” on the other.¹⁹

Alvarez’s ability to make these kinds of statements in the “full light of day” – and survive – is evidence that indigenous intellectuals, especially in Quetzaltenango, were less vulnerable to state repression than were campesino activists. As one indigenous intellectual put it, the army hesitated to wake “the sleeping giant” that the indigenous movement represented in Quetzaltenango.

The relatively privileged position of the Quetzaltenango-area activists, their ability to speak to area *indígenas*, and the resources they could bring to the struggle, also made them potentially valuable to the revolutionary left. In the late 1970s, the revolutionary movement maintained contacts with activists in what came to be termed the “*movimiento indígena*,” people like Victoriano Alvarez and Ricardo Cajas. The use of

¹⁹ *Ixim: Notas Indígenas*, September 1978, p. 5, reproducing columns published in *La Nación/Quetzaltenango*, September 1, 14, and 20, 1978.

the term signifies that a definitive distinction was being made by the late 1970s between those *indígenas* inside and outside of the ladino-led revolutionary guerrilla movements. Indigenous *clasistas* in the *guerrilla*, like Emeterio Toj, Pablo Ceto, and Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, who by the late-1970s definition would have been outside the *movimiento indígena*, became key figures in a process of negotiating with those inside the *movimiento indígena* who were sympathetic to the revolutionary struggle.

In the period following the Panzós massacre, a core group of *indígenas* from CUC, the Coordinadora Indígena Nacional, *Ixim*, and the Maryknoll's Centro Indígena held discussions about the role of *indígenas* and ethnicity in the revolution, prompted in part by the success of the Sandinista revolution in nearby Nicaragua in 1979 and FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional) advances in neighboring El Salvador. Revolutionary victory seemed possible, activists recall; a unified struggle involving the popular left and the indigenous movement seemed all the more imperative, and in 1980 and early 1981, according to some participants, achievable.

Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, a CUC founder and member of the EGP, recalls meeting with indigenous activists in various locations – the Centro Indígena in the capital, San Andrés Ixtapa, San Martín Jilotepeque, Sololá, Patzicía. Both sides, he explains, saw the need for coordination. Those in CUC wanted to strengthen relations and incorporate the *movimiento indígena* more formally into the revolutionary movement because the participation of everyone was needed, he said.²⁰ For their part, *indígenas* in the race-based organizations sought greater contact with CUC. “The Coordinadora Indígena Nacional,” remembers Hernández Ixcoy, “was seeking a means ... by which

²⁰ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, March 1, 2002, Chimaltenango.

everyone could join the popular revolutionary war.” But CUC had to make concessions too, they insisted, had to take up the cultural claims of the *movimiento indígena* “as policy, as part of [revolutionary] strategy.”²¹

Pablo Ceto, also in CUC and the EGP, argues that by 1980 CUC was open to the issues that motivated the indigenous movement, since two years of discussions and “indigenous expression” had followed the Panzós massacre.²² Emeterio Toj similarly explains how the organization’s thinking evolved. Before the Panzós massacre, he said, the idea of rights specifically for the *pueblos indígenas* was not a central part of CUC’s thinking. But pointing to Panzós as a catalyst, Toj claimed:

we started to recognize that the war was mainly against the *indígenas*. We were not saying that they [the state and army] were not also killing [ladino] workers but mostly the dead were Indians. We realized that the *pueblo indígena* was the one [hardest] hit, the enemy of the system.²³

There was ample evidence to support such a conclusion. Another blatant example came in January 1980, when CUC activists, mostly indigenous campesinos, were burned alive in the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City.

The Spanish Embassy Massacre and the Declaration of Iximché

State repression against campesinos in the department of El Quiché was severe in the mid- and late 1970s, especially in the northern Ixil region, a heavily indigenous area where CUC had a large membership and support for the EGP was significant. Between

²¹ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, September 7, 2002, Chimaltenango.

²² Interview with Pablo Ceto, September 28, 2002, Guatemala City.

²³ Interview with Emeterio Toj, August 24, 2002, Guatemala City.

1975 and 1978, a reported twenty-eight campesinos were disappeared from the small communities of the Ixil.²⁴ Another seven agrarian leaders were kidnapped from Uspantán in October 1979 and executed.²⁵ Others from Chajul were reportedly raped and/or disappeared, including women and children. CUC activists from the area traveled to Guatemala City to protest the violence before congress, although they were denied an audience. Led by CUC activist Vicente Menchú, the father of Rigoberta Menchú Tum, they made their rounds of sympathetic organizations in the capital. Some fifteen of them stayed overnight at the Centro Indígena.²⁶

On January 31, twenty-seven of the activists, mostly indigenous members of CUC, occupied the Spanish embassy to call attention to the violence. The Guatemalan government reacted by firebombing the embassy. According to testimonies received by the CEH Truth Commission, as the inferno enveloped the building, the national police and security forces stood “passively” and made no attempt to assist the occupants. The ambassador suffered burns and barely escaped; all of the others in the building except two burned alive, a total of thirty-seven people. The sole CUC activist who survived the fire, Gregorio Yujá Xona, was taken to a hospital to be treated for severe burns, “guarded” by the national police. He was kidnapped from the hospital the following day by armed men, tortured and killed.²⁷

²⁴ The twenty-eight were listed in a manifesto by representatives of Cotzal, Chajul, and Nebaj, June 1978.

²⁵ CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, 6:163.

²⁶ Telephone interview with Father Daniel Jensen, March 30, 2004.

²⁷ See CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, 6:163-182.

Following the burning of the embassy, the Guatemalan state moved to discredit the CUC activists and their supporters, claiming that they were subversives disguised as campesinos, and that they had started the fire themselves. State officials questioned the motives of the Spanish ambassador himself in allowing the protestors into the embassy.²⁸ An article in *Diario Impacto* later claimed that one of the dead may actually have been an unnamed Belgian nun, who “entered the Spanish embassy disguised as an *indígena*, accompanying a powerful [*fuerte*] group of people who appear to have exploded incendiary bombs.”²⁹ The *Revista Militar* claimed that the embassy had been occupied by “a guerrilla commando, dressed in indigenous dress from El Quiché, who were following the Sandinista example in the taking of the National Palace in Nicaragua on August 22, 1978.”³⁰

The response of indigenous activists to this latest round of violence was confrontational and ethnically symbolic. CUC organized a protest at the Iximché ruins in Tecpán, the former capital of the Kaqchikel kingdom, on February 14, 1980. An estimated 200 people from various parts of the country converged at the site, with CUC claiming that all twenty-two of the country’s ethnic groups were represented. There were also invitees from the unions, the church, and leftist politicians, as well as the international press.

Members of CUC and the EGP, *Ixim*, the Centro Indígena, and others together drafted the “Declaration of Iximché” in a three-day meeting in San Andrés Ixtapa shortly

²⁸ See CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, 6:176.

²⁹ “Una Monja Habría Muerto en la Embajada Española,” *Diario Impacto*, May 28, 1980.

³⁰ In Jennifer Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 303, fn. 2.

after the embassy fire. The statement was a testament to their on-going differences, but at the same time, reflected the progress of discussions about ethnic and class identities, state violence and racism.

Ricardo Cajas, who addressed the gathering at Iximché as a representative of the Coordinadora Indígena Nacional, describes being instructed by CUC organizers to go to Tecpán, then he was sent to the ruins of Iximché. As he was walking to the site, Pablo Ceto came along in a car and picked him up. He was told where to go if the army arrived, Cajas said, and told where a car would be waiting for him. When he arrived at the ruins, Cajas noticed that the guard of Iximché had been tied to a tree by the activists, he said. People were armed. It was a moment of enormous tension and mobilization.³¹

Ricardo Cajas describes being greatly moved by a banner which had been hung: “For every *indio* that falls, thousands of us are rising up.” “I’ll never forget it,” he said. “The word *indio* was still a taboo, but to see this” He does not remember what he said in his speech, but recalls that people remarked afterward that it was *muy encendido*, inflamed, provoking. “There was great anger for the Spanish embassy massacre. It was almost a declaration of war by the *indígenas*.” Summing up the historical evolution of the indigenous movement in the previous decade, he explained, “we were no longer there to discuss, we were each there to act, each in our own capacity.”³²

In the words of Miguel Alvarado, an indigenous doctor from Cantel, Quetzaltenango, Iximché represented “an awakening of consciousness for ladinos and

³¹ Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

³² Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

indígenas, ... a united proclamation demanding a space in the ... revolution.”³³ Together the protestors proclaimed their condemnation of the latest massacre and their support for armed struggle.

The Declaration of Iximché was read aloud at the site by a young woman and former student at the Instituto Socorro who had been active in *reinas* events and soon joined the revolutionary movement.³⁴ The declaration’s content and the site’s symbolism suggest that while participants were firmly supporting revolution in league with the ladino-led popular movement, their embracing of class struggle neither negated nor eliminated the ethnic content of their demands. The proclamation combined an appeal for Indians to rise up together with non-Indians to fight exploitation and repression, with a long and detailed account of the history of indigenous struggle since the conquest. It mixed the fundamental concerns of CUC with issues that filled the pages of *Ixim*. It urged *indígenas* to join the popular struggle to combat economic injustices, pitifully low salaries for campesinos, and high prices for basic agricultural inputs, while decrying the long history of racist violence against the Indian, forced military recruitment of *indígenas*, forced sterilization, and the cultural violence of state-sponsored “folklore.” Throughout the piece it is readily apparent which passages came from *clasistas* and which from *culturalistas*, but at the site of Iximché and in the closure of the Declaration, they stood together, their respective demands intertwined. They concluded with the

³³ Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

³⁴ Interview with Emeterio Toj, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City. The text of the Declaration of Iximché was published in *Cuicuilco* No. 1, July 1980, as “Los pueblos indígenas de Guatemala ante el mundo ...”, pp. 2-5.

familiar call of the *Popul Vuh*, “May all rise up, may all be called, may not one or two groups among us be left behind the others!”

It was a symbolic moment of unity, an event when indigenous *culturalistas* explicitly allied themselves with *indígenas* in CUC and the armed left, especially the EGP. This is not to say, however, that *indígenas* in the *movimiento indígena* were included as equals in the protest at Iximché. It was orchestrated by CUC, and Ricardo Cajas, for example, apparently made his way to the gathering without knowing where he was going or that he would be asked to speak. No one, he conceded, was taken more by surprise than he by the scene at Iximché, with its “re-claiming of consciousness” by the left.³⁵

José Manuel Fernández Fernández, who has studied the development of CUC, writes that the fact that the left was dealing more explicitly with the question of ethnicity was “a symptom of a rupture in ideological control.”³⁶ It seems less a “rupture,” perhaps, than a controlled and limited process. CUC leaders Emeterio Toj and Domingo Hernández Ixcoy explain that while the left began with Iximché publicly to incorporate the ideas coming from the *movimiento indígena*, they were less able, or less inclined, to incorporate the leaders themselves. “In 1980,” says Hernández Ixcoy, “I think that the leadership of the EGP realized that they had to allow space for demands – not for *indígenas*, but for their demands. They began to see that they had to incorporate more

³⁵ Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

³⁶ Jose Manuel Fernandez Fernandez, “El Comité de Unidad Campesina: Origen y Desarrollo,” Cuaderno 2 (Centro de Estudios Rurales Centroamericanos (CERCA), Guatemala/Madrid, 1988), p. 11.

clearly the question of cultural claims.... They spoke for their demands, but didn't incorporate leaders ..., it was virtually not allowed."³⁷

Emeterio Toj put a more positive spin on the issue. CUC leaders were indigenous, but EGP leaders were ladinos, he explained, and this did not change with time. "But we Mayas managed to enrich the political thinking, the ideology of the EGP.... In the beginning we couldn't talk openly about indigenous questions, it was impossible, that wasn't the discourse. The struggle was economic, the question of classes. But little by little, with our presence ... the EGP was acquiring more of a Maya character [*fue coloreandose de Maya*], began to incorporate *lo Maya*." Toj saw CUC's protest at Iximché as a reflection of that.³⁸

The EGP began to publish statements on ethnicity, what it termed the "ethnic-national contradiction," and addressed the role of *indígenas* in the revolution. The following appeared in the EGP's *Revista Compañero* in early 1981:

The revolutionary popular war, and the ethnic affirmation of the Indians in the process of this war, today offer the only alternative and future solution to the ethno-cultural complexity of our country.... In our country, there will be no revolution without the incorporation of the Indian population in the war, and without their integration with full rights into the new society, a society which the Indians must help to build.... Their role as producers of the wealth gives the Indians both strength and rights: strength to wage

³⁷ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, September 7, 2002, Chimaltenango.

³⁸ Interview with Emeterio Toj, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

the war, and an undeniable right to participate in the construction and leadership of the new society.³⁹

“In practice,” Toj said, “we were the ones who gave life to [these ideas].” But still, Toj explained, the space for “leading” on indigenous issues was very limited and restraint was required when bringing up ethnicity. “If you crossed the line,” Toj recalled, “you were called a *culturalista*, *indigenista*. You had to be very careful not to cross the line.”⁴⁰

For others close to the EGP, events like the CUC gathering at Iximché and the EGP’s statements on the “ethnic-national question” seemed to be opportunistic manipulations of ethnicity for political gain. Ricardo Falla, for one, a Jesuit who joined the EGP, sees the issue of ethnicity on the left as highly problematic. There was probably something “authentic” about identity as *indígenas* for some on the left, he notes, but still, ethnicity was potentially dangerous. “The idea is a *chicle*,” he remarked, suggesting that ethnicity could take whatever shape its proponents desired.⁴¹

The Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas, or ORPA, was the guerrilla army typically described by Guatemalans as the most attuned to issues of ethnicity. Rodrigo Asturias, the son of novelist Miguel Asturias, was the main ORPA leader; interestingly he adopted the *nom de guerre* Gaspar Ilom, the indigenous hero of the fictional *Men of Maize*. The younger Asturias wrote on the theme of racism in the

³⁹ “Los indios guerrilleros,” *Revista Compañero*, no. 4, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁰ Interview with Emeterio Toj, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁴¹ Interview with Ricardo Falla, November 12, 2002, Santa Maria Chiquimula.

late 1970s, in essays known as *Racismo I* and *Racismo II*.⁴² ORPA leaders were known to address issues of racism and discrimination in their everyday discourse when they spoke in indigenous communities. Active around the Lake Atitlán area, ORPA was the guerrilla army joined by dozens of young *indígenas* from Santiago Atitlán.

State repression hit hard around the Lake Atitlán region. In Santiago Atitlán, as elsewhere, virtually all forms of social organizing became suspect in the eyes of the army. Lists of leaders “marked” (sometimes by their neighbors) for army reprisal first circulated in May 1979, containing the names of the primary school director, teachers, and local priests, including Father Stanley Rother.⁴³ The army posted soldiers around town during the annual festival in July 1979. ORPA made a visit to the community in June 1980 and “seemed to have the sympathy of the people,” wrote Father Rother. Afterward army soldiers appeared “in force.... walking around in groups of three or four, standing on the corners watching everything.”⁴⁴ As Rother continued in a letter of September 1980, “Since then we have had strangers in town, asking questions about the priests, this catechist or that one, where they live, who is in charge of the Cooperative, who are the leaders”⁴⁵

⁴² The ORPA document known as “Racismo I” was entitled “Acerca del racismo,” and “Racismo II” was entitled “Acerca de la verdadera magnitud del racismo.” Bastos and Camus note the secrecy of ORPA, which results in confusion over authorship and publication dates. One scholar dates both documents 1978, another dates “Racismo I” as produced in 1976 and “Racismo II,” in 1978. Bastos and Camus, *Entre el mescal y el cielo*, p. 61, fn. 9.

⁴³ Rother, *The Shepherd Cannot Flee*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Rother, *The Shepherd Cannot Flee*, p. 15 and 30.

⁴⁵ Rother, *The Shepherd Cannot Flee*, p. 30.

