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Voices  
from the  
Gaps

# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

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*My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty-three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. 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.*

”



## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1959
- \* Quiché  
Mayan in  
Guatemala
- \* Wrote a  
testimonio enti-  
tled *I, Rigoberta  
Menchú*

## Biography

Writer and humanitarian Rigoberta Menchú Tum is best known for her work in increasing awareness and lobbying for indigenous rights in her native Guatemala. She recounted her life story of suffering and political organizing in 1983 in the international bestseller, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, exposing the oppressive conditions Indigenous people confront in her country. In her book, Menchú portrays elements of her life to explain collective truths experienced by the Quiché Mayans in Guatemala. Although some of the book is indeed factual, it is intended to serve more as a representation of her community than herself. It is unclear whether the experiences of her early childhood belong to her personally or represent her people. The most in-depth sources about Menchú are interviews with her acquaintances conducted by anthropologist David Stoll. Some of the details concerning Menchú's life are disputed; however, the contributors of this page have pieced together as much information as was available.

This page was researched and submitted by Sharon Sando, Mike Anderson, Gilliane Mansfeldt, and Dana Christoph, and Mike Smith on 5/27/99.



# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

## Biography continued

Rigoberta Menchú Tum was born the sixth of nine children on January 9, 1959 to Quiché communal leader Vincente and his wife Juana (Aznarez 116). Native to the small village of Chimel, Guatemala, she lived on a homestead that her father had claimed and cleared. From a young age Menchú helped work the land that her father had cultivated, and possibly on the coffee plantations of the Pacific coast. The agricultural prospects of the newly cleared land surrounding the village were poor. She watched the daily struggle for life in the depths of the terrible poverty, seeing many in her village malnourished and starving because of meager harvests and wages.

During Menchú's childhood in the 1960s, few educational opportunities existed for her. It is likely that the majority of her education was sponsored by the efforts of Catholic missionaries. According to her siblings, Menchú enrolled in a Catholic boarding school around the age of six or seven. She returned to her village for an unknown amount of time before resuming an education around the age of thirteen. She studied with the parish nuns from the Belgian Order of the Sacred Family, sometimes living in the convent (Stoll 160).

In Stoll's interviews, Menchú's classmates remember her as being friendly, intelligent, and obliging. Her academic aptitude and hard-working spirit enabled her to study at a prominent secondary school usually reserved for the wealthy. According to classmates, she worked for room and board to pay for her education.

Menchú recounts her experiences at the parochial boarding school somewhat differently in I, Rigoberta Menchú saying she felt more like a servant than a student. She earned less than twelve dollars a month working in the school, and more time was reserved for the performance of domestic duties than actual studying (Arias 111).

Classmates remember Rigoberta being interested in politics during her education, but it was difficult for her to become active (Stoll 161). The nuns isolated the girls from the outside world as best they could in an attempt to control the girls and undo some of their Mayan upbringing.

At a young age Menchú became involved in social reform activities through the Catholic Church and became prominent in the women's rights movement. She was very influenced and inspired by the leadership and political activism of her father.



# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

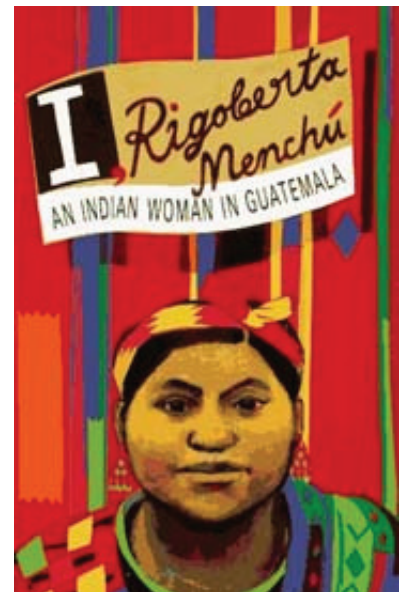
## Biography continued

The government extensively persecuted the Menchú family for their activities in political organizations. Her father was imprisoned and tortured for his involvement in the Guatemalan labor movement. Infuriated by poor wages, barren land, and the way the government ignored his people, he became active in the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC). Menchú describes her father as a prominent figure in the organization, and he was later killed for his involvement in taking over the offices of the Spanish embassy. Menchú's mother and brother were also tortured and killed gruesomely by the army.

