

# Menchú Tum, Stoll, and martyrs of solidarity

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According to the mainstream media, civil society and grassroots campaigns are increasingly affecting foreign policy. Recent events, like the signing of the International Treaty to Ban Land Mines, have opened the media's eyes to the phenomenon of foreign-policy action at the grassroots, but it has been around for a lot longer.

Many such campaigns are in solidarity with some kind of struggle. The causes adopted by solidarity groups are as diverse as society itself. Recent examples include the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, the revolutionary governments in Cuba and Nicaragua, the anti-government forces during the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, the Zapatistas in Mexico, and the liberation of East Timor from Indonesian occupation. The common thread of international solidarity groups is that people, primarily in the North, give time, money, and energy to a struggle that benefits people in a different culture, primarily in the South.

Solidarity groups form part of the broader international development community, so it is important to understand them in order to understand the whole development picture. Why do people devote so much to people with whom they have nothing obvious in common? This paper looks at one possible motivating factor for solidarity work: the role of the martyr. It first considers the general concept of the martyr, and then examines a specific case as reflected in two books: *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. The first presents an account of a well-known activist for social change in Guatemala. The second disputes many of the claims related in the first book, and calls into question the martyr status of its subject. The paper draws on solidarity with Central America and Guatemala, primarily from an English Canadian perspective, but the questions raised should be asked about conflict, social change, and international solidarity elsewhere.

## The impact of solidarity groups

From about 1980 to 1997, solidarity with struggles for changes in Central America was perhaps the most popular foreign-policy issue for Canadians. As measured by the number of groups, their location throughout the country, and the number of people who participated, perhaps only the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and support for Cuba have generated as much Canadian grassroots activity. Because of the grassroots nature of many of these groups, it is difficult to find many hard data about participation, but we can make some observations.

Some grassroots solidarity activities were expressed through national campaigns. The two best known were probably Tools for Peace (T4P), which sent material and financial aid to revolutionary Nicaragua, and Project Accompaniment (PA), which sent volunteer observers to accompany the return of Guatemalan refugees to their country. T4P sent a large amount of aid to Nicaragua, raised by people across Canada collecting donations from their own communities. PA sent about 150 individuals to spend six weeks or more (some spent eight months) with returning and returned refugees. Each person paid her or his own way or raised funds in their own communities in order to go live in the heat and rain and insect-infested areas of some of the most remote parts of Guatemala.

Not as easy to identify, but clearly a factor, was the tremendous amount of work done to support the struggle in El Salvador. While solidarity with El Salvador never had a clearly identifiable national organisation in Canada, most people would agree that it was at a comparable level with solidarity for Nicaragua and Guatemala.

In addition to the national campaigns, there were solidarity groups in cities and towns across the country. Typical activities involved raising funds for projects in Central America, educating the Canadian public about conditions in the region, and lobbying the Canadian government, usually by letter-writing campaigns, on refugee, aid, and foreign-policy matters. 'The low level of priority that the Canadian government assigned to Central America before 1980 was challenged, and to some extent altered, by the nation's citizens' (North 1990:211).

Other examples where the grassroots solidarity movement may have had an effect include the following.

- Increased aid to Nicaragua after Hurricane Joan. The Canadian government initially promised a small amount, which it increased after being bombarded by letters and phone calls expressing outrage at its lack of generosity.

- According to McFarlane (1989:151), '[b]y 1978, External Affairs correspondence was displaying a great deal of fretting over the "domestic dimension" to the Central American problem...'. The increased level of solidarity activism meant that External Affairs could no longer claim to be the 'expert' on Central America. Solidarity groups had their own people on the ground reporting on what was happening there.
- Churches and solidarity groups often sponsored refugees to come to Canada. In some cases, these refugees went on to participate in solidarity activities, and some took on other roles within the academic and NGO communities.

Another area of influence exerted by the solidarity movement is the cross-over of solidarity activists to other areas of work on Central America. A number of the new crop of NGO staff working on the region were previously active in solidarity groups, and some Latin American Studies scholars also have a solidarity background.

Most solidarity work was done by volunteers who not only received no material benefit from their work, but often contributed money, transport, lodging, food, and time, to solidarity activities. The few paying jobs in solidarity work generally involved long hours for poor wages.