Rother soon noted the involvement of local activists with ORPA: “I am aware that some of our younger catechists are working with those that are preparing for a revolution. They are young men that are becoming more and more conscientious about their situation and are convinced that the only option for them is revolt.”⁴⁶ Several of them, broadcasters at the Voz de Atitlán, became vocal critics of the growing repression and violence. Their actions would not be lost on the army.

Gaspar Culán, who had left the seminary and married just before ordination and worked as the Voz director, gives us an idea what “consciousness-raising” in Santiago Atitlán meant as army repression grew, and the extent to which it coincided with ORPA’s revolutionary discourse of economic and racial equality. In a scripture-based program broadcast in Tzutujil called the “Word of God,” which involved reading and analyzing biblical texts, Culán condemned the violence that hung over residents of Santiago, and the suspicion, distrust, and hate the army was sowing in the community through its use of local informants. He deplored economic inequality and racial discrimination, and the concentration of area lands in the hands of the rich and powerful. He asked his listeners:

What do you think? ... In the readings we learn that God created man, [but] not to be persecuted by death We are all now under the threat of death, death stalks us; ... we are losing our being, ... we are losing our life.

We cannot speak, seek a better life, because death will follow us, will come between us, destroy us. The question is, who ... has brought death among us? The only thing the enemy wants is that we fight among ourselves, that we separate, that we hate each other....

⁴⁶ Rother, *The Shepherd Cannot Flee*, p. 30.

Dear brothers, let's think. Are we living in real justice? Are we all equal as the scripture says? Is there no discrimination? That's not true, among us there are poor, and besides being poor ... we are discriminated against. Why? Because all are not equal God says, live with equality and without discrimination, but that is not what we are doing, there is no justice, there is no equality.

Think a little more deeply: do all of us have goods, ... lands, thousands and thousands of *cuerdas* of lands in our hands? In whose hands are the great quantities of land, ... while others have none? [Few] people have almost all the lands and the poor have nothing. That is why there is extreme poverty in our families.... Think and reflect because God asks you to exercise love, peace and justice.⁴⁷

With the insurgency growing around the community, Culán was calling for residents to resist army violence and to unify in support of revolutionary change. Repression made heeding such a call difficult. By September 1980, several local leaders had gone into hiding, and classes and all but the smallest group meetings in the community were cancelled.⁴⁸ The army soon set up a permanent base on the outskirts of town, in October 1980, part of which was on the church's farming cooperative, virtually occupying Santiago Atitlán. Within a week of the establishment of the camp, five

⁴⁷ I am grateful to those at Voz de Atitlán for their generous work in translating tapes of Gaspar Culán's programs from Tzutujil to Spanish. The exact date of the program transcribed here is unknown; it was broadcast sometime in late 1980 before Culán was disappeared in October of that year.

⁴⁸ Rother, *The Shepherd Cannot Flee*, p. 31.

indigenous activists were disappeared, including Culán, dragged from his home on October 24.⁴⁹

Other kidnappings followed in rapid succession. *Orejas*, or informants, infiltrated activist groups and the church, and pointed out to the army the houses of activists. “Those who studied, women [activists], were marked,” remembers one woman, a community health worker, “... those who were in groups, tried to learn to read and write You didn’t go out in the evening. When the lights went out, it was known there would be dead.”⁵⁰

Ten days after Culán was abducted, on November 3, 1980, the radio station Voz de Atitlán was broken into by the army, files searched, tape recorders and typewriters stolen. The pattern of repression against radio schools was repeated across the country. The diocese of El Quiché reported that all six of the Catholic church-sponsored radio stations in Guatemala were searched, one was taken over by the army, and three were closed.⁵¹ The Voz de Atitlán fell silent and its Board of Directors fled. The army captured four of them in Antigua, and they were disappeared. Only one body was found, gruesomely tortured.⁵²

⁴⁹ Interview with widow of Culán, June 28, 2002, Santiago Atitlán. For a long (and always with such compilations, incomplete) listing of 265 dead and disappeared from Santiago Atitlán, 1980 through 1990, see the introduction to the Tzutujil translation of the New Testament published by the Parroquia Santiago Apostol, Santiago Atitlán, 1991.

⁵⁰ Interview with woman health worker who wishes not to be named, October 5, 2002, Santiago Atitlán.

⁵¹ Diocese del Quiché, *El Quiché: El pueblo y su iglesia*, p. 147, fn 141. For more on government repression of radio schools in indigenous communities, see “Investigarán las radios con programas en lengua,” *Prensa Libre*, November 11, 1981.

⁵² The body of Diego Sosof Alvarado, abducted in November 1980, was found with extensive signs of torture: small burns covering his body, his fingers cut off, his eyes

Many of those who stayed in the community left their houses to sleep, residents recall. They asked Father Rother to open the church each night, and hundreds slept inside.⁵³ On the night of July 25, 1981, in the midst of a military round-up in the community, Rother locked the church doors against the army with a reported 600 young people inside to protect them from forced recruitment. The priest was shot and killed just two nights later, after midnight, July 28, 1981.⁵⁴

In November of that same year, the army focused on what was left of the group of young indigenous activists. They rounded up some 300 residents of the area, among them the remaining members of the radio association and literacy project, including Felipe Vásquez Tuíz (the protestor in the queens photo with his fist in the air), and took them to the military camp. Several recount being interrogated and kept in holes in the ground.⁵⁵ After fifteen days apparently the army was satisfied that it had secured some degree of collaboration and began a public relations offensive. They called in the press and lined up the “confessing subversives” for photographers.

The front page headline of the *Prensa Libre* on November 10, 1981, read, “Campesinos disclose how they were recruited for ORPA; the Army has at its base those who turned themselves in.” The caption under a photo of Voz de Atitlán members read,

gougued out. See CEH, 7:247-55; and Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala in *Polémica*, “Santiago Atitlán, Preparación de una masacre,” *Epoca* 1, no. 16, January – March 1985, pp. 56-65.

⁵³ Rother reported hundreds of people sleeping in the church already on November 4, 1980, just a few days after the army set up its Atitlán camp. Rother, *The Shepherd Cannot Flee*, p. 34.

⁵⁴ See CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, 7:249.

⁵⁵ Interviews with family of Felipe Vásquez Tuíz, Juan Atzip, and Pedro Esquina, July and October 2002, Santiago Atitlán.

“Tzutuhil *indígenas* who formed a literacy association ... and promoted the Voz de Atitlán, closed for transmitting programs against the government.” The lengthy article that accompanied the photos claimed that the three hundred members of “subversive groups” – those listed were CUC, ORPA, the EGP, and the Communist party PGT – had acknowledged being “duped” by the guerrillas. The army claimed that one was said to have been kidnapped by ORPA when he was drunk, another forced to join under threat of death. They had turned to the army, the article asserted, for protection and collaboration.⁵⁶

The “ex-subversives,” according to the article, accused members of the church and community groups for organizing anti-government activities. The article detailed the establishment of the Voz de Atitlán and accused its broadcasters specifically of airing programming that aided the insurgency. It mentioned the “subversive” *Pensemos Juntos*, the literacy training guide developed by *indígenas* using the methods of Paulo Freire. Comments attributed to one of the broadcasters, Juan Atzip, claimed that the literacy workers themselves were “humble” uneducated *indígenas*. “Of course, we are people who ... completed [only] the second year of primary school. For that reason, we never thought that those programs contained anti-government ideas.” “We only want to live in peace, work in peace,” Atzip continued, in a statement similar to others orchestrated by the government and army in the ensuing months. “We don’t want trouble, we don’t want Guatemalans to kill each other.”⁵⁷ The captives were then released one by one.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Prensa Libre*, November 10, 1981, pp. 1, 4, and 6.

⁵⁷ *Prensa Libre*, November 10, 1981, pp. 1, 4, and 6.

⁵⁸ Two young women in one of the November 10 photos of the “subversives,” the article claimed, were members of CUC. Their actual involvement with the campesino

A few months later, the army allowed the radio station to go on the air again. Permission was granted in the form of a letter to three of the members of the radio association, among them Juan Atzip, from General Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, then vice-minister of defense. Under the leadership of the three “cooperating” members of the board, the letter stated, “the Voz de Atitlán ... can go on the air with its regular programming.”⁵⁹

The programming permitted, however, was far from “regular,” and literacy and consciousness-raising programs were eliminated. Several of the radio broadcasters, including Felipe Vásquez Tuíz, then president of the board, refused to cooperate with the army and its new format. He went into hiding in Quetzaltenango for a few days, then returned to Santiago Atitlán and his young family. Three months later he was arrested in front of his fellow broadcasters, taken to the local jail and beaten. When his family asked why he was being held, the army reportedly said that Vásquez Tuíz represented the radio and that Voz de Atitlán broadcasters would “take turns” in prison. He was not released. He remained in the local jail for three days, then was disappeared. His body has never been recovered.⁶⁰

organization is unclear, but there were working with the Voz de Atitlán’s literacy program in the neighboring community of San Juan La Laguna. They were held at the military base with the others for questioning, but unlike the men, were not released. They describe being kept at the Santiago Atitlán base and another in the department of San Marcos for a year, forced to wash clothes and cook for the soldiers. They were finally released and returned home in late 1982. Interviews with the women, who wish to remain unnamed, October 5, 2002, San Juan La Laguna.

⁵⁹ The letter, dated April 14, 1982, was addressed to Diego Coché, Juan Atzip, and Diego Pop. In it General Mejía Victores refers to a request from the group made to the Army Department of Culture and Public Relations for permission to resume broadcasting. Interviews with Juan Atzip and Diego Pop, June 27, 2002, Santiago Atitlán.

⁶⁰ Details of Felipe’s incarceration and abduction were provided by friends and family in

Miguel Sisay, who attended the Instituto Indígena Santiago, worked in campesino organizing, was part of the Voz de Atitlán, and finally joined ORPA, saw all of their work in Atitlán as part of one idea, one large effort to help the community. But it was violently repressed:

... all of these expressions were shut down, there was no way to develop them. Literacy training ... was shut down, any free expression of opinion was shut down, they interrupted the radio, killed people, tortured others. It was a horrible thing.... Everything was ... cut short, *verdad*, and everyone went his own way.... At the end of 1980 and the beginning of 1981 practically my whole generation... disappeared [from Santiago Atitlán], ... went to the mountains [*guerrilla*], many of my school friends, my childhood friends ... died in the war, died in combat.⁶¹

Someone close to Felipe Vásquez Tuíz argued that he had just wanted to improve the situation people were living in, to help them to read and write, defend their rights, and his participation in ORPA was seen as an extension of that:

He liked to organize groups, share with people who needed things – even though we were those *gente pobre* too. His parents were illiterate. He was one of the first to go to school ... one of the first professionals from the pueblo. They were the guides for the future. But they were cut down.⁶²

Santiago Atitlán. See also CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, case #4245.

⁶¹ Interview with Miguel Sisay, July 2, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁶² Interview with family member of Felipe Vásquez Tuíz, October 5, 2002, Santiago Atitlán.

Carlos Escalante from Quetzaltenango, a young *indígena* who formed part of the group Cabracán and its ethnic-focused agenda, remembers Vásquez Tuíz as someone dedicated to both the “cultural” struggle and to the revolutionary left. They spent time together in Santiago Atitlán, he recalls, one night talking about culture and identity the whole night through, the next night sitting on the beach in nearby San Pedro La Laguna with members of the guerrilla talking about the revolution.⁶³ There seemed to be room in ORPA, many activists say, for both.

Other *indígenas* in ORPA made a greater distinction between the “cultural” struggle and the multi-ethnic revolutionary movement. The group had a strong presence around Quetzaltenango, attracting *indígenas* like Alberto Mazariegos from nearby Olinstepeque. Like Vásquez Tuíz, he was someone active in church youth groups (Catholic Action’s JACRO) and “cultural” organizing in the early 1970s; he was remembered as always first to arrive at queens’ events with his marimba. Again like Vásquez Tuíz, he joined the multi-ethnic revolutionary movement in the late 1970s. But while Felipe stayed closely involved with “indigenous” events in his community, Mazariegos seems consciously to have chosen one form of organizing over another. He was well aware of the debates that surrounded participation in the ladino-led *guerrilla*:

At that time some *indígenas*, especially the academics who were already professionals, ... believed that we were capable, that it was time to build a movement like all of those by our ancestors, ... the uncountable [historical] armed struggles of our *pueblos*. But for us, we believed ... that it was worth sacrificing our indigenous claims, putting the needs of *indígenas y no indígenas* first.... Despite the

⁶³ Interview with Carlos Escalante, October 14, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

fact that we knew that the majority of those suffering were *indígenas*, at the moment we needed to build strength.⁶⁴

“There were many discussions,” Mazariegos continued. “We were with people in meetings, in activities that *indígenas* held, and it was a theme of discussion.... [Some said] we can’t support a struggle that isn’t ours, we can’t go on being used.... we don’t need interlocutors.”⁶⁵

While *indígenas* like Mazariegos and Vasquéz Tuíz saw ladino revolutionaries as *compadres* rather than interlocutors, others in the *movimiento indígena* remained unconvinced. We turn now to evolving relations between *indígenas* in race-based organizing and the revolutionary left.

Unbridgeable Divide?

Emeterio Toj of Santa Cruz del Quiché, a CUC founder and EGP member, was the most significant figure in efforts to strengthen connections between the revolutionary left and the *movimiento indígena*, given the task by the EGP of bringing the organizing networks around Quetzaltenango more fully into the opposition movement. While working as a radio broadcaster in El Quiché in the early 1970s, Toj had provided Jesuits and ladino university students with access to the indigenous countryside. His role for the EGP was similar. Toj had been involved with the Seminarios Indígenas and the Coordinadora Indígena Nacional since their inception, and over the course of the 1970s he had maintained connections with *indígenas* in race-based organizing. He was ideally positioned to bridge divisions between the *clasista* and the *culturalista* camps.

⁶⁴ Interview with Alberto Mazariegos, September 3, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁶⁵ Interview with Alberto Mazariegos, September 3, 2002, Guatemala City.

As Miguel Alvarado remembers, Toj had a “special task, to organize indigenous intellectuals so they would not be a counter-revolutionary threat, but rather a force ... to strengthen the revolutionary struggle.”⁶⁶ In discussions with area activists, Alvarado recalls that Toj talked both of revolution and the problems of *indígenas*, said that the *pueblo indígena* had no alternative but to organize itself and join forces with the popular, revolutionary struggle as a *pueblo indígena*. “The main theme of the meetings was how ... *indígenas* could organize as their own force, and as their own force, participate in the popular struggle.... [Just like] unionists, women’s groups, the *indígenas* also had to take part. It could be done, it was feasible because we were interested.”⁶⁷ As Alvarado explains further,

we were conscious of the injustices that existed in our country, and that a struggle for revindication of the rights of *indígenas* was needed, that we couldn’t do it as *indígenas* [alone], but had to work with ladinos ..., conscientious revolutionaries. We had to do it together because that was the history of Guatemala.⁶⁸

Area activists had, in fact, been working in roles supportive of the revolutionary movement since the mid-1970s. Activists in Quetzaltenango provided fleeing or injured *guerrilleros* or CUC members with places to hide, often in their own homes. They provided food, money, clothing, medical attention, and transportation. A woman working at a local health post that received aid from the international organization CARE

⁶⁶ Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

⁶⁷ Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

⁶⁸ Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

managed, one activist recalls, to pass some of the products to the guerrilla, through the Alvarados in Cantel, through a local Catholic parish, and through Emeterio Toj. Others passed information between the armed movement and area *indígenas*.