In 1979 Menchú became a part of the labor activism efforts of the CUC. The government pursued her for her involvement, and Menchú received many death threats. In 1980 she participated in organizing a farm worker strike in the plantations of the Pacific coast. They organized for better wages, food, and treatment for the many laborers. She also became a part of the radical 31st of January Popular Front, where she educated the Indian peasants about resistance to military oppression.

In 1981, Menchú had no choice but to leave Guatemala because of her political affiliations and activism. From Guatemala she went to Mexico where she organized resistance to the oppression of her people and helped found an organization called The United Representation of the Guatemalan Opposition. In 1986 she served on the National Coordinating Committee of the CUC. She performed the narration in *When Mountains Tremble* about the plight of the Mayans. She has returned to Guatemala on three occasions to build support for her causes, but death threats have forced her to return to exile.

In recognition of her humanitarian work, Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 making her the first indigenous person and the youngest woman to receive this distinction. Her work seeks to gain recognition for the victims of repression, racism, and poverty and also serves as homage to indigenous women.





# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

## Biography continued

After the release of I, Rigoberta Menchú, Menchú wrote a follow-up book about her activism for Indigenous rights between the ages of 23-28, entitled *Crossing Borders*. She also partnered with author Dante Liano to write several popular children's books about her childhood as a Mayan Quiché Indian in Guatemala. Titles include *The Honey Jar* and *The Girl from Chimel* and focus primarily on the traditions of Mayan Quichés, yet also allude to the troubles to come for her people. Beautiful illustrations by Domi grace the pages in both of her children's books, making Menchú's life story accessible to young readers. In addition to writing, Menchú's current human rights initiative is the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation, which provides healthcare, housing, urban planning, and aid for agricultural production. The foundation also strives to unify different groups of indigenous people and to promote mutual cooperation and reflection on values. The foundation receives its support from sixteen governments and multiple non-government entities; thirty-one medical clinics have opened to provide healthcare to those in need.

In 1944, fifteen years before Menchú's birth, two reformist presidents were elected, Juan Jose Arevalo and Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. This was the beginning of what was called the "Ten Years of Spring." During this time Guatemala was run by a reformist government, which introduced a social security system. The government also worked to redistribute land taken by the Spanish to the peasants, encouraged free expression, and legalized unions and the formation of political parties.

In 1951 Arbenz succeeded Arevalo as president, and in 1952 he instated the land reform law. This law was established to take unused agricultural land from large property owners and redistribute it to rural farmers without land. Although the land reform law had little to no effect on coffee bean plantations, it had a direct effect on the United Fruit Company. United Fruit was a notorious multinational corporation which influenced internal politics and, after the land reform law, used a propaganda campaign to persuade the U.S. government that Guatemala had a communist agenda.



# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

## Biography continued

In March of 1954, Guatemala implemented a new constitution that restricted privileges of the elite and gave more attention to the growing problems of middle and lower class Guatemalans. The new constitution also gave Guatemalan women the right to vote. That same year the U.S. launched a plan to overthrow Arbenz and did so with a group of Guatemalan exiles armed and trained by the CIA. By June 27, the reformist government was overthrown, Arbenz was forced to resign, and the hostility between the government and the native population mounted.

During the 1970s and 1980s the tension between the two groups continued to grow. In 1977 the U.S. cut off all military aid to Guatemala because of the increase of violent activity against the Mayan people and the guerrillas by the Guatemalan army.

In 1978 General Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia was elected president and the civil war violence escalated. During that same year the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC) was formed. Reformist groups, such as the CUC, aroused considerable opposition in influential circles.

In 1979, Menchú joined the CUC furthering her involvement in political activism at the same time the guerillas were also widening their campaign across the country. That year nearly 11,000 people were killed by death squads and government soldiers in response to the growing guerilla activity. Under Ronald Reagan the US started to supply the Guatemalan army again to end the violence and Reagan's argument that our lack of support hurt our allies in the struggle against communism. The Guatemalan military also launched a "scorched earth campaign," burning almost four hundred Mayan villages to the ground.

By 1989 the death toll of the civil war reached 100,000 deaths and at least another 40,000 missing. In 1996 a newly elected president, Alvaro Arzu, signed a peace agreement with rebels in Guatemala thus ending thirty-six years of civil war.



# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

## Biography continued

*I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*

In the opening pages of *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, Menchú informs readers of her aim to convey a collective identity of Mayan Quiché struggles through the literary form of testimonio. Menchú clearly states, “This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book and I didn’t learn it alone . . . My personal experience is the reality of a whole people” (1).

The Latin American narrative form of testimonio gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s when a Cuban publishing house recognized the form as a viable literary category. Testimonios are a narrative form that traditionally allow subjects of oppression to persuade large audiences of the elite class or Western readers to understand the suffering and hardship they experience. Through the use of a first-person voice, readers sense that they are witnessing the events vividly described in the text. Testimonios aim to convey a collective as opposed to individual identity and often have a political and social objective. Many academics debate the merit of testimonio, and question whether it should to be canonized as literary form. Some critics contest the form’s factual legitimacy as a usable basis for political action, and view testimonios as works of propaganda.

Menchú’s voice was first heard abroad in 1983 when she recounted her life story to anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray and published *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Venezuelan-born, Burgos-Debray assembled the text from tape-recorded interviews she had conducted with the 23-year-old Menchú in Paris the year before. She revised and arranged the transcripts into a book, first released in Spanish titled *My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and This is How My Consciousness Was Raised* in 1983. Its international popularity caused the book to be translated into twelve languages, and Menchú’s work became an internationally influential image of the atrocities committed by the Guatemalan army in peasant villages.



# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

## Biography continued

In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, recurring themes of class divides, poverty, Mayan Indian tradition, and gender roles provide readers with a heightened understanding of the Quiche experience. From a young age Menchú understood that life as a Quiché Mayan would be difficult and recounts that her family was too poor to make ends meet in their rural village of Chimel. This forced her family and community to supplement their income with work in the fincas (plantations) during their agricultural off-season. The fincas were owned by wealthy ladino landowners and workers were subjected to verbal abuse and inhumane working and living conditions. After watching her younger brother die in the cruel conditions of the finca, and observing her mother's grief she felt "both angry with life and afraid of it, because [she thinks]: "This is the life I will lead too; having many children, and having them die" (41). Emphasizing her childhood dislike of the finca, Menchú writes, "It made me very angry [going to the finca] and I used to ask my mother; 'Why do we go to the finca?' And my mother used to say; 'Because we have to. When you're older you'll understand why we need to come. I did understand, but the thing was I was fed up with it all. When I was older, I didn't find it strange any more. Slowly I began to see what we had to do and why things were like that. I realized we weren't alone in our sorrow and suffering but a lot of people, in many different regions, shared it with us" (25). Her disdain for the oppressive finca and the injustices her family experienced at the hands of the ladinos in power sparked her interest in activism. Throughout *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, she stresses her role in exposing the oppressive conditions her people face. She explains, "... My duty was to promise to serve the community and I looked for ways in which I could work for the community" (49).

In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Menchú discusses the traditions and values of her native Indian Quiché heritage. Discussing marriage customs, domestic duties, gender roles, spirituality, and child-bearing, Menchú provides the reader with a context on the unique importance the Quichés hold in the history of Guatemala. She stresses the importance of the oral tradition in handing down experiences pertaining to womanhood, spirituality, and social interactions. Menchú explains how much of her education was handed down in the form of oral history from the community.



# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

## Biography continued

Her understanding of spirituality, marriage, family, cultural history, and domestic traditions were all learned through conversations with her elders. She emphasizes the strong spiritual connection Quiché Indians have with nature, stating, “We Indians have more contact with nature [...] We worship—or rather not worship but respect—a lot of things to do with the natural world, the most important things for us” (56). Although she provides the reader with a glimpse into Mayan Quiché culture, she is careful not to reveal too much information. She writes, “We Indians have always hidden our identity and kept our secrets to ourselves. This is why we are discriminated against. We often find it hard to talk about ourselves because we know we must hide so much in order to preserve our Indian culture and prevent it from being taken away from us” (20).