## **Martyr syndrome**

A martyr is someone who suffers or dies for a religion or cause. For solidarity communities, martyrdom is often an important part of their awareness and lobbying campaigns. This experience can be collective, like the Dili massacre in East Timor, or personal, like the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero. Some don't actually require the death of the martyr, but they do require that this person should have experienced great suffering. The latter category includes Nelson Mandela in South Africa and Rigoberta Menchú Tum in Guatemala. We shall look at Menchú Tum's case in more detail below.

The martyr figure is used in many ways. For example, in the mid-1990s, the English Section of Amnesty International in Canada did several direct-mail campaigns which contained a very graphic description of a torture session. The envelope even carried a warning that what was described inside wasn't for the squeamish. However, just as the warnings of 'mature content' on televised movies guarantees them a good audience of adolescent boys, I couldn't help but wonder if the warning wasn't part of the campaign marketing sizzle.

Some international development NGOs use another type of martyr. Judging by their direct-mail campaigns and other marketing efforts, many seem to think that the way to get donations is to portray the recipients of their aid as the most helpless and pathetic people on earth. This has been called the 'pornography of poverty'. The Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC) has a code of conduct for members, to prevent the worst such cases. The existence of this code and a label for the phenomenon indicate that the problem is a real one.

Witnessing or hearing stories of horror and suffering are very compelling to the majority of human beings. Past generations turned out to see heretics and witches burned at the stake. Nowadays we slow down at road accidents on the motorway, trying to see what happened. The question for solidarity movements is: what is the wisdom of building support for a cause that is based on reactions akin to those of people who turned out to see heretics burned at the stake during the Inquisition? We may have a good turn-out for the burning, but as soon as the killings stop, so does the support.

The level of Central American solidarity activities is now far below what it was in the 1980s, even if Chiapas in Mexico is included under this umbrella. In fact, many people involved in solidarity with Chiapas were also involved in Central American solidarity 15 to 20 years ago. It appears that when one group of people stop being martyrs, some solidarity activists move on to another group who are acquiring this status. But martyrs don't seem to help to build a long-term, grassroots network which supports the people of Central America.

This martyr syndrome has another undesirable effect on the relationship between people in the North and our 'partners' in or from the South. Too often, solidarity activists would allow Central Americans to speak, as long as what they wanted to tell was the story of their suffering. However, if they wanted to speak about other things, they were marginalised and ignored. I am personally aware of a case where Central Americans who wanted to speak at a Canadian government-NGO consultation in 1996 were told by an employee of one of the major solidarity organisations that the Central Americans should not speak, because the NGOs were there to speak for those who had no voice. The obvious irony here is the question of who was denying the Central Americans their voice.

Other Central Americans who cannot or will not tell stories of personal horror are ignored, or even distrusted ('if they don't have a personal story of physical suffering, maybe they're a spy'). Those who

do tell their story suffer too. José Recinos, a Guatemalan who walked most of the way across Canada in 1996 to raise awareness about human-rights abuses in Guatemala, said that he often felt the most tiring thing was talking about his torture experience every day.

## **The debate about the martyr in *I, Rigoberta Menchú***

The Guatemalan solidarity movement has a well-known martyr figure in the person of Rigoberta Menchú Tum. Menchú Tum won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize and is an indigenous woman from the K'iche' people, in the department of Quiché, in northern Guatemala. As an indigenous person, she is a member of the majority of Guatemala's population, but a majority which has been margin-alised and exploited since the arrival of Europeans in 1524 (Martínez Peláez 1994).

She first became known to the world after the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. This became one of the standard texts for solidarity activists who supported the struggle of the Guatemalan people against the domination of the small, economically powerful, mostly European-descended or mixed-blood (*ladino*) élite in Guatemala.

On 15 December 1998, the *New York Times* published an article by Larry Rohter, claiming that some of the incidents related in this book were inaccurate. The article was based on Rohter's own investigations in Guatemala, but it was prompted by, and it quoted from, a forthcoming book by David Stoll, an anthropologist at Middlebury College in Vermont, entitled *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*.