The left was looking for a more formal commitment, however, and full incorporation. Toj believed that the professional class in Quetzaltenango had to be incorporated on its own terms, he said, so they could make the revolutionary struggle their own. He felt it was vital that the left “incorporate their knowledge, their political power The strategy was to invite them, and that they would decide how to collaborate, the form in which they could make the revolution theirs.”⁶⁹

In practice, though, there was considerable disagreement over the roles activists in the *movimiento indígena* would play. The EGP was not willing to grant any privileges to professionals, one activist remembered, and expected them to be like everyone else, which did not go over well with the indigenous movement. There was distrust, Toj asserted, and no room for leaders.⁷⁰

Tensions over leadership roles were at a high point when the state delivered a severe blow to relations between the revolutionary movement and the activists in the *movimiento indígena*. On the afternoon of July 4, 1981, Toj was cornered by four armed men in Quetzaltenango, thrown into a car, and taken to the National Police. He was interrogated and beaten, his head covered with a *capucha*, a rubber hood used in torture. He was transferred to the local army barracks for similar interrogation under torture, then moved to the army base in nearby Huehuetenango. There he was kept in a bread oven, he

⁶⁹ Interview with Emeterio Toj, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁷⁰ Interview with Emeterio Toj, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

later told human rights investigators, bound in an excruciating position. He was beaten, administered electric shocks, and drugged.

His captors, he explained to me, wanted him to reveal the names of his contacts in the Quetzaltenango-area indigenous movement. His defiance is still apparent a quarter-century later. He made a vow, he said, that “not a single name of those *hermanos* I worked with in Los Altos [Quetzaltenango area] would leave my mouth When you are captured, you no longer matter. What matters is what is outside, the others.” His captors asked over and over, he said, “Where are your *compañeros*? Who are your *compañeros*?” That’s what they asked me a thousand times.” No one in Quetzaltenango was captured, he said, because he revealed no one.⁷¹

After fifteen days Toj was allowed to bathe and clean his wounds and was flown to a military base in Guatemala City. There he was again bound, beaten, and questioned daily about his contacts, his activities, the work of certain Catholic priests. His wounds were infected and he could no longer stand or sit up. “My body couldn’t hold itself up, and I fell ... to the floor ... so they began to interrogate me in that position,” he told the CEH Truth Commission.⁷²

Toj’s pride in remaining silent about his contacts in Quetzaltenango is accompanied by a more painful acknowledgement that he did go along with the army’s wishes in other ways.⁷³ Rather than kill their captive, the army apparently saw value in

⁷¹ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, September 29, 2002.

⁷² CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, 6:202.

⁷³ Others have expressed the pain and torment that comes with collaboration under such circumstances. An one Argentine put it, “You had to walk a very fine line, making them believe you were useful, but without abetting them in a way that, morally, was going to

keeping Toj alive, and he became their weapon in a round of psychological warfare. They untied him and let him bathe, allowed him to eat regularly, even gave him a radio and let him exercise. They arranged to have him meet several senators from the United States who were on a fact-finding mission for the US Congress. Toj cooperated when he met these visitors, he said, telling them that he was “formerly in CUC ... and that he did not want to continue.” His answers, he believed, gave the army officials a certain confidence that they had won him over.⁷⁴

His captors soon introduced Toj to someone they presented as a psychologist, who would be in charge of his detention. He was given reading materials on the counterinsurgency struggle, among them a lengthy statement by a former Jesuit and EGP member, Father Luis Pellecer.

Father Pellecer had been kidnapped from Guatemala City a month prior to Toj’s abduction, beaten unconscious in the street and taken away by unidentified armed men. He suddenly made an appearance 113 days later, September 30, 1981, at a press conference held by the Guatemalan government. Foreign dignitaries were invited, and the national and international press were in attendance. The conference was broadcast on television throughout Guatemala and El Salvador shortly after its recording. Pellecer read an hour-long formal statement in which he denounced his membership in the EGP and in the Jesuit order, criticized the church for supporting socialism, and condemned liberation theology as promoting violence and being based on hatred of the wealthy. He

do you in.” In Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 77.

⁷⁴ Interview with Emeterio Toj, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

claimed to have “realized that he had taken a mistaken path,” and therefore had staged his own kidnapping.⁷⁵

The validity of Pellecer’s comments was immediately questioned by the Jesuit order in Central America, which claimed that his remarks were clearly made under duress. The fact that he was beaten unconscious during his abduction raised obvious questions about his “self-kidnapping.” His behavior and speech in the press conference were abnormal, they noted, he made incorrect statements regarding his own background and education, and evidence of torture was apparent. He appeared, for example, to have an entirely new set of teeth.⁷⁶

While the press conference was not believable to those close to Pellecer, it was a model that Emeterio Toj was expected to emulate. He was forced to watch a tape of it repeatedly and with his “psychologist,” had to write a press conference “confession” of his own. He was told that if he did not cooperate his family would suffer the consequences.⁷⁷

The government presented Toj to the press and diplomatic corps on October 22, 1981, three weeks after the Pellecer event. Like Pellecer, Toj renounced the insurgency and claimed to have voluntarily turned himself in to the army. While Pellecer’s comments had focused on the Catholic church and priests’ roles in supporting socialism

⁷⁵ “Sacerdote jesuita guerrillero se confesó ante la prensa,” *Prensa Libre*, October 1, 1981, pp. 14 and 78.

⁷⁶ Press Release, October 4, 1981, Jesuit Missions, “In Central America Concerning the Statements of Father Luis Pellecer.”

⁷⁷ Interview with Emeterio Toj, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

and revolution, Toj was told to stress the issue of ethnic discrimination and oppression by the left.

The army understood quite keenly, Toj argues, the tensions that underlay relations between the revolutionary left and the indigenous movement. They apparently sought to use Toj to fan the flames of discord. As Toj claims,

They had long been managing the indigenous matter. They knew well ... how risky it would be to awaken, stir the *pueblo*.... They had found the mechanisms, the way to influence [*mediatizar*] this struggle, and this is not recent, this comes from way back, when they co-opted la Malinche, and they have managed it throughout history, they know, they aren't stupid. The basic soldier might be stupid and maybe the low-level officer, but there are strategists who know very well what they are doing.⁷⁸

In particular, Toj asserts, the army recognized the danger of a revolutionary movement that could win over the *indígena*:

At the high levels, they knew well the implications of the incorporation of the *indígena* into the struggle. They knew, and they had to prevent it, a thousand ways. One of the ways, as in my case, was to use the same people to put out the fire.... They are Machiavellian. They use all the symbols at their disposal to manipulate, to impede the struggles of the *pueblo*, to kill the hopes of the *pueblo*, to turn *pueblo* against *pueblo*.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Interview with Emeterio Toj, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁷⁹ Interview with Emeterio Toj, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

To a degree, Toj gave his captors what they wanted. The guerrilla armies, he asserted in a statement he read aloud to the press, were “oppressive and discriminatory.” He described himself as a founder of CUC, which was characterized in the press conference in terms starkly differentiated from the EGP, which was, in 1981, a false separation. CUC was portrayed explicitly and benevolently as an Indian organization, “an indigenous movement aiming to dignify the campesinos.” Toj described peaceful objectives of the organization, which were *not* to fight against the government, but to find ways to deal with the difficult problems confronting indigenous communities.

Toj went on to condemn and denounce the EGP. He was leaving the revolutionary movement, he said, because the EGP had infiltrated CUC and was using the organization and its members, pushing them into violence against the army. The campesino was expected to fight against a well-equipped army, but with only sticks and machetes at his disposal. Toj had come to understand, he claimed, that “for the EGP, we *indígenas* are no more than cannon fodder, for them that is our historic function.” He went on to repeat the familiar characterization of the *indígena* as a peaceful political bystander, and none too bright: “We Guatemalan *indígenas* only want peace, work, and food, give us that and we will make the land produce as we have done until now,” he said. Like the activists in Santiago Atitlán, he described himself as having “limited intellectual capacity,” proof of which was that he had gone to primary school only as an adult. He exhorted his fellow *indígenas* not to support subversion, not to accept the

offers of subversive groups which trick them into violence. He finally asked permission to make the same plea to his fellow K'iche's in their own language.⁸⁰

Shortly after the press conference, in November 1981, the army took Toj on a speaking tour. One stop was Santiago Atitlán, where he had to meet with the radio broadcasters of the Voz de Atitlán. He arrived when several of them were still being kept in the holes in the ground at the military barracks. Army officials brought the Voz directors together to listen to Toj denounce the *guerrilla*. One official, he recalls, waved the literacy guide *Pensemos Juntos* in the air, calling it subversion. “Look at the work of the guerrilla! Look at these things that are soiling, dirtying the *patria!*” Emeterio had to say that he was from CUC, but that he was “repenting.” “I tried to signal that what I was saying wasn’t true,” he told me.⁸¹

Toj was taken around to other communities as well, addressing K'iche' audiences in their own language. He was made to address residents of Chupol, El Quiché from a helicopter, broadcasting with a bullhorn a message about cooperating with the army. “This is Emeterio,” he had to say to the community, which would have been familiar with his voice from his radio work. “Don’t be afraid. The army won’t do anything.”

⁸⁰ “Otro dirigente campesino renuncio al EGP; Gobierno presentó ayer a Emeterio Toc Medrano,” *Diario La Hora*, October 23, 1981, pp. 2 and 23; “Fundador del CUC se entregó! Se trata de Emeterio Toc Medrano quien dio declaraciones ayer sobre su participación en el EGP,” *El Gráfico*, October 23, 1981; “Co-fundador del CUC habla: Otro ex-militante de la guerrilla ofrece declaraciones a prensa nacional sobre EGP,” *Diario Impacto*, October 23, 1981; “Se entrega guerrillero fundador del CUC,” *Prensa Libre*, October 23, 1981.

⁸¹ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

He tried to speak in monotone, he said, in an unnatural manner so that no one could understand him.⁸²

The final strange episode of his capture occurred at the end of November. He was to speak to his own community of Santa Cruz del Quiché, army officials decided. Toj told me that it was the final straw, and that he could not do it. The night before his scheduled trip to Santa Cruz, he escaped from the army barracks in Guatemala City, after nearly five months in captivity. By that time, he said, he was allowed to walk around the barracks; guards were accustomed to him. He claims that he saw an opportunity when the guards were not looking and slipped out.⁸³

Toj boarded a bus, he said, and in a panic tried to decide where to go. He considered contacts who lived in the capital from CUC, from the church, and from Quetzaltenango. He was unsure where to turn, since he had publicly condemned the EGP. Who would believe he was not a traitor? He went to the home of a CUC collaborator and asked for money and clothes. The man was skeptical, Toj recounted: “*Vos*, they say you’re with the army.” It was a huge blow, he said. The CUC contact gave him a hiding place and clothes from Sololá (where indigenous men wear elements of *traje*.)

The next day a friend from El Quiché arrived, and by afternoon Toj made contact with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy. Hernández Ixcoy in turn connected him with Gustavo Meoño, one of the EGP *comandantes*. The next day Toj was in the hands of the EGP leadership in the capital. They gave him a gun, he said, and accepted him back “as a

⁸² Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁸³ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

friend.” They decided to make a public proclamation, to “demoralize” the army by announcing that Toj had been rescued, that the EGP had “achieved the escape of *compañero* Emeterio Toj Medrano.” With Toj’s own voice they recorded an announcement and commandeered a radio station in the capital to broadcast it. Thus, Toj himself announced to the nation that his rescue was “another demonstration of the incapacity ... of the army of assassins of [Romeo] Lucas García.” “The Popular Revolutionary War,” an EGP statement asserted, “had extended practically to the entire country. Our Guerrilla Army of the Poor is striking ... the repressive forces not only in the mountains and campesino areas far from the capital, but also in the main departmental seats including the capital of the country.”⁸⁴

The army countered with an announcement that Toj had come to them freely and had been free to go. Officials also claimed that he had agreed to return to his former contacts to inform on their activities.⁸⁵ Yet the escape reportedly cost the vice-minister of defense, General Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, his job.⁸⁶

The effects of the episode were costly for Toj and more broadly, for connections among revolutionaries and the indigenous movement. Before Toj’s kidnapping, “we were all with him,” says one Quetzaltenango-area activist, “here in Xela [Quetzaltenango] *indígenas* had begun to move.”⁸⁷ Seeing Toj on television in the hands

⁸⁴ Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres, “Logramos la fuga del compañero Hemeterio Toj Medrano,” no date.

⁸⁵ “Supuesta Fuga se Explica,” *El Imparcial*, December 3, 1981.

⁸⁶ From testimony of army witness, in ODHAG, *Nunca más*, p. 169.

⁸⁷ Interview with activist, November 13, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

of the army, however, raised alarm. His escape deepened suspicions. And certain of his assertions, activists said, rang true.

The event coincided with growing resentment among *indígenas* over talks with the *guerrilla*. The very type of discrimination Toj condemned in his press conference infuriated activist *indígenas*; even Toj admitted that for him there was a grain of truth in what he said about racism on the left.⁸⁸ All the guerrilla *comandantes* were ladinos and the combatants *indígenas*, activists complained. In meetings with the *guerrilla*, they said, ladinos would send *indígenas* for wood, as if it that were their role. “We said no,” one activist explained to me. “In truth, the class struggle will leave us in the same conditions, because they [on the left] don’t value indigenous identity. It was the same as in the universities, everywhere ... only class-struggle, only socio-economics.”⁸⁹

Toj “came to us and maintained contacts,” said Ricardo Cajas, referring to the period before Toj was captured. “Every time he came to my house, the discussion went like this: ‘Emeterio, they are using us. There is no ethnic revindication. Where are indigenous rights, where is the right to indigenous autonomy?’” “We always collaborated,” Cajas explains, but the final aim, massive incorporation of indigenous activists, was never achieved. “We weren’t convinced that it was a struggle of *indígenas*,” he said. The left could incorporate indigenous campesinos, but had much more difficulty with “organized groups, groups that were questioning, discussing” the arguments and shortcomings of the revolution.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Interview with Emeterio Toj Medrano, September 29, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁸⁹ Interview with activist, November 13, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

⁹⁰ Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

Ricardo Cajas describes a meeting in Patzicía in 1982 when activists met specifically to negotiate the position of *indígenas* in the revolutionary movement. Jesuits came, and CUC and EGP member Pablo Ceto. “They came to say that the *cristerianos* were already taking on a role,” Cajas remembers, “through [the organization] Justicia y Paz. The *universitarios* are in, labor is in it.... Now what part are the *indígenas* going to take?”⁹¹

Hernández Ixcoy remembers the meeting as a moment when the EGP took what he believed was a radical and not entirely successful position, demanding that those in the *movimiento indígena* either formally enter the revolutionary movement or be cut off from it. An intense discussion ensued, Cajas recalls, and evidence of territoriality was apparent. “We *indígenas* don’t necessarily have to stop being *indígenas* to be revolutionaries,” Cajas and others declared. “We support revolutionary resistance,” they said, “but why won’t the left take up ethnic claims? Their [the leftists’] position was that they would discuss it when they took over the government. We said no, we have to discuss it now, before.”⁹²

They finally agreed that the *movimiento indígena* would go on discussing the matter alone. The others left and the *indígenas* stayed on. There was no one among them from Patzicía, Cajas recalled, to justify their presence in the meeting hall, so they hung banners indicating that they were from APROFAM, a family planning organization, in case the army came. “We were worried about the army,” Cajas remembered, “but [also]

⁹¹ Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

⁹² Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 29, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

concerned that the very left could become our adversary as well.” It did not happen that way, he says, but they were worried nonetheless.⁹³

When they were forced to choose sides, said Hernández Ixcoy, most in the *movimiento indígena* joined the efforts of CUC and the armed revolution. “[But] those who did not trust CUC, left the Coordinadora,” which then fell apart. He felt that the EGP/CUC ultimatum had been a mistake, he said. Rather than respect the autonomy of the cultural movement and forge alliances, the revolutionary left had cut them off.⁹⁴

Propelled by Panzós and the Spanish embassy disaster, popular, indigenous, and revolutionary organizations had taken steps to join forces in 1980 and 1981.⁹⁵ But unity proved to be fleeting and as we will see, repression devastating. Domingo Hernández

⁹³ Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 29, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

⁹⁴ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, March 1, 2002, Chimaltenango.