Short chapters add a sense of urgency to Menchú’s cause. Switching chapter topics from oppressive finca conditions to Quiché traditions, to activist involvement, Menchú organizes her work in the fashion of a storyteller, jumping from topic to topic but never losing focus. In this, the structure of the text itself serves as portrayal of her Quiché background, which holds their oral traditions in high regard. Repetitive and simple phrasing adds a sense of honesty to her words and reinforces points. The narrative repetition inherent in Menchú’s text commands the readers’ focus and engages them in the story (Lovell and Lutz 187). For example, Menchú writes of the separation between many Indigenous groups in Guatemala utilizing repetition to emphasize her statement: “I must say it’s unfortunate we Indians are separated by ethnic barriers, linguistic barriers. It’s typical of Guatemala: such a small place but such huge barriers that there’s no dialogue between us.” (143). Repeating the word barriers three times within two sentences reinforces the concept of group discord she is trying to convey. Menchú also presents insightful quotations at the beginning of each chapter, drawing the reader into the text with others’ (and sometimes her own) thoughts provoking introductions. All of these literary devices are employed masterfully and the reader is left unaware of the effect such methods have on their involvement in the story.





# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

## Critical Reception

Although Menchú clearly states in the prelude to her testimonio that she is characterizing herself as a symbol of the typical Mayan peasant, rather than giving a verbatim testimony of her own experiences, anthropologist David Stoll's journalistic investigation of her account raised considerable controversy over the veracity of her experiences. In 1999, Stoll published a strong critique of Menchú's biography entitled *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*.

Stoll's investigation included interviews with those directly associated with Menchú's childhood, including members of her village and the Catholic nuns who educated her in her youth. From his interviews, he found it doubtful that Menchú ever labored on a Ladino plantation, worked as a maid, or was entirely without an education in her childhood. Her father, according to Menchú's book, founded a small mountain village that was later annexed by wealthy plantation owners without any justification. Stoll's investigation concluded that it was likely that this annexation was a result of a land dispute between Menchú's maternal family and her father.

Stoll's primary concern with Menchú's story is "not that she chose to communicate the problems facing Guatemalan Indians by turning herself into a composite Maya," but rather "Rigoberta was dramatizing herself the way a Hollywood script-writer might, to stir an audience and move it to care about far-off victims" (Arias 395). Stoll believes that Menchú should have later emphasized that she was a symbol of the Maya in her book rather than characterizing her experiences as genuine.

Many critics have brushed off Stoll's assertions, citing that the testimonio is, in itself, a collective memory. Elzbieta Sklodowska dismisses Stoll's allegations from her interpretation of Menchú's story. She writes, "Where Stoll spots lies and fabrications, I see allegories and metaphors. In short, I see a text" (Arias 256). Many critics believe the factual discrepancies are irrelevant compared to the larger truths Menchú aims to convey through an established literary form. Critic Linda Maria Brooks argues that testimonios are literature, pointing to the form's consistent performance strategies of staging, acting, story telling performance, and dialogue. She argues that the statements Menchú provides are "enactments of broader truths—performances of the dialogical process by which truths originate" (Brooks 3). She points out that Stoll is looking at Menchú's truth from a journalistic rather than an anthropological point of view. Arguing that testimonios are an intercultural exchange, Brooks stresses that the form allows for political urgency.



# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

## Critical Reception continued

Other critics who question the legitimacy of the literary form argue that poor, disenfranchised, and oppressed Latin Americans have traditionally used the testimonio form to resist class divides. Critic William G. Tierney argues that the academic debate surrounding testimonios' truthfulness comes as no surprise, as the inherent class-divide naturally lends itself to scrutiny. He argues, "one finds truth not through the unquestioned, absolutist reading of Menchú's—or anyone's text, but through our own engagement, questioning, struggles, and challenges" (Tierney 111).

Following the controversy to the authenticity of the Nobel laureate's testimonial, the United Nations established an oversight committee to investigate the implications of Stoll's objections to her story. After rigorous investigation into the conflict between the native guerillas and the government army, the committee firmly stated that Menchú's story is a credible representation of life as a Guatemalan peasant.

Menchú, the girl from Chimel, has significantly increased awareness of Indigenous rights and struggles in Guatemala and furthered many other humanitarian efforts abroad. Of her activism for indigenous rights in Guatemala she writes, "That is my cause. As I've already said, it wasn't born out of something good, it was born out of wretchedness and bitterness. It has been radicalized by the poverty in which my people live. It has been radicalized by the malnutrition which I, as an Indian, have seen and experienced. And by the exploitation and discrimination which I've felt in the flesh. And by the oppression which prevents us from performing our ceremonies and shows no respect for our way of life, the way we are" (247).



# Rigoberta Menchú Tum

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