Stoll worked for some years as a journalist before returning to university and obtaining a doctorate in anthropology. His dissertation was later published as *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. In *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, Stoll says that he basically stumbled across the fact that no one remembered anyone being burned alive in the town square of Chajul, meaning that one of the best-known stories from *I, Rigoberta Menchú* could not be true. Stoll investigated further and published some papers on the subject. He claims to report what his informants tell him and points out that many of his informants are also indigenous Guatemalans. He had the collaboration of Barbara Bocek, an archaeologist from Stanford University who was working as a Peace Corps volunteer. Bocek speaks K'iche' and was therefore able to learn much from K'iche' women, many of whom speak little or no Spanish.

The first part of Stoll's book presents data based on his attempts to corroborate a number of events from *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. In the second

part, Stoll discusses the significance of his findings. One of the issues he raises is the role that the earlier book might have played in prolonging the Guatemalan civil war by helping to generate international support for the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), the principal guerrilla umbrella group during the civil war.

I shall not venture into the debate about which book is more correct, nor will I speculate on the authors' motivations for writing their respective books, since other sources are available.<sup>1</sup>

## **The construction of *I, Rigoberta Menchú***

*I, Rigoberta Menchú* provides an excellent case study for some of the debates that have been raging in anthropology in the last 20 years concerning who should really be considered the author of a book of this kind, and indeed what it means to be the 'author' of an anthropological work.

Most people agree on this much of the genesis of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. In January 1982, Menchú Tum was in Paris during a speaking tour about Guatemala. Elizabeth Burgos, an anthropologist, was interested in writing a testimony of a Guatemalan indigenous person, and came in contact with Menchú Tum. Burgos recorded 26 hours of Menchú Tum's testimony over the course of a week. Then Menchú Tum left Paris, and Burgos went on to publish the work. Elizabeth Burgos is named as the author, indicating that she thinks it is her book.

Arturo Taracena was at that time the representative in Paris of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), then Guatemala's largest guerrilla organisation. In an interview (Aceituno 1999:1B) in *el Acordeón*, the Sunday cultural supplement to the Guatemalan daily *el Periódico*, Taracena says that four people worked on the book: Menchú Tum, Burgos, Francisca Rivas, and himself. According to Taracena, he and Cécile Rosseau, a Quebecoise who was the representative in Paris of the Revolutionary Organisation of the People in Arms (ORPA), another guerrilla organisation, were the chain that connected Burgos to Menchú Tum. Menchú Tum was staying with Taracena. Rosseau knew that Burgos wanted to write a testimony of a Guatemalan indigenous person, and she knew Taracena. Burgos asked the questions and recorded Menchú Tum's testimony. Rivas, a woman of Cuban origin also living in Paris, transcribed the interviews, because Burgos' Spanish wasn't up to the task. Taracena corrected the Spanish, since Spanish was Menchú Tum's second language, and also wrote the glossary of Guatemalan slang for non-Guatemalan readers of the Spanish edition.

According to Taracena, Burgos proposed that he not be mentioned in the book, in order to forestall accusations that it was a political work, and he 'didn't disagree'.

Menchú Tum has disowned the book: 'I'm the protagonist of the book, and it's my testimony, but I'm not the author' (*Prensa Libre* 1998a:5); but she has also said, 'It's my testimony, and I'll defend it' (*Prensa Libre* 1998b:4).

One important point is usually lost in the complicated story of the creation of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Its readers created the Rigoberta Menchú of the book, and it is unlikely that she is the same person as the one who currently heads the Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum. Most readers probably remember her demographic details (indigenous woman from Guatemala who speaks Spanish as a second language), but don't know what she has been doing since she won the Nobel Peace Prize. The accidental nature of the creation of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* means that Menchú Tum, Burgos, or Taracena may have been responding to what they knew, consciously or unconsciously, would reverberate with the Northern solidarity activist's own caricature of Guatemalan indigenous people.

## The attempt to discredit *I, Rigoberta Menchú*

Stoll questions six parts of the account in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

- The book says that the army burned to death one of Menchú Tum's brothers, Petrocinio, in the town square of Chajul, and forced her and her family to watch. Stoll says that's not true. He reports that seven residents of Chajul say the army never burned anyone alive in the town square. According to Stoll, Petrocinio died in different circumstances, and without the family present.
- It says that another brother, Nicolás, died of hunger. Stoll says that no brother died of hunger in the way Menchú Tum described it. Rohter says Nicolás is alive and well, and that he and a half-sister know that two older brothers died of hunger, but before Nicolás was born, which means at least 10 years before Menchú Tum was born.
- It says that Menchú Tum never went to school and couldn't speak, read, or write Spanish until shortly before giving the testimony on which the book is based. Stoll says that Sister Margarita of the Insituto Belga-Guatemalteco says that

Menchú Tum was a good student, and was in her first year of *básico* (grade seven) in January 1980.