⁹⁵ In part, through the Frente Popular 31 de Enero (FP-31), which Domingo Hernández Ixcoy helped found. The FP-31 was announced on the one-year anniversary of the Spanish embassy massacre that its name commemorated. It aimed to institutionalize the coalition of groups that had come together to protest state violence in 1980; it ended up being a short-lived umbrella organization of groups supporting the revolutionary left, campesino, labor, and student organizations: Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC); Núcleos de Obreros Revolucionarios “Felipe Antonio García” (NOR); Coordinadora de Pobladores “Trinidad Gómez Hernández”(CDP); Cristianos Revolucionarios “Vicente Menchú” (CRVM); Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario “Robin García” (FERG); and members of the Frente Democrático contra la Represión (FDCR). The FP-31 declared itself a “Revolutionary Organization of the Masses” aiming to “remove [President] Lucas [García] from power along with the military, economic, and political forces that sustain him and install the Revolutionary Government, Popular and Democratic.” In CENSORSOG, Hoja informativa del Centro de Servicios para la Solidaridad con el Pueblo de Guatemala, Año 1, no. 2, February 1981. Arturo Arias observes that all of these organizations except CUC were crushed by the state counterinsurgency offensive of 1981 to 1983. “By the end of 1983 there was no trace left of the January 31st Popular Front” Arias, *Controversy*, p. 5.

Ixcoy said that ultimately the left turned on the indigenous movement as traitors. They preferred “Indians who didn’t think,” he said, “Indians who didn’t question.”⁹⁶

The Indigenous Revolutionary Movement

The splits between the *movimiento indígena* and the guerrilla armies have been the subject of rumor, intrigue, and suspicion. *Indígenas* estranged from the ladino-led *guerrilla* formed several small revolutionary groups, partially armed and largely or entirely made up of indigenous leaders and members, often with experience in the EGP or ORPA. Accusations circulated about *guerrilla* reprisals, including executions, against those *indígenas* who formed separate guerrilla groups. They remain rumors, unsubstantiated by the UN and Catholic Church truth commissions.

In various guises – Nuestro Movimiento, Movimiento Indígena Revolucionario, Movimiento Indio Tojil, Movimiento Revolucionario del Pueblo Ixim – these *indígena* called for an end to both economic *and* ethnic oppression as the key to liberating Guatemala: one without the other, they argued, would result in an incomplete revolution. Observers have noted, however, that like the ladino-led guerrilla movement, revolutionary indigenous groups failed to give both of these forms of oppression their due. “They never tackled the question of class in its full dimension,” says Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, “just as CUC *mentioned* the ethnic question, but never developed it.”⁹⁷

The Movimiento Indígena Revolucionario, or MIR, was born out of the conflicts that arose in the 1982 meeting in Patzicía. As Ricardo Cajas explains, MIR “was not very well known, but it was our effort to say, okay, if the popular organizations have an

⁹⁶ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, September 7, 2002, Chimaltenango.

⁹⁷ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, August 20, 2002, Chimaltenango.

armed *guerrilla* wing, then we will have an armed *guerrilla* wing as *indígenas*.... In the movement MIR we said ‘we are going to die, but with an indigenous voice, not used.’”⁹⁸

Miguel Alvarado describes MIR as having members from Quetzaltenango and Chimaltenango, some from Huehuetenango and San Marcos. “But there weren’t many of us ..., perhaps a hundred people in the western highlands,” about one-fifth of them armed, he said. According to Alvarado, the group had a good working relationship with ORPA because several members had belonged to that group. Others had been in the EGP before forming the separate indigenous movement.⁹⁹

Nuestro Movimiento was an earlier and larger group that separated from ORPA, with *indígenas* and ladinos in its membership. It was very attuned to indigenous issues, organizers say, and maintained good relationships with the all-indigenous groups.¹⁰⁰ All of these splinter groups, Alvarado claims, were seeking equality, not vengeance of *indígenas* against ladinos: “what we sought was a better standard of living for all Guatemalans, *indígenas* or ladinos, a relation of equality. With equality, discrimination ... would disappear.”¹⁰¹

The left didn’t look upon the groups favorably, however; in the words of Alvarado, they “always saw us with ‘bad eyes.’” They wanted *indígenas* to participate

⁹⁸ Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

⁹⁹ Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

¹⁰⁰ Edgar Palma Lau was the founder and *comandante* of Nuestro Movimiento. The intent of the group was not to provoke the army into a guerrilla-style war, but to organize regionally, forming a corps of combatants that could liberate a region and install regional governments, so the army wouldn’t or couldn’t enter and commit massacres. Palma and all of the group’s leaders were killed in 1983 or 1984, and Nuestro Movimiento died with them.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

with them, he said, but on their terms. “For them, the indigenous struggle was put aside....” That was what concerned *indígenas*, he said, what many disagreed with. “They left these [guerrilla] organizations because they seemed not to meet their goals for a complete indigenous revindication. So we were seen as counter-revolutionaries, because we believed in our own indigenous struggle That was basically the essence of problems.”¹⁰²

Miguel Alvarado had been in the urban front of the EGP and the urban front of ORPA, but left those organizations for the all-indigenous movement. “What destroyed everything,” Alvarado said, “was that they always gave more opportunities to ladinos ..., didn’t base assignments or opportunities on merit. For example, a ladino would come from the capital, who knew nothing of the *pueblos*, the *aldeas* in the heart of the struggle.... When they arrived, they would inevitably be made leaders, superiors, occupy privileged posts without knowing [the region]. This bothered, disgusted many indigenous combatants.... It was the downfall of everything. *Indígenas* deserted ... because there was no justice.”¹⁰³

Writing in the early 1980s, Guatemalan academic and activist Arturo Arias published an account of the development of indigenous movements in the 1970s. In it he directed considerable animosity at Alvarado, whom he labeled the “frontrunner” of the “orthodox *indigenistas*.”¹⁰⁴ He portrayed the “indigenous bourgeoisie,” personified by Alvarado, as standing in the way of the revolution and suggested that ties existed between

¹⁰² Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

¹⁰³ Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

¹⁰⁴ Arias, “El movimiento indígena,” p. 99, and Arias, “Changing Indian Identity,” p. 253. See also above, chapter 1, note 13.

them and the US Central Intelligence Agency. These assertions were echoed by others in the EGP. When I asked Alvarado about Arias' characterization of the indigenous movement, he noted that "as a beginning, as one of the first documents to deal with this theme, [Arias' work] is very good. But as an accurate document? They portrayed us as counterrevolutionaries, that was completely false. It was perhaps more a subjective fear of many ladino revolutionary leaders than a real danger."¹⁰⁵

As Ricardo Cajas explained, the misrepresentations and fears went two ways.

I think many [indigenous] leaders at the time were more afraid of the *guerrilla* than the army. The *guerrilla* knew where we were, we had been collaborating with them. The army ... didn't know much about us, since we had kept the Coordinadora in secrecy.¹⁰⁶

"We wanted to make known that we weren't against the revolution," Cajas said, but wanted to insist at the same time that *indígenas* not be used, or denied their identity as they saw it. Discrimination was a pattern on the right and the left, he insisted. The guerrilla "wasn't cruel like the army, but had the same tendency" of ethnic discrimination.¹⁰⁷

Indígenas in an organization called the Movimiento Indio Tojil caused a stir in the early 1980s with the publication of a document entitled, "Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista a la república popular federal."¹⁰⁸ Its authors expressed the familiar

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Miguel Alvarado, November 7, 2002, Cantel.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 28, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Ricardo Cajas, August 30, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

¹⁰⁸ Exact dates of its publication are unclear; it seems to have been written and circulated in 1982 after Ríos Montt took power, since it mentions the "deceptive integrationist

argument for a multi-sided revolutionary struggle against class and ethnic oppression. “A revolution cannot be selective,” they wrote, “where some forms of oppression are destroyed and others conserved, where some are considered urgent and others deferrable.”¹⁰⁹ But what was new and radical about the document – and quickly denounced by activists on the left – was the Tojil’s explicit assertion of Maya nationhood and call for political independence for the *pueblo indígena*:

... Guatemala is not a nation but a society, ... an institutionalized collectivity kept unified by the coercive force of state institutions.... Guatemala ... is a bourgeois authority that dominates a multiplicity of nationalities and claims to be a nation – ‘single and indivisible.’¹¹⁰

For the *pueblo maya*, they asserted, “the ‘Guatemalan nation,’ in the sense of community, does not exist; if it does exist, they do not consider it theirs, nor do they feel themselves included in it, but rather consider themselves its victim.”¹¹¹

politics” related to the *indio*, programs including putting “*indios* in the Council of State,” which took place in 1982 (see below). The revolutionary left was clearly reacting to ideas expressed in the document by 1982, so if its publication date was later, the ideas in it, at least, were circulating by then. See chapter 7. Bastos and Camus point out that its date of publication was likely 1984, since the document refers to 460 years of colonization; Alvarado arrived in Guatemala in 1524. See Bastos and Camus, *Entre el mecapal y el cielo*, p. 68, n. 17. See the Tojil document in CIRMA Archivo Histórico, Colección Infostelle, binder 125, 27 pages. The Movimiento Indio Tojil, according to an account in Bastos and Camus, existed from 1980 to 1988. See anonymous interview excerpt, Bastos and Camus, *Entre el mecapal y el cielo*, p. 65-66. The demands of the Tojiles were rearticulated in the 1990s by the Mayanista movement. See chapter 7 of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁹ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 6.

¹¹⁰ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 1.

¹¹¹ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 8.

A revolution, the Tojil document asserted, had to reverse ladino bourgeois economic and political domination. “For the *pueblo indio* the revolutionary struggle is simultaneously social and national,” they argued. A revolution had to attack not just the present government and its capitalist system, but the centralized state structure itself.¹¹² They called for the establishment of a federalist system with a semi-autonomous Maya nation or nations within Guatemala; whether it would include one Maya nation or a plurality of *naciones* – K’iche’, Mam, Kekchi’, etc. – was left somewhat open. But their preference for unified Maya action is apparent: in asserting a “*panindiana*” identity, they argued, by speaking in terms of “*nuestro pueblo,*” “*nuestra gente,*” “*nuestros connacionales,*” they could take colonialist terms, “apolitical denominations given by their oppressors,” and infuse them with political content.¹¹³ Their proposal: a *República Popular Maya* in partnership with a ladino republic, equal partners in a Guatemala state.¹¹⁴

Technically, the proposed relationship amounted not to a separation from the Guatemalan state, but semi-autonomy for Mayas and ladinos within that state. A total separation would not be advisable nor feasible given the economic and political realities of Guatemala, they argued, nor could it be the basis for political stability. They

¹¹² Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 6.

¹¹³ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 8. The document discusses pre-conquest Mayan societies “constituted of various dynamic and interdependent nations,” and colonial measures to break them down into controllable groups, while at the same time homogenizing them into *indios*. The *pueblos indios* now sought, they argued, not only to reclaim their individual ethnic identities, but to also claim a “national panethnic identity.” See pp.7-8, and section 3.2, “La comunidad mayance: una nación multiétnica?”, pp. 13-18.

¹¹⁴ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 23.

characterized their proposal as a “viable and moderate” alternative.¹¹⁵ Each republic would have legislative and administrative autonomy in the areas of economics, culture, and politics; they would share common responsibilities relating to the military, finances, and foreign policy. All would be Guatemalan citizens; unity of the country would be assured by “agreements and compromises freely consented to by both parties, and never again by the force of one and the subjugation of the other.”¹¹⁶ The Tojiles argued that this was the formula for political stability because it maintained ethnic diversity within a single decentralized state.¹¹⁷

It is not difficult to see why other activists were alarmed by the proposal, with its assertion of separate ladino and indigenous republics. Moreover, the integrity of the single state of Guatemala did seem to be at issue for the future: the Tojiles indicated a desire eventually to achieve greater unity between their republic of “Mayas of the East” (in Guatemala) and the those “Mayas of the West” (in Mexico). “That is to say that the Mayas of Guatemala consider it their historic destiny to be more connected to their *connacionales mayas* who fall under the jurisdiction of other States”¹¹⁸ Despite these intentions, the paper set out to convince ladino revolutionaries that the proposed

¹¹⁵ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 19.

¹¹⁶ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 23.

¹¹⁷ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 19.

¹¹⁸ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 20. What “Mayas of the West” may have thought of such a proposal is not clear, although a recent study by Wolfgang Gabbert suggests that Mayas of the Yucatán at least would have been very reluctant participants in any Maya nation. See Gabbert, *Becoming Maya: Ethnicity and Social Inequality in Yucatán since 1500* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004.) A comparative study of indigenous movements of the 1970s in Mexico and Guatemala would be helpful in unraveling some of the issues raised in this dissertation. I found intriguing connections between Guatemala and Mexico in my research, but the differences are striking.

relationship was in their interest. Like *indígenas*, the *proletariado ladino*, ladino urban and rural workers, the Tojiles argued, had an ambiguous relationship to the “Guatemalan nation” as it existed, since that system exploited, repressed, and marginalized them. It had to be recognized, they insisted, that the claim of a single Guatemalan nation, which was in fact a bourgeois nation, was key to the capitalist system that revolutionaries struggled against. It was up to revolutionary ladinos to “revise their traditional models of interpretation and organization of Guatemalan society,” to envision, if they could, a nation *not* dominated by ladinos.¹¹⁹

The Tojil document addressed the positions of the revolutionary guerrilla armies explicitly:

There are some revolutionary organizations ... that acknowledge the ‘ethnic and cultural’ complexity of the country, but that still are not clear regarding the type of national order that would reign in the post-revolutionary society. These organizations seem to have surmounted the bourgeois colonialist version of Guatemalan reality, but due to an ideological block they suffer, or ... due to their colonial interests that they must defend, they return over and over to ... racial discrimination, cultural oppression; they also return to solutions in terms of ‘necessary national integration of the indigenous ethnicities.’¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 5.

¹²⁰ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 11.

The Tojil position wholly rejected that integration. Furthermore, it contested the left's characterization of the Tojiles and others in indigenous movements as counterrevolutionary, setting out their own definition of socialism:

... the *indios* believe that socialism cannot be reduced to only the socialization of the means of production, but also state structures.... [They] also believe that socialism does not consist in socializing particular forms of life and in the standardization of certain national characters, but in the recognition and free expression of said differences The mode of socialist thinking of the *pueblo indio* differs from the mode of socialist thinking of the *pueblo ladino*.¹²¹

It was urgent to deal with these issues, they argued. Otherwise, “sooner or later, there will be a fight among socialists.” They argued that it would pit those like the Tojiles, who sought a new state structure, against the revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow one centralist state but implant another. The bourgeois ladino right, they asserted, wanted the *indio* only as a symbol of national folklore, and persecuted him culturally and as a class. “At the moment,” they continued, “it appears also that the ladino left ... wants him as a proletarian class ... and uses his revolutionary potential; but for lack of historical vision and political myopia, it negates him and obstructs him as a nation with a right to self-determination.”¹²²

The document ended with the following notes: “Some *indios* will find the present document to be very daring/impudent [*atrevido*] and will oppose its content. But their opposition is the same as that of the Roman slaves who trembled and protested the

¹²¹ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 24.

¹²² Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 27.

announcement that they would lose their chains and their condition as slaves.” The opposition of ladinos, on the other hand, was to be expected. “Their opposition is the same as that of the bourgeoisie when the proletariat demands that they disappear as a dominant class and be reborn In other words, for the ladino to accept these demands, he would practically have to stop being ladino-colonizer and transform himself into a new social and national being.”¹²³

The Tojiles, the document makes clear, considered themselves to be revolutionaries. Moreover, they criticized activists as only concerned with culture: “At the present, there are various ‘studied’ *indios* who approach/interpret [*abordan*] the *pueblo indio* in the same terms as the colonizer and repeat the same mistakes: they “obfuscate their political nature,” reducing their identity to only “one of its aspects (culture, history, language, etc.)” The Tojiles offered a class-based critique of those *indígenas* who had “fully assimilated the colonial bourgeois interpretation of the Guatemalan reality,” criticizing students, professionals, and businessmen who benefited from cozy relations with the bourgeois ladino state.¹²⁴

It is difficult to gauge the reaction of other indigenous activists to the Tojil position. Interviewees point to the Tojil paper as something radical, its debut a moment that stands out in their memories and in their attempts to reconstruct this history. It seems that, as its authors predicted, it was not universally embraced as a viable option by

¹²³ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 27.

¹²⁴ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 8. References like this (once again!) point to the need for research on these sectors. As we will see in the next chapter, this critique is relevant to the Mayanista movement that rose to prominence in the 1990s. It drew freely on the Tojiles’ positions, but dropped their demands for structural change.

indigenous activists, although it was appealing to some and its ideas became prominent in certain circles.¹²⁵ Arguably the importance of the document relates to the fact that its publication allowed the revolutionary left to portray the explosive idea of a Maya “nation” as the goal of all those *indígenas* outside of the main guerrilla armies.

The fight with the revolutionary left came sooner rather than later. The left, including *indígenas* such as Pablo Ceto, attacked the Tojil paper.¹²⁶ Ceto, like Arias,

¹²⁵ While the ideas of the Tojil paper were seen as radical, they also had a certain appeal to some indigenous organizations. We can see an example of this reaction from an *indígena* (margin notes identify him as “Fernando”) in a group called the *Comité de Asistencia y Solidaridad de los Desplazados* (Committee of Assistance and Solidarity with the Displaced, or sometimes just *Comité de Desplazados*), a group that publicized repression, kidnappings, and assassinations against *indígenas*. In correspondence sent to the German NGO Infostelle, “Fernando” comments on and provides Infostelle with position papers described as internal discussion materials of a “Coordinadora Kakchikel.” The documents closely echo the Tojil manifesto, calling for a federated system in Guatemala and autonomy for the *pueblo maya*. The papers set out a nationalist position with the same limitations as the Tojiles: the authors “accept the present borders of the Guatemalan state” despite their colonial imposition and the separation they entail between Guatemalan Mayas and those in Mexico; and they do not intend to reject or expel Guatemala’s ladinos. Like the Tojiles, they argue not for a socialist revolution strictly following Marx or Lenin, but a “*socialismo autogestionario*.” No. 1, P. 11. “Nacionalismo indio y Marxismo,” p. 1. The documents, “Fernando” asserts, were a starting point for discussions between unnamed organizations and the “Coordinadora Kakchikel.” The proposals were “completely rejected” by those organizations, he claims, but he told Infostelle that the Comité de Desplazados saw some value in them. “... the *Comité* uses them as education/training materials [*material de formación*], that is to say we are ... in agreement with these proposals and a discussion is being established between the *coordinadora* and the *comité* regarding this line [of thought].” The typed letter is marked by several hand-written corrections, among them the crossing-out of the word “completely” before “in agreement” Letter from “Fernando,” July 1985, CIRMA Archivo Histórico, Colección Infostelle, del 11.01.09 al 11.02.02, Sig. 128. Also note the striking similarities between the Tojil document, the documents attributed to the “Coordinadora Kakchikel,” and “Mayanist” positions articulated by Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil beginning in the late 1980s. Compare the Tojil positions, for example, to those expressed by Cojtí in CEDIM, *Foro del pueblo maya y los candidatos a la presidencia de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Editorial Cholsamaj, 1992). Cojtí is a Kakchikel from Tecpán, Chimaltenango. See chapter 7 for discussion of Cojtí and the Mayanistas.

¹²⁶ Interview with Pablo Ceto, September 28, 2002, Guatemala City.

accused its authors of being counterrevolutionaries tied to the CIA, which at the time was courting indigenous groups in Nicaragua to gain their support against the Sandinista revolution. The Tojil document did mention the indigenous struggle in Nicaragua and the problems *indígenas* experienced with the Sandinistas, who “completely ignored everything related to the fundamental political and cultural rights of the indigenous and black *étnias*, despite the fact that they had been fighting ... against the Somoza dictatorship”¹²⁷ But the accusations of links between the Guatemalan indigenous movements and the CIA seem to be unfounded. The *movimiento indígena* frequently expressed extreme anti-US sentiment, condemning US economic imperialism and involvement in Guatemalan counterinsurgency.

To the end, many of the activists in the *movimiento indígena* felt themselves part of the revolutionary opposition, although their battle lines were sometimes drawn not only against the government, but against the *guerrilla* as well, at least politically. The revolutionary left in turn wanted the indigenous movement to join its struggle, but the leadership terms and autonomy insisted upon by the latter were unacceptable. With the separatist sentiment in the Tojil document, the ladino-led revolutionary movements turned fully against the indigenous revolutionaries. Domingo Hernández Ixcoy notes the tragic irony of what happened next: while division plagued the opposition, the state made no differentiation between them. The army did not ask whether they were ladinos or *indígenas*, EGP, ORPA, or Movimiento Tojil, *clasistas* or *culturalistas*; repression

¹²⁷ Tojiles, “Guatemala: de la república burguesa centralista,” p. 25.

against them was indiscriminate. As Hernández Ixcoy put it, the state crushed them all.¹²⁸

The Counterinsurgency State, 1978-1983¹²⁹

The UN-sponsored Truth Commission in Guatemala writes that state violence spiraled in the early 1980s until it reached levels that were “unimaginable.” The strategy of the Romeo Lucas García regime (1978-1982) was to “eliminate” the social movement, urban and rural.¹³⁰ We have seen some of the effects of those policies. Indigenous language radio schools were shut down or forced to abandon “anti-government” programming, their directors disappeared. Cooperatives were crushed or co-opted, their leaders killed, and campesino organizing was forced underground. Catholic priests were under constant scrutiny, many forced to leave their posts, others murdered. By 1982, there were only 38 priests left in the diocese of Sololá, a drop from 60 just three years earlier. The entire diocese of El Quiché was forced to close in 1980 due to severe repression and the killing of several priests. The total number of priests in Guatemala fell by half in two years, with 600 priests in 1979 (80% foreigners) falling to 300 in 1981.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Interview with Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, August 20, 2002, Chimaltenango.

¹²⁹ The human rights record of the Guatemalan state has been extensively documented, most recently in the two lengthy truth commission reports, the 12-volume work by the UN-sponsored CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, and the 4-volume report by the Guatemalan Archbishop’s Human Rights office, ODHAG, *Nunca Más*. See also several decade’s worth of reporting by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch/Americas.

¹³⁰ CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, 1:183.

¹³¹ Rother, *The Shepherd Cannot Flee*, p. 86. The Diocese of El Quiché reports that at least 16 Catholic priests or nuns were kidnapped or assassinated during counterinsurgency violence, 155 were threatened or expelled from the country, and 30

The Maryknoll Centro Apostólico in Huehuetenango was subject to on-going surveillance, harassment, and violence, with leaders attending its programs disappeared and killed. It closed its doors in late 1979. According to Father Jensen, Maryknoll estimates that of the 1500 students in the program, a staggering 400-500 were later killed in counter-insurgency violence.¹³² As state violence decimated the ranks of educated *indígenas* in the 1980s, Instituto Indígena Santiago alumni were also prominent among the targeted, dead and disappeared. A Santiago publication expressed the institute's understanding of violence directed at its own: "many young alumni of the Instituto Indígena Santiago were assassinated for their high level of consciousness of the reality their people live and for their commitment to their communities."¹³³

The army sacked the office and student quarters of Maryknoll's Centro Indígena in the capital. Files containing information about local organizers all over the highlands were stolen, recalls Father Jensen, who was head of the Center at the time. Following the Spanish embassy massacre, he feared that it was becoming more a danger than a sanctuary for organizers. A staff member was kidnapped by the army and another went into hiding. The priests at the center surreptitiously destroyed the remaining files and closed the house in the spring of 1980. Jensen himself was forced to flee the country.

Catholic church-sponsored leadership training centers were closed. *El Quiché: el pueblo y su iglesia*, p. 147 fn. 141.

¹³² Telephone interview with Father Daniel Jensen, March 30, 2004.

¹³³ Oscar Azmitia and Manuel Salazar, *Rub'ix Qatinamit: El canto del Pueblo, Estudiantina del Instituto Indígena Santiago*, no date, p. 20. Socorro, the more conservative of the two schools, attempted to resist politicization among its student body. The outspoken 1973 *reina indígena* of Quetzaltenango, for example, María Elvira Quijivix quoted above, was part of an entire class expelled from the school for girls' suspected political ideas and organizing. Interview with María Elvira Quijivix, October 7, 2002, Quetzaltenango.

When General Efraín Ríos Montt took over the government (1982-1983), the level of repression against activists seemed to lessen, at least in Guatemala City. But far greater numbers were being killed in the countryside. The army intensified its “scorched earth” campaign in the highlands, completely destroying hundreds of villages and displacing hundreds of thousands of rural residents. The army militarized the countryside to an extent previously unseen, established mandatory (though officially voluntary) civil patrols in nearly every indigenous community, and resettled *indígenas* in army-controlled “development poles” and “model villages.” It was a concerted – and effective – effort to “drain the sea” in which the insurgents swam, explained military officials, referring to Mao Tse-tung’s metaphor of guerrillas as fish in water.¹³⁴

While aiming to achieve firm control of the countryside, Ríos Montt pursued a public relations campaign regarding Mayas, aimed at national and international opinion. He created a Council of State to address issues of Guatemalan “national identity.” The council had thirty-four members, with ten *indígenas* (and ten alternates) from eleven ethnic groups included as “ethnic councilors.”¹³⁵ Ríos Montt and the “ethnic councilors” took part in *Día de la Raza* celebrations in 1982. He impressed President Ronald Reagan as being “totally dedicated to democracy in Guatemala,” and Reagan complained to a *New York Times* reporter that Ríos Montt was getting a “bum rap.”¹³⁶ The Guatemalan Council of Bishops disagreed: “... never in our national history,” they wrote in May

¹³⁴ See Schirmer, *Guatemalan Military Project* for discussion of the Ríos Montt plan of government, pp. 23-25.

¹³⁵ *El Imparcial*, August 18, September 13, October 12, 1982.

¹³⁶ *New York Times*, December 5, 1982, p. 1.

1982, “have such grave extremes been reached. The assassinations now fall into the category of genocide.”¹³⁷

¹³⁷ La Conferencia Episcopal de Guatemala, “Conferencia Episcopal de Guatemala Condena Masacre de Campesinos,” May 27, 1982.

Chapter 7: May All Rise Up?

When I go to political gatherings and meet *compañeros* again, we say to each other, you're still alive! But while we're embracing we look over each other's shoulders. Is someone seeing this?

– Q'eqchí woman activist, 2002, Alta Verapaz¹

Now it is a question of finding out if the [popular movement's] adoption of Indian ethnic demands is a tactical move or if it is real and authentic support....

– Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, 1997²

I dare say that the *militares* understood the ethnic component and how to manipulate it better than the revolutionaries. They understood it was a very serious issue ... and that they had to disarticulate it, prevent indigenous support for revolution.

– Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, 2002³

The politics of opposition and counterinsurgency shifted in the 1980s and 1990s.

This chapter briefly follows the revolutionary and indigenous movements as they took their offensive to the international level, where the gulf widened between the main guerrilla armies, joined in the umbrella *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* or URNG, and a sector of the *movimiento indio* advocating nationalist separation.⁴

Meanwhile, the Guatemalan state and army, secure in their grip on the countryside, marched down “constitutional corridors” and professed allegiance to democracy.

¹ Interview with community health worker who wishes to remain anonymous, January 24, 2002, Cobán.

² Cojtí, *El movimiento maya*, p. 83.

³ Interview with Domingo Hernandez Ixcoy, September 7, 2002, Chimaltenango.

⁴ The URNG, founded in 1982, was made up of the four main guerrilla armies, the EGP and ORPA, along with the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR), and the Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo (PGT), Guatemala's Communist Party.

In that context, the state and a weakened URNG eventually faced each other across the negotiating table. With input from various organized sectors of society they hammered out an official end to thirty-six years of civil war.⁵ The post-accords “peace” has been fraught with unresolved conflicts, and political activism continues to be met by state repression. As this chapter’s epigraphs suggest, legacies of the past – histories of activism, mixed with the trauma of violence and loss, fear, distrust – remain a tangible part of the present.

The late 1980s and 1990s were years of considerable polarization among organized *indígenas*, the development of which I will outline below.⁶ In some respects, the intense disagreements of the period reflect familiar points of contention from the 1970s. But they were different in at least one important respect: in the 1970s and early 1980s, the indigenous activists in this study, even if they disagreed with the ladino-led revolutionary left, felt themselves part of broader, multi-ethnic movements for change in Guatemalan society; that was no longer the case for part of the *movimiento indígena* in the late 1980s and 1990s. Self-described *Mayanistas* publicly took up the Tojiles’ call for Maya nationalism discussed in the last chapter, while quietly dropping the Tojiles’ demands for regime change. For reasons related to national politics and international influences, Mayanists came to dominate debate about “indigenous rights” and personify the indigenous struggle in the 1990s, which revolved around culturally-focused demands.

⁵ Under President Cerezo, who came to power in 1986, the government began talks with the guerrilla armies, consolidated in the URNG. While negotiations stopped and started repeatedly for the next eight years with little progress, in the mid-1990s preliminary peace accords were finally drafted with the mediation of the United Nations. The Guatemalan government and URNG signed a final peace accord on December 29, 1996.

⁶ For detailed treatment of indigenous groups and coalitions since 1986, see Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el silencio*; *Abriendo caminos*, and *Entre el mecapal y el cielo*.

Among the movement's protagonists were *indígenas* who had been part of 1970s activism, yet in the 1990s they distanced themselves and their claims from politics, as well as history. Mayas on the other side of the divide, those affiliated with the left, were viewed simply as *clasistas*; with a circumscribed definition of indigenous rights, *clasista* activism in the 1990s was interpreted as wholly separate from “indigenous” activism.

I have tried to demonstrate that during the formative years of pan-indigenous organizing, the 1960s and 1970s, demands made in the name of the *pueblo indígena* were relatively diverse, complex, and interdependent; contrasting ideologies reflected varied socio-economic and political positions of their proponents, but activists' struggles developed in relation to each other and to evolving ideas about identity and rights. When we look closely at organizing during that period, we see ethnic demands and calls for socio-economic change frequently woven together. I have sought to document how activist *indígenas* of many types – students and intellectuals, catechists, campesino organizers, revolutionaries, and beauty queens, interacted with, shaped, challenged, and reinforced each other's struggles.

How and why, then, does diversity seem to solidify in division in the 1980s and 1990s? As I discuss below, many factors exacerbated long-simmering tensions among *indígenas* over priorities and leadership: rigid revolutionary ideology on the left was accompanied by extremist positioning by the Tojiles; a violent and manipulative state helped drive home the wedge between opposition forces; international human rights norms that focused on certain rights as “indigenous” inadvertently diverted attention from other claims. Together in the 1990s these forces pitted *clasistas* against *Mayanistas*, with

activists in the respective camps no longer functioning – however tangentially – as components of a broad opposition movement.

As Guatemalans struggle to rebuild a society rent by violence, we are left with a pressing question (though one historians are loath to ask): can the past help us to understand where activist *indígenas* might go from here?

Indigenous Activism on the International Stage

The intensification of counterinsurgency from 1981-1983 hit hard in both urban Guatemala and the countryside, crippling the *guerrilla* through attacks on its “safe houses” in the capital and undermining its support bases in the highlands. With the opposition in disarray and leftist leaders in exile in Mexico and Nicaragua, Guatemala’s revolutionary struggle was waged after 1982 primarily at the international level, in alliances with solidarity movements in Europe and the US and in the international media.