- It says that Menchú Tum's family was involved in a land dispute in Chimal between indigenous families like hers and non-indigenous families who were favoured by the State because of their ethnic background. Stoll says that Menchú Tum's older brother (and other sources in the area) claim that the dispute was between Menchú Tum's father and his in-laws, another indigenous family.
- It says that Menchú Tum's father, Vicente Menchú, was a founder of Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC). Stoll says that Vicente Menchú was not a founder of CUC, basing his claim mainly on circumstantial evidence.
- It says that Menchú Tum was a member of CUC and an organiser and catechist in Uspantán. Stoll says that Menchú Tum was not a member of CUC in Guatemala, nor was she an organiser and catechist in Uspantán, again basing his claim mainly on circumstantial evidence and chronologies, adding that no one recalls her activism in her community.

All the points that Stoll challenges relate to Menchú Tum's status as a suffering 'martyr'. The first three show how she and her people suffer and are deprived. The last three show that the reason they suffer is their status as indigenous people and because they are activists.

### ***Repercussions***

The publication of the *New York Times* article caused a storm in the Guatemalan press. Much of this simply repeated the original report, but the headlines included things like 'Rigoberta lied in her autobiography' (*Siglo Veintiuno* 1998:2). Columnist Alfred Kaltschmitt used the occasion to imply that there had been no human-rights abuses in Guatemala during the civil war, or at least that both sides were equally guilty (Kaltschmitt 1998). At the international level, the people who always maintained that the conflicts in Central America were the result of communist agitation took advantage of the controversy to trot out their arguments again (Horowitz 1999; D'Souza 1998).

Others came to Menchú Tum's defence. Rosalina Tuyuc, an indigenous congressional deputy for a party generally sympathetic to Menchú Tum, said that Stoll's accusations 'originate from the racism against indigenous people that exists even today' (*Prensa Libre* 1998c:5).



In the same article, Aroldo Quej, an indigenous deputy for a party less sympathetic to Menchú Tum, said, 'I don't share many of the positions of Ms Menchú, but that doesn't mean that I don't respect the honour that was bestowed on her, nor the international prestige that she has'.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education's* website (*Chronicle* 1999) has the following comments that are indicative of one line of response to Stoll's book:

Allen Carey-Webb, an associate professor of English at Western Michigan University, says readers must put Ms Menchú's work in context. 'We have a higher standard of truth for poor people like Rigoberta Menchú,' he says, adding: 'If we find a flaw in her, it doesn't mean her whole argument goes down the drain.'

Joanne Rappaport, president of the Society for Latin American Anthropology, has similar worries. Mr Stoll's book, she says, is 'an attempt to discredit one of the only spokespersons of Guatemala's indigenous movement.'

In another interesting point from the same website, Rick Anderson, Head Acquisitions Librarian, UNC Greensboro, asks if:

... students will be well served by instruction on this topic that makes no distinction between the truth and falsity of what purports to be eyewitness testimony? Is the case against the Guatemalan government so flimsy that we who oppose its tactics must resort to fabrication in our criticism of it?

Overall, the result of the debate was at least embarrassing to solidarity activists. The credibility of one of our symbols was called into serious question in a number of mainstream media outlets.

## **Reaction of English Canadian solidarity activists**

In an earlier paper (Reid 1999), I surveyed a number of solidarity activists in order to find out their attitudes towards the debate. The 13 respondents provided some interesting insights.

It is clear that these respondents do *not* do the work they do for Guatemala solely because of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. All but one said that the disputed accuracy of the book would not change what they believe about Guatemalan indigenous people, while the remaining respondent disputed the use of the word 'biography' in the question. Although respondents did not base their views on Guatemala solely on this book, they seem to think other people might change their views about the

situation of Guatemalan indigenous people if *I, Rigoberta Menchú* were shown to be an inaccurate