In this context, the issue of ethnicity took on added prominence for the left in the early 1980s. The shift was likely a result both of the realities of state genocide against the Maya and leftist leaders’ awareness of growing international concerns about indigenous rights; it is safe to assume that revolutionary activists and intellectuals were cognizant of the power – visual, emotional – of a revolutionary struggle with an indigenous face, especially in international arenas. In search of material and political support abroad, the guerrilla armies emphasized the state’s targeting of the *pueblo maya* and focused attention on indigenous support for and participation in the revolutionary movement.⁷

⁷ See Bastos and Camus, *Entre el mecapal y el cielo*, for a similar claim, pp. 71-3. Arturo Taracena (formerly of the EGP) has aptly described the impact of revolutionary *indígenas*

One “indigenous face” of the left which became prominent in international solidarity circles in the early 1980s was that of Rigoberta Menchú Tum, who was then in her early twenties, an *indígena* from an area of El Quiché with considerable support for the EGP, and not coincidentally, extreme state repression. Menchú, a CUC activist, was the daughter of Vicente Menchú, a CUC leader killed in the Spanish embassy fire in 1980. While in exile in Mexico in late 1981, Menchú traveled to Paris with a delegation of the January 31 Popular Front, a coalition of leftist groups including CUC and labor and student organizations. There she met anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who recorded her testimony and compiled the famous *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, first published in Spanish in 1983 and in English in 1984.⁸

The degree and kind of EGP involvement in the Menchú *testimonio* are somewhat unclear. Arturo Arias recounts that Menchú’s talents as a spokesperson were noted by an ORPA contact, who mentioned her to the EGP representative in Paris, Arturo Taracena.⁹ Taracena in turn arranged introductions between Menchú and Burgos-Debray, a Venezuelan and the wife of leftist intellectual Régis Debray. Conflicting claims have been made as to who contributed to editing the volume, with Burgos-Debray asserting that she was the sole editor and Taracena of the EGP also claiming to have had a hand in it. The manuscript was apparently approved by an EGP *comandante*, but there is

in European solidarity circles: “the *indígenas* conquered Europe before their own country.” Quoted in Bastos and Camus, *Entre el mecapal y el cielo*, p. 71.

⁸ Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. The first publication of the work was entitled *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, “My name is Rigoberta Menchú and this is how my consciousness was born.”

⁹ See Arturo Arias’ introduction to the volume he edited, *Controversy*, p. 6, and in the same volume, “Arturo Taracena Breaks His Silence,” interview by Luis Aceituno, pp. 82-94.

disagreement as to which one it was and how much interest the EGP initially had in the *testimonio*.¹⁰ In any event, it seems clear that the work ultimately proved useful: Menchú and her account allowed the *guerrilla* to claim to represent an indigenous struggle for justice. Diane Nelson has described Menchú as a “vital prosthetic” for a URNG that lacked *indígenas* in positions of authority.¹¹

Burgos-Debray later described the work as “of a journalistic nature that was supposed to help the movement in solidarity with Guatemala’s guerrillas.”¹² Menchú’s voice, argued Burgos-Debray in the book’s introduction, “allows the defeated to speak....”¹³ The language is strategically distanced from armed struggle, with Menchú portrayed as opting for the political arm of the revolutionary movement: “Words are her only weapons,” claims the editor.¹⁴ Yet the work clearly and unambiguously defends

¹⁰ Burgos-Debray claims that the commander-in-chief of the EGP, Rolando Morán, approved the manuscript, while Taracena asserts it was EGP leader Gustavo Meoño. See Arias, *Controversy*, p. 7. Meoño is the same *comandante* who orchestrated the announcement of Emeterio Toj Medrano’s “rescue” in 1981.

¹¹ As Nelson argues, while no *indígenas* were among the guerrilla commanders at the peace negotiating table, “the *mujer maya* in the form of Rigoberta Menchú prosthetically overcomes this lack of presence.” As she continues, “[Menchú] is both a Mayan woman, acting on the national and transnational stage, and a *mujer maya*, propping up the wounded body politic of a revolutionary movement that was militarily defeated.” Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound*, pp. 362-3.

¹² Quoted in Octavio Martí, “The Pitiful Lies of Rigoberta Menchú,” in Arias, *Controversy*, p. 79.

¹³ Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p. xi.

¹⁴ Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p. xi.

armed revolution, and in it Menchú makes explicit the connections between her family and the guerrilla.¹⁵

The task for the book was to make the Guatemalan conflict understandable to an international readership and to elicit empathy and support. To achieve these goals, Burgos-Debray leaned on familiar and patronizing interpretations of the *indio* when describing Menchú:

The first thing that struck me about her was her open, almost childlike smile. Her face was round and moon-shaped. Her expression was as guileless as that of a child and a smile hovered permanently on her lips....¹⁶

But readers soon get the message that despite appearances, this is a mobilized and articulate *india*:

I later discovered that her youthful air soon faded when she had to talk about the dramatic events that had overtaken her family. When she talked about that, you could see the suffering in her eyes, they lost their youthful sparkle and became the eyes of a mature woman who has known what it means to suffer....

¹⁵ For connections with the guerrilla, see Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, ch. 32. The issue of Menchú's membership or non-membership in the EGP has been the subject of much controversy in Guatemala. Menchú has publicly distanced herself from and criticized the URNG, especially since winning the Nobel Peace prize in 1992. Yet as anthropologist Diane Nelson writes, she "is popularly understood to be, if not part of, then quite sympathetic to the URNG." One of the (many) treasures of Nelson's *A Finger in the Wound* are the jokes she compiled that tell much about the Guatemalan national psyche. At the time of the Menchú's Nobel prize, Nelson writes, a popular joke asked, "What is Rigoberta's blood type? URNG-positive." Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound*, p. 362, fn. 3.

¹⁶ Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p. xiv.

I very soon became aware of her desire to talk and of her ability to express herself verbally.¹⁷

In the *testimonio*, Menchú is portrayed as speaking for *indígenas* across the Americas. But editor Burgos-Debray immediately weighs in on precisely which *indígenas* should be given audience, differentiating Menchú from *indígenas* advocating a separate ethnic struggle. It is a fine line that Burgos-Debray attempts to walk, passionately arguing for the indigenous struggle while condemning “indigenists” and their desires for separation. As Burgos-Debray writes,

In telling the story of her life, Rigoberta Menchú is ... issuing a manifesto on behalf of an ethnic group.... As a popular leader, her one ambition is to devote her life to overthrowing the relations of domination and exclusion which characterize *internal colonialism*. She and her people are taken into account only when their labour power is needed; culturally, they are discriminated against and rejected. Rigoberta Menchú's struggle is a struggle to modify and break the bonds that link her and her people to the *Ladinos*, and that inevitably implies changing the world. She is in no sense advocating a racial struggle, much less refusing to accept the irreversible fact of the existence of the *Ladinos*. She is fighting for the recognition of her culture, for acceptance of the fact that it is different and for her people's *rightful share of power*.¹⁸ (Emphasis added.)

¹⁷ Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, pp. xiv-xv.

¹⁸ Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p. xiii.

These aims, in fact, share much in common with those of members of various indigenous opposition and revolutionary groups – Ixim, Nuestro Movimiento, MIR – who, as we saw in chapter six, likewise stressed problems of “internal colonialism” and ethnically-based discrimination, and called for *indígenas* to have a role in shaping society and a degree of power. Yet Burgos-Debray simplifies the positions of indigenous revolutionaries, focusing exclusively on the most radical, the Tojiles and their call for Maya autonomy: “Then there are the ‘indigenists’ who want to recover the lost world of their ancestors and cut themselves off completely from European culture,” she wrote. “In order to do so, however, they use notions and techniques borrowed from that very culture. Thus, they promote the notion of an Indian nation.” These groups, too, “want to publicize their struggles in Paris,” says Burgos-Debray. But she warns readers that they, like other “*avant garde* groups which take up arms in various Latin American countries,” are not to be confused with revolutionaries – the four guerrilla groups of the URNG, the families of the disappeared, the trade unions:

Just as the groups which are or were engaged in armed struggle in America have supporters who adopt their political line, the Indians [read “indigenists”] too have their European supporters, many of whom are anthropologists. I do not want to start a polemic and I do not want to devalue any one form of activism; I am simply stating the facts.¹⁹

We know of course that she was not starting a polemic in 1982, but continuing one with over a decade-long history. The “facts” as well are a simplified version of more nuanced positions and complex historical relationships among organized *indígenas*.

¹⁹ Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p. xvii.

It was easy to portray (all) indigenous revolutionaries as separatists, however, because activists advocating separatism *were* prominent on the international scene, writing, establishing links to solidarity organizations in Europe and the US, and searching for funds. From the materials I could gather, it appears that the Tojil line of argument was amply represented at the international level. The German NGO Infostelle recently donated its archive from the period to the research institution CIRMA in Antigua, Guatemala. Among the collection are position papers similar to those by the Movimiento Indio Tojil, but with names that are vague, sometimes claiming to represent one ethnic group, other times the *pueblo maya* or *nación maya* collectively: “Las Naciones Maya-Quichés” from the “Tierra de los Maya-Quichés” (1982); the “Movimiento Indio de Guatemala,” writing from “Tierra de los mayas” (1983); and simply the “Movimiento Indio” (1983).²⁰

The materials offer a glimpse into these activists’ efforts to position themselves; they also reveal tensions between these indigenous revolutionaries and the URNG. One document apparently from 1982 (as indicated in a margin note) argues that financial support from international solidarity groups should flow directly to *indígenas* rather than exclusively to the four armies of the URNG. It is *indígenas* who are being massacred, the authors asserted, *indígenas* who are suffering, *indígenas* who are attacked as “subversives.” They pointed to the problems of discrimination suffered at the hands of

²⁰ See the Infostelle collection, CIRMA Archivo Histórico. The collection also includes explicitly cross-ethnic writings, arguing for a collective indigenous-ladino struggle. An unsigned document from November 1981, for example, asserts, “today beside our *hermanos ladinos* we will make the revolution.” It quotes the *Popol Vuh*, “*Que todos se levantan...*” It ends with the slogans, “*Indios y ladinos, a luchar para triunfar; Por la revolución guatemalteca, indios y ladinos a luchar.*” See “Siempre en pie de guerra,” Infostelle collection, CIRMA Archivo Histórico.

the ladino left and claimed to be shut off from access to resources. They insisted that they did not advocate cutting aid to the “four groups of the left,” but that solidarity groups should also “give a part to the *indígena*, who has neither voice nor vote”²¹

Other correspondence details ongoing violence in indigenous regions of the country, while simultaneously sending a message about the existence of Maya “nations,” as the Tojiles asserted. Unlike most human rights reports of the period, these accounts prominently included victims’ ethnic identification and at the same time, the “nations” to which they belonged: “*nación Cakchiquel*,” “*nación Mam*,” “*naciones Kekchí y Pocomchí*.”²² Another document echoes the Tojil argument that indigenous socialism is different from ladino socialism, calling for “the reconstruction and construction of Maya socialism.” Again a separate Maya nation is explicitly on the agenda of the “Movimiento Indio,” vital to its continued existence: “*Patria Maya o Exterminio!*,” a Maya nation or extermination.²³

The URNG and *indígenas* advocating Maya autonomy by this point were in direct contention, not just theoretically, but over political and financial support. The Tojil demands were completely unacceptable to leftist revolutionaries, who were ostensibly fighting for the creation of a new state; they would not acquiesce to that state being divided in two. Support for the indigenous groups, moreover, could directly cut into their own sources of funding. The URNG attacked the indigenous revolutionaries as counter-

²¹ CIRMA Infostelle collection, no title, dated by hand, 1982.

²² “Los pueblos maya-quiches de Guatemala a todos los pueblos del mundo consecuentes con los valores humanos,” signed Las Naciones Maya-Quichés, July 7, 1982, in Infostelle Collection, CIRMA Archivo Histórico.

²³ “Planteamientos del Movimiento Indio de Guatemala,” signed Movimiento Indio de Guatemala, August 1983, in Infostelle Collection, CIRMA Archivo Histórico.

revolutionary. Like Burgos-Debray had done in her portrayal of “indigenists,” they homogenized all indigenous-only groups and reduced their demands to just one: a Maya nation. That “nation” was not a legitimate demand, asserted one of the URNG groups, because Mayas had never been unified:

The large Indian mass is constituted by various small minorities, whose particular most distinctive feature consists of a multitude of languages.... so fragmented that we cannot identify [them] as a nation.... They were neither unified nor communal in the past, much less so after the ravages of conquest they can only be unified effectively into Guatemalan society through the revolution.²⁴

The EGP conceded the need for ethnic consciousness but argued that ethnic-specific claims would endanger the central struggle, class conflict. Without being fully grounded in “revolutionary class politics,” they warned, “the revolutionary process runs the risk of becoming distorted, turning into a four-centuries-late liberation struggle which today can have no revolutionary content.”²⁵

The rigid and extreme posturing of the Tojiles and the URNG had the effect in the 1980s of (nearly) eliminating middle ground, silencing those *indígenas* who called for a

²⁴ From the PGT, in Carol Smith, “Conclusion: History and Revolution in Guatemala,” in Carol Smith, ed., *Guatemalan Indians and the State*, p. 266.

²⁵ The EGP, writing in 1982, stated that “The class contradiction in our country is complemented by the ethnic-national contradiction [but] the latter cannot be resolved except in terms of the resolution of the former.... the task of revolutionaries consists of strengthening national-ethnic consciousness, ... but at the same time reforming, complementing, [and] investing this awareness with revolutionary class politics.... THE MAIN DANGER IS THAT THE NATIONAL-ETHNIC FACTORS WILL BURST FORTH IN DETRIMENT OF CLASS FACTORS.” Emphasis in original. In Carol Smith, “Conclusion: History and Revolution in Guatemala,” in Carol Smith, ed., *Guatemalan Indians and the State*, pp. 269-70.

revolution that would grant sufficient attention both to class exploitation and ethnic oppression. This latter position, though it had been voiced in various forms in the 1970s, was only expressed in the 1980s after a fracture within the URNG. Longtime prominent members of the EGP, Domingo Hernández Ixcoy and Francisca Alvarez, split from the guerrilla group in 1984 while in exile in Mexico and founded a splinter guerrilla movement, the October Revolution.²⁶ At the same time, they helped to organize a working group of *indígenas* in exile called Ja C'Amabal I'b. The name, which translates as “the House of *Pueblo* Unity,” reveals their goal of continuing an indigenous struggle while countering arguments for separation.

In position papers presented in Mexico, Nicaragua, the US, and Europe, Hernández Ixcoy and Alvarez argued that *indígenas* who were (or had been) part of the URNG needed to speak out and articulate their concerns, visions of society, and aspirations. Ja C'Amabal I'b set out a position that rejected both extremes in the debate about ethnicity and revolution, those of the URNG and the Tojiles. Their comments were at once in dialogue with the main guerrilla armies, *indígenas* inside and outside of the separate (and separatist) revolutionary movements, and the international indigenous

²⁶ The split with the EGP was related to their critique of the EGP leadership's rigidity and failure to adapt or change course after the massive loss of civilian life at the hands of the state following the guerrillas' “triumphalist” offensive in the early 1980s. See “Razones de una ruptura política,” in the bulletin of the October Revolution, *Opinión Política: Por la comunicación, el intercambio y el debate entre los revolucionarios*, No. 3, March-April 1985, which includes excerpts from the October Revolution's “*Carta de ruptura con la dirección nacional del EGP*.” The October Revolution called for a more “democratic” revolutionary movement, with the popular masses – indigenous and ladino – “as protagonists.” As they wrote in 1987, “... we consider that the participation of the *indios* in the process of their liberation – which is that of the Guatemalan society at large – requires revolutionary democracy ...” See “*Tesis sobre la cuestión étnico-nacional*,” *Opinión Política*, no. 11, September 1987, p. 8.

movement more broadly. Their positions bring to mind the kinds of discussions that took place in the early- and mid-1970s.

The URNG groups, they believed, had not gone far enough in putting theoretical ideas about ethnicity into practice. At the same time, they denounced what they termed the “ethnopolitism” of the separatist *indígenas*. Ethnopolitism had emerged as an understandable reaction to the state’s integrationist *indigenismo* and the discrimination suffered by its proponents, they said, but its exaltation of ethnic qualities and virtues led invariably to racism and discrimination in reverse.²⁷ They criticized its ahistoric and romantic notion of the Indian and its location outside of class struggle. Showing a keen awareness of the recent history of indigenous organizing, Hernández Ixcoy and Alvarez pointed out that “[i]n political and organizational terms, this tendency produces sectarianism and deep distrust that isolates them from other social and political sectors that fight against exploitation and oppression.”²⁸ They were more generous than others on the revolutionary left in their critique of separatist indigenous organizing, but came to a similar conclusion: “... *despite the intentions of its defenders*, this position favors the counterinsurgency and bourgeois project as they try to divide the struggle of the oppressed from that of the exploited....”²⁹ (Emphasis added).

An alternative “new thinking” was being discussed and developed in Ja C’Amabal I’b, they explained, although again, variations of these positions had been on

²⁷ Paper presented by Domingo Hernández Ixcoy, member of Ja C’Amabal I’b, in the United States, July 1986, “Algunos elementos de aproximación a la situación de la población india guatemalteca,” p. 8.

²⁸ Ja C’Amabal I’b, “Algunos elementos ...,” p. 9.

²⁹ Ja C’Amabal I’b, “Algunos elementos ...,” p. 9.

the table in the 1970s. Hernández Ixcoy and Alvarez stressed the need for *indígenas* to “find the path to our liberation,” but insisted on “realistic solutions” rather than separation from non-Indians. For Hernández Ixcoy and Alvarez, the solution lay in class and ethnic solidarity among *indígenas*, in partnership with ladino campesinos and within a more open and democratic revolution.³⁰

The impact of a growing international indigenous rights movement is apparent in their positions. Hernández Ixcoy and Alvarez acknowledged indigenous calls for autonomy as legitimate; probably not coincidentally, they did so at an international symposium entitled “State, Autonomy, and Indigenous Rights” in Nicaragua in 1986. There they defended the much-maligned autonomy demands of other indigenous activists, yet they cast them not as demands for separation, but for the self-determination that they argued had to be central to a truly democratic system: “[A]utonomy is a right,” they asserted, “a just demand, and an expression of the new revolutionary democracy.”³¹ In other words, a certain degree of autonomy was to be part and parcel of a new participatory revolutionary society. In the same address they defended “special” rights for *indígenas* within the revolution, insisting that “we affirm that the struggle of the *indios* for their liberation, although it takes diverse forms and has its own specific demands apart from the oppressed *pueblos*, must form part of the great historical flow [*caudal*] of the Guatemalan revolution, be a decisive part of it.”³²

³⁰ Ja C’Amabal I’b, “Algunos elementos ...,” p. 11.

³¹ Ja C’Amabal I’b, “Ponencia del taller Ja C’Amabal I’b (Casa de la Unidad del Pueblo) ante el Simposio Internacional ‘Estado, Autonomía y Derechos Indígenas,’” July 1986, p. 1.

³² Ja C’Amabal I’b, “Ponencia del taller Ja C’Amabal I’b,” p. 2.

These calls for multi-faceted change, with *indígenas* in partnership with ladino activists, were picked up by a reinvigorated *movimiento popular* in the 1990s as Guatemalans grappled with the challenges of ending decades of armed conflict. Yet as we will see, the definitions of what “counted” as indigenous rights became narrowly defined during the peace process, with “special” rights extracted from broader claimsmaking, a development with enormous implications for activist *indígenas* across the political spectrum.

The Counterinsurgency State, “Democracy,” and “Peace”

With much of the opposition leadership in exile and the insurgent threat in the country “contained,” President Efraín Ríos Montt in 1983 nonetheless called for a continuation of military rule to “consolidate” Guatemala. The Army High Command had other plans and forced him from his post in August of that year. Jennifer Schirmer’s interviews with Guatemalan military officers help to explain military strategy.³³ The army sought to continue the “pacification” campaign, one officer said in an interview with Schirmer, but at the same time, gradually “return Guatemala to a regime of legality.”³⁴ An Air Force colonel explained that “one must run down constitutional corridors.”³⁵ As General Héctor Gramajo elaborated, the war was to be continued, but waged by other means:

Our strategic goal has been to reverse [Karl von]
Clausewitz’s philosophy of war to state that in Guatemala,

³³ See Schirmer, *Guatemalan Military Project*, pp. 29-34.

³⁴ In Schirmer, *Guatemalan Military Project*, p. 30.

³⁵ Manuel de Jesús Girón Tánchez, in 1988 interview with Jennifer Schirmer, in Schirmer, *Guatemalan Military Project*, p. 32.

politics must be a continuation of war. But that does not mean that we are abandoning war; we are fighting it from a much broader horizon within a democratic framework. We may be renovating our methods of warfare but we are not abandoning them.... We are continuing our [counterinsurgency] operations [against] international subversion because the Constitution demands it.³⁶

The election of a civilian president was scheduled for 1985. Army officers left their government posts, while the military orchestrated the political “opening.” An intelligence analyst explained to Schirmer that newly elected civilian president Vinicio Cerezo was told, “... you have been given the freedom to act, but to act only within the [army’s National] Plan.” As he told Schirmer, “If civilians occupy their assigned places, then the success [of *el proyecto*] is assured.”³⁷

Not surprisingly, the militarization of Guatemala was not undone with a return to civilian rule; the military still retains tremendous power in Guatemala. Yet opposition groups appropriated what political space they could. Prominent among the opposition were so-called *organizaciones populares* with links to the left; many of these were led by *indígenas* and/or focused on rights violations against the indigenous population. In the mid- to late-1980s, such groups continually denounced repression and brought international pressures to bear on the Guatemalan state. The Mutual Support Group for

³⁶ General Héctor Alejandro Gramajo Morales, Minister of Defense, in early 1990s interview with Jennifer Schirmer, in Schirmer, *Guatemalan Military Project*, p. 1. In evidence of military officials’ shared interpretations of “National Security Doctrine” across the region, Marguerite Feitlowitz notes the same explanation of “peace” as “war by other means” in Argentina’s Dirty War. See Feitlowitz, *Lexicon of Terror*, pp. 32-33, and 263-64, fn. 50. Clausewitz (1780-1831) had described the reverse, war as “the continuation of politics by other means.”

³⁷ In Schirmer, *Guatemalan Military Project*, p. 32.

Families of the Disappeared (GAM) and the widows' organization National Coordinating Committee of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA), founded in 1984 and 1988 respectively, condemned on-going government violence and pressed for information on the disappeared. The Council of Ethnic Communities "Everyone United" (CERJ), founded in 1989, protested forced participation in the civil patrols in indigenous communities and forced military recruitment. Indigenous women in particular took on central roles in these organizations, with women like Rosalina Tuyuc, leader of CONAVIGUA, becoming prominent spokespersons for the opposition.³⁸

Around the same time, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, self-described Mayanistas (re)entered public debate. In the changed context of the 1990s, their agenda contrasted sharply with that of the leftist opposition: they set out strongly nationalist, culturally-oriented demands focusing on issues of language, dress, and self-determination

³⁸ Like elsewhere in societies under state terror, women in Guatemala founded and led organizations demanding information on the disappeared, often beginning with searches for their own parents, husbands, or children. CONAVIGUA began in 1988 as an association addressing critical problems of subsistence for women whose husbands had been killed. It grew into a large human rights organization denouncing all types of rights violations. Diane Nelson has noted the ambiguous reaction of Guatemalan society to these women leaders, many of the indigenous, uncharacteristic "leaders" in terms of both gender and ethnic identities. The cover of one weekly magazine asked, "With Women Like These, Why Do We Need the Half-Men Who Govern Us?" Another "*Suplemento Análisis*" in the newspaper *La Hora* contained a photo depicting Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, Nineth Montenegro of GAM and human rights activist Helen Mack. It asked, "In the Struggle against Impunity, Who Wears the Pants?" Nelson argues that "[a]lthough seeming to compliment these incredible women, these examples actually demonstrate marked anxiety about them. The underlying message is that more manly men are needed" Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound*, pp. 192 and 194. Rosalina Tuyuc in a 1995 interview called for a space for Maya women in particular to express their experiences as women, as Mayas, and as class victims of government killings and rape. "It shouldn't be the men who speak for our pain and certainly not the government who speaks for what we suffer: illiteracy, misery, poverty, illness, repression. It is we women who must tell the world about the reality we live in." Interview with Rosalina Tuyuc, June 1995, Guatemala City. Tuyuc, along with human rights leaders Nineth Montenegro of GAM and Amílcar Méndez of CERJ, were elected to congress in 1995.

for the *pueblo maya*. Their most prominent spokesperson was Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil. In the 1970s Cojtí contributed to *Ixim* (using a pseudonym), was involved in the Seminarios Indígenas, and worked in the Christian Democrats' Instituto de Desarrollo Económico-Social, IDESAC, in earthquake relief efforts. During the height of the violence he studied in Belgium, earning a doctorate in communications in 1980. He returned to Guatemala and took teaching positions in 1983 at the University of San Carlos and the University Rafael Landívar.

Cojtí's absence from the country and subsequent academic positions, especially at the conservative Landívar, seem to have allowed him to reengage questions of ethnic identity and indigenous rights in the late 1980s as somewhat removed from the politics of the 1970s, despite having been closely involved in the unfolding activism of the period. In the context of growing state repression against the activist sector, Cojtí firmly positioned himself, and the *Mayanista* movement that solidified around him, as distant from the armed struggle. In rooting their demands, *Mayanistas* like Cojtí emphasized the work of Adrián Inés Chávez, for example, who studied the *Popul Vuh* and made important contributions in Maya linguistics. At the same time they downplayed any history of political activism.

In Cojtí's historical accounts of the rise of pan-Mayanism, he points to the Panzós massacre as a moment when generalized state terror against *indígenas* began. But his reference to the social mobilization and violence of 1978 does not implicate Mayanistas in it; he claims, on the contrary, that the Mayanist movement was "too young" to take a position in the growing conflict, although he and most in the movement are of the same generation as the other protagonists of this study. Cojtí does recount the formation of a

group he calls the Movement in Solidarity Assistance and Action (MAYAS), which is a name taken by the Movimiento Indio Tojil at the international level. It was made up of Mayas, he writes, “who accepted the necessity of social change but not the perpetuation of colonialism in a new society for which they fought.”³⁹ He depicts that organization as almost apolitical, however, as *apart* from the real conflict, positioning MAYAS (and by extension, *los mayas*) *between* the state and the guerrilla and therefore not part of the opposition. “The members of the movement,” Cojtí wrote, “were between two fires, that of the guerrilla and the army. Mayanism was moderate....”⁴⁰ Cojtí goes so far as to assert that the period of *la violencia* may have been productive for the Mayanista movement:

Doubtless this period was useful [*bastante útil*] in that it allowed [Mayanists] to analyze and theorize the Maya question, and verify that both the guerrilla organizations and the Guatemalan state used Mayas as combatants for their war. It was verified that the Marxists ... in their thinking ... neglected anticolonialism, and ... that the national army was racist to a pathological degree for the magnitude of genocide effected against the Indian.⁴¹

Downplaying the fact that the Tojiles (or MAYAS) did, in fact, advocate revolution, Cojtí sanitized their history and removed them from politics, rendering them “too young” to have constituted an opposition force. In doing so, Cojtí made room for and created a

³⁹ Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, *Ri maya' moloj pa iximulew, El movimiento maya (en Guatemala)* (Guatemala: Editorial Cholsamaj, 1997), pp. 102-3. Cojtí attributes to MAYAS the Tojil document discussed in chapter 6.

⁴⁰ There is similarity, of course, between these Mayanista arguments and those of David Stoll. See Stoll, *Between Two Armies*.

⁴¹ Cojtí, *El movimiento maya*, p. 103. I do not think he intended to suggest that it was a positive period, but rather that it was illuminating.

history for organized *indígenas* whose demands could be tolerated by the state, some of them even granted at little socio-economic or political cost.

In 1990 indigenous rights had considerable cachet in Guatemala due to the approaching Quincentennial of Columbus's arrival in the Americas and the International Labour Organisation's new Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ILO 169), which was adopted internationally in 1989. In this context, Cojtí and the Mayanists launched a major effort to put their demands for the *pueblo maya* on the national agenda. On October 16, 1990, the Permanent Seminar of Maya Studies (SPEM) sponsored the "Forum of the *Pueblo Maya* and the Candidates for the Presidency of Guatemala," held in the capital. The fact that presidential candidates from eight political parties (or their representatives in two cases) felt obliged to attend such an event reveals much about the early-1990's political *coyuntura* in Guatemala. Mayanists prominently set out their proposals and engaged the candidates in debate about ethnic identity and rights.⁴²

At the *Foro*, Cojtí gave a speech that would serve as the basis for Mayanist demands from that point forward. His arguments are strikingly similar to the Tojil (or MAYAS) position discussed in the last chapter, with the important difference being that Cojtí dropped calls for revolution. Like the Tojiles, Cojtí described "internal colonialism," where ladinos dominated Mayas economically, politically, and culturally, as justification for Maya separation. He condemned a pattern of ladino monopolization of the state and a political division of the country that kept ethnic communities fragmented. He deplored assimilationist policies. He set out the nationalist right for Mayas to exist as a people. Like the Tojiles, he called for the restructuring of political-

⁴² See CEDIM, *Foro del pueblo maya*.

administrative divisions in Guatemala to reflect linguistic and ethnic boundaries, and the recognition of limited territorial and political autonomy. “We also have the right ... to civil and political equality,” he argued, “like every Guatemalan.... [although civil and political rights] must be exercised through our culture ... and not ... after a forced ladinization.... These are the rights of the *pueblo maya* which point toward a different direction, not toward assimilation but toward ... autonomy.”⁴³

By including the phrase “like every Guatemalan,” Cojtí softened the impact of the call for autonomy, setting its limits within the boundaries of the state. (Recall that the Tojiles had done so as well, despite how their position was characterized by the left.) Cojtí at the same time called specifically for a set of culturally-focused rights: to ethnic and cultural identity, to use and preservation of languages, to cultural integrity, to control over education for Mayas.⁴⁴ Arguably, the specificity of this list, and the fact that it applied only to *indígenas*, gave the Mayanist agenda much of its political power. The state in Guatemala was not about to concede to the establishment of any significant degree of Maya autonomy.⁴⁵ But limited autonomy in areas affecting indigenous communities *could* be discussed. Moreover, the Mayanist package of rights demands that went along with claims for self-determination was more palatable and closely mirrored

⁴³ Cojtí in CEDIM, *Foro del pueblo maya*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ Cojtí in CEDIM, *Foro del pueblo maya*, pp. 33-36.

⁴⁵ Future president Serrano Elías, for example, called Cojtí’s *Foro* presentation a “brilliant exposition,” but said he was grateful that (as many had charged) the political parties did *not* represent the aspirations of the “Maya nation.” He, like the PGT above, denied the existence of any singular Maya nation and painted a picture of fragmented ethnic groups vying for power. “Gentlemen,” Serrano said, “thanks to God that the political parties do not represent these aspirations, because we are not called to [do] that, we are called to represent the aspirations of all the nations of Guatemala....” In CEDIM, *Foro del Pueblo Maya*, pp. 73-4.

the rights set out in international human rights instruments like ILO 169. As Guatemalan peace negotiations proceeded, the Accord on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples addressed many of these claims, including rights to “cultural integrity,” dress, and language use. It was an agenda that could be advanced and discussed without raising issues of fundamental structural reform of Guatemalan society.

The rights guaranteed in indigenous rights instruments – issues like the rights to speak indigenous languages in schools and in government institutions, the right to wear *traje* – are important to the quality of life for many *indígenas* and a key part of efforts to end racial discrimination. Yet we learn from this history that they do not reflect the range of rights demanded by *indígenas*. We also see that in a case like Guatemala, where a “peace” process coincides with continued political repression, a focus on these issues can have unforeseen political consequences: such rights tend to be understood as constituting in full the rights of *indígenas*. Moreover, they divide one type of activism, and activist, from another. A focus on certain delimited rights as “indigenous” has the effect of removing other potential claims of activist *indígenas* – socio-economic reform, an end to violence – from the table. Through the very process of negotiating “indigenous rights” in a repressive political context, those broader issues are rendered non-indigenous and in effect, so are their proponents. Regarding *indígenas* in the popular movement in the early 1990s, Cojtí asserted that they were Mayas in fact but not in word or deed.⁴⁶ The divisions so important to counterinsurgency – divisions among *indígenas* – became

⁴⁶ Cojtí Cuxil, *El movimiento maya*, p. 113. He goes on to say that the *sector Maya-popular* in the late 1990s can consider itself part of the *movimiento Maya* since it has begun to demand indigenous rights, but earlier in the same work expresses considerable skepticism about the authenticity of these positions. See epigraph above.

solidified through a peace process where one form of activism was “sanctioned” and another form remained suspect.⁴⁷

In 1982, publication of the Tojil position narrowed the demands that were identified with the *pueblo indígena*; almost immediately the diverse positions of indigenous movements were boiled down into one (in that case, easily caricatured, easily rejected) proposal for separation. In the 1990s, the positions of the Mayanistas – similar to those of the Tojiles – were again characterized as representative of the demands of the *pueblo maya* as a whole. This time, in a political context more attuned to “indigenous rights,” some of the demands could be met.⁴⁸ Other components – real autonomy, for instance – again could be easily dismissed.⁴⁹

The demands of the Mayas in the popular movement were granted little space in the discussion (and study) of indigenous rights in the 1990s. That is not to say that they

⁴⁷ Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil was named Vice Minister of Education under the last government, and educator Otilia Lux de Cotí was named Minister of Culture. As many Mayas have commented, an effective means of disarticulating the Maya movement was to incorporate its leaders into government.

⁴⁸ Edward Fischer makes the argument that the Maya movement has been largely free of political repression because of their “moderate message” and “their use of savvy diplomacy when presenting it.” “Because of ... [a] strategic emphasis on cultural issues, their demands fall outside the historical political confrontations between the Guatemalan Left and Right Segments of the elite sector are ready and willing to grant demands for cultural and linguistic rights, allowing them to demonstrate their progressiveness to the rest of the world in this period of increasing concern over indigenous rights. Such concessions are also timely, given that foreign assistance is being closely tied to Guatemala’s human rights record.” “Induced Culture Change as a Strategy for Socioeconomic Development: The Pan-Maya Movement in Guatemala,” in Fischer and Brown, eds., *Maya Cultural Activism*, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁹ Kay Warren notes, for example, that in negotiations on the Accord on Identity and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, “[m]ajor issues such as the recognition of regional autonomy ... and the officialization of Maya leadership norms were deemed irreconcilable and dropped.” Warren, *Indigenous Movement and Their Critics*, p. 56.

did not try to shape debates on indigenous rights. Many Mayas on the left took up ethnic concerns to a greater degree than they had done before, with their treatment of indigenous identity becoming pronounced and fine-tuned.⁵⁰ The reasons for the shift are likely multiple. In the aftermath of *la violencia*, unthinkable numbers of fellow activists lay dead or disappeared, and hundreds of indigenous communities lay in ruins. Political ideologies were shaken by the state genocide that followed the guerrilla strategy of organizing in the highlands, and with the global collapse of socialist regimes. As they had done in the past, indigenous *populares* learned from and reacted to the Mayanistas and their demands. The revolutionary left as well sought the legitimacy afforded by the “indigenous struggle.” Material factors undoubtedly shaped their discourse as well, as international financial resources became readily available for “indigenous rights” projects.

The *indígenas* on the left did not simply mimic Mayanist demands, however. They treated ethnicity in tandem with issues of class. As many had done since the 1970s, they argued against an interpretation of the rights and needs of Mayas that excluded or downplayed economic needs. As the *popular* indigenous umbrella group Majawil Q’ij expressed it in 1991,

the constitution of the republic speaks of rights ... but the
indigenous pueblo only knows pain and suffering: is it our

⁵⁰ Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus studied popular organizations’ paid statements in two daily newspapers from 1985 to 1991, finding that specific references in those announcements to ethnicity increased considerably over time. They found few references to ethnicity in the 1985-88 period; an increase between 1988 and 1990; and by 1991, ethnicity had become a common theme. From 1990 to 1991, in fact, popular organizations’ references to ethnicity nearly doubled in the papers, from twenty-three instances in 1990 to forty-four in 1991. See Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el silencio*, p. 125.

right that the children cannot go to school, that they only eat tortilla with salt, the recent [1990] massacre at Santiago Atitlán? ... Is it a right that the pueblo indígena is obligated to be in the development poles, in the model villages? It is not possible that one speaks of our rights while the pueblo continues going hungry.⁵¹

CUC, which emerged from clandestinity in the late 1980s, likewise reshaped its political message in the Quincentennial moment; like Majawil Q'ij above (to which it belonged) CUC combined ethnic and class concerns in its statements. When CUC commemorated its 14th anniversary in 1992, it declared that “the threats against the Mayas continue,” and specified the ethnicity of each victim on a list of individuals recently subjected to violence, precisely as the separatist “Movimiento Indio” had done in 1982. In 1992, CUC wrote that the Maya New Year was,

an opportunity for us, the indigenous *pueblos*, for deep reflection over what it is and what it means to be Maya.... We salute all those of us who are [Maya] and feel the Maya blood in our being, with a desire to deepen and live more than ever that which we are. We rise and walk with the wisdom and thought of our ancestors.⁵²

At the same time, CUC insisted that culture could not be separated from socio-economic and political reality. They pointed to the “cultural” problem of *indígenas* no longer wearing *traje*, but argued that the problem was connected to politics and economics: it

⁵¹ Majawil Q'ij, in Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el silencio*, p. 166. Majawil Q'ij, which means New Dawn in Mam, was founded in 1990 and made up of organizations with ties to the revolutionary left. They included CUC, CONAVIGUA, CERJ, campesino groups and organizations of the displaced.

⁵² CUC, “Hunahpu: personaje mítico de la religión maya,” in Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el silencio*, pp. 161-2.

was not merely the case that people no longer wanted to use *traje*, they argued, but that politically it was dangerous to do so (in counterinsurgency thinking, community specific dress identified *indígenas* from certain areas as “subversive”), or since it was expensive to make, was simply out of reach for the poor.⁵³ Similarly, Majawil Q’ij argued that formal recognition of cultural aspects of identity was necessary but insufficient, and that Mayas’ human rights more broadly defined, including communal rights, had to be respected: “It has taken five hundred years for them to recognize our values,” they asserted in 1992. “How much longer will it take before they recognize us as human beings and as peoples?”⁵⁴

The Quincentennial and peace process brought the *indígenas* of the popular organizations and the revolutionary movement into contact (again) with the Mayanistas and their cultural agenda. Attempts at unity were marked by contention and animosity. In October 1991 Mayas of Guatemala’s popular movement sponsored the Segundo Encuentro Continental de la Campaña de 500 Años de Resistencia Indígena, Negra, y Popular, an explicitly cross-ethnic, pan-regional congress to plan collective responses to 1992 commemorations. They reportedly failed to consult the Mayanistas in planning the event. The Mayanistas in turn reenacted a moment from 1976, leaving meetings in Quetzaltenango in protest of what they considered an agenda with too great a focus on issues of class struggle.

Recall that activist Ricardo Cajas had identified that previous moment in 1976 as the moment when the indigenous movement split in two, when the *clasista* and

⁵³ In Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el silencio*, p. 163.

⁵⁴ Majawil Q’ij, “Life, Resistance, and the Future,” in Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound*, p. 24.

culturalista camps became clearly defined and separate. I would argue that these distinctions between them did not – and do not – preclude alliance. We saw *indígenas* of very different political positions together opposing state violence at Panzós in 1978 and following the Spanish embassy fire in 1980. It is the all-or-nothing, race or class positions, like those staked out in 1982 and 1992, that seem to divide and stand in the way of social movements by *indígenas*.

Army officers have expressed concern over the reemergence of Maya movements. As one officer explained to Jennifer Schirmer in the early 1990s,

[the Maya movement]... for the next five to six years will *only* be run by Mayan intellectuals and academics, but in the medium term of twenty to twenty-five years, if it succeeds in homogenizing the differences within the Mayan community and creates conditions for leadership, [it] could become a political movement that forms the basis for a new political party in the twenty-first century.⁵⁵

(Emphasis added.)

The comment that the movement would be “only” run by Mayanistas in the short term sends the signal that their claimsmaking was no threat to the state. Only with a degree of unity between Mayanists and *populares* could they pose a dilemma as a “political movement,” a long-held preoccupation of the state. “Now, everyone’s Mayan, or ethnic, or whatever they call themselves,” complained another officer.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Lieutenant Colonel of the Ministry of Defense, in Schirmer, *Guatemalan Military Project*, p. 273.

⁵⁶ Lieutenant Colonel, in Schirmer, *Guatemalan Military Project*, p. 273.

This research suggests that forging such a political movement would be daunting. Mayas are certainly not homogenous, but a population diverse in all respects – economically, politically, culturally, linguistically. Their demands have long reflected that diversity. But as ORPA member and later congressional deputy Alberto Mazariegos asks, “why necessarily do we want *indígenas* to have ... only one form of thinking, when we are located across the social structure?”⁵⁷

Rigoberta Menchú Tum, winner of the Nobel Peace prize in 1992, has used her position as a Nobel laureate to try to bridge some of the distance between *indígenas* of the Mayanist and *popular* camps, and among Guatemalans more generally. She has repeatedly argued for unity “as our ancestors recommended.”⁵⁸ In this she refers, once again, to the call of the *Popul Vuh*, “May all rise up, may no one be left behind.” But she explicitly applies it to all Guatemalans, not just *indígenas*. In doing so, she counters calls for Maya separatism, while still asserting that Guatemala is a “plurinational” country. National unity, she argues, “does not mean we abandon the specificity of the indigenous *pueblos*, [but] recognize that this is a plural-national, pluriethnic country...” Regarding the Maya voice, “there cannot be a single representative of the indigenous *pueblos*,” she writes, “because we group ourselves in many ways. The representation should be plural, respecting the different manners of seeing things.”⁵⁹

This dissertation has sought to illuminate some of those “different manners of seeing things” by examining how indigenous demands developed and were expressed in

⁵⁷ Interview with Alberto Mazariegos, September 3, 2002, Guatemala City.

⁵⁸ In Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el silencio*, p. 182.

⁵⁹ In Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el silencio*, p. 182.

the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.⁶⁰ Chapter three examines some of the ways in which local oppositional politics evolved in the highlands in the 1960s and 1970s, and analyzes the roots and catalysts of that activism. Chapter four turns to organizing at the regional and national levels, analyzing how loose networks among activists evolved beyond municipal boundaries, through schools, priests, cooperatives and agrarian organizing, radio programs and literacy campaigns. It addresses a period when *indígenas* within communities and from different regions and language groups engaged in discussions and organizing focused on ethnic and class identities, indigenous culture, justice, and state violence. It examines the emergence of two tendencies among activist *indígenas*, race-based and class-based, their intellectual roots, and their changing dynamics over the course of the 1970s. The chapter argues that despite these distinctions in how activists interpreted their struggles and framed their demands, when we look closely at their efforts, we often see a complex weaving together of ethnic concerns and calls for socio-economic change.

The 1978 massacre at Panzós was a turning point in this history, initiating a pattern of extreme state violence against indigenous communities and pushing activists together in opposition movements. Chapter five discusses that massacre and the intriguing role of indigenous community queens in protesting the violence. The protest illustrates the vast web that linked local organizers to each other and shows the multi-faceted nature of activists' demands – cultural, economic, and political. Chapter six traces the evolution of opposition politics by *indígenas* after the Panzós massacre, as state

⁶⁰ Let me be the first to acknowledge that this study merely scratches the surface of what the past might teach us. Opportunities for research abound; hopefully some of the protagonists themselves will flesh out more details of this period if and when they feel safe in doing so. Until then, my thanks, again, for their part in this.

counterinsurgency incorporated scorched earth practices and reached the level of genocide. The violence of Panzós and the subsequent 1980 Spanish Embassy massacre radicalized significant numbers of *indígenas*, causing many activists to support or join revolutionary movements. The chapter turns to the increasing levels of state terror under Lucas García and Ríos Montt in the early 1980s, when psychological tactics related to ethnic identity were used by the state, along with counterinsurgency massacres aimed at entire indigenous communities. While initially state repression had a mobilizing and radicalizing effect on young *indígenas* and was a catalyst in the formation of broadening pan-Indian identity, extreme terror over time had the opposite effect. With the terror campaign of 1981-1983, the masses were demobilized; the opposition was paralyzed and polarized, its leaders forced into exile. Important figures in Maya activism, as we note in the present chapter, reacted by distancing themselves from the conflict and “activism” in general.

The experiences of extreme state terror directed specifically against the indigenous population continue to shape how *indígenas* and Guatemalan society as a whole remember the past, and how they mobilize (or not) around claims in the present. The Catholic and UN-sponsored truth commissions set out to recover the historical record of atrocities and produced powerful, highly detailed reports on the violence. Yet the history of *activism itself* remains a taboo for many Mayas. With the shock and horror that came of counting the dead, it seems, came a desire to distance the *pueblo maya* from a part in it. The findings *were* horrifying: over 200,000 had been killed or disappeared during the war, over a million displaced; 669 massacres were committed. Some 83% of

the victims were *indígenas*. The CEH found responsibility to rest with the state in 93% of the incidents, and with the guerrilla armies in 3%.⁶¹

Otilia Lux de Cotí, teacher and adviser of the 1978 de-crowned *reina indígena* from San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz, was part of the three-member Commission which headed the UN-sponsored investigation into *la violencia*. Anthropologist Carlota McAllister tells us that Lux spoke at the announcement of the Truth Commission's findings and blamed both the guerrillas and the army for the atrocities, collapsing them, as McAllister put it, "into one alien force."⁶² Lux addressed her audience:

In the name of the Maya, living and dead, we ask the God of gods and all Guatemala to pardon us, because we became involved in an armed conflict that was imposed on us and that was not ours....⁶³

McAllister describes the "loud and lengthy cries for justice" in the auditorium, packed with *indígenas*, every time mention was made of army violence; some Mayas, she asserts, did feel "that the war was theirs." Why, McAllister asks, "was Lux suggesting that to be counted as victims of the war Maya had to be innocent not only of any crime but also of any political agenda?"⁶⁴

Victor Montejo, an indigenous teacher and anthropologist who has written on his experiences of violence, expressed a sentiment similar to Lux's as he commented on the Rigoberta Menchú/David Stoll controversy, "Don't we realize ... that Maya now need to

⁶¹ CEH, *Memoria del silencio*, 5:21.

⁶² Carlota McAllister, "Good People," p. 4.

⁶³ McAllister, "Good People," p. 4.

⁶⁴ McAllister, "Good People," p. 4.

reconstruct their lives by trying to remove themselves from those who brought the guns and did the killing?”⁶⁵

We know from an examination of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s that Mayas were not bystanders in the transformations that preceded and accompanied over three decades of civil war. Activism by *indígenas* helped shape that war; that war shaped indigenous activism. The polarization that is the byproduct of the way events unfolded in the 1980s and 1990s obscures a history of (somewhat) more symbiotic relations among activist *indígenas*. That earlier activism was plagued by disagreement and tensions, but a relatively broad definition of the rights and needs of *indígenas* and Guatemalans in general – economic, social, cultural, political – arguably inspired the work of Maya activists in the 1970s. It is that more inclusive, fuller range of activism and claimsmaking that could potentially help secure dignity and equality for the *pueblo indígena*. As the Popul Vuh counsels, “May all rise up, may no one be left behind.”

⁶⁵ Victor Montejo, “Truth, Human Rights, and Representation: The Case of Rigoberta Menchú,” in Arias, *Controversy*, pp. 376-77.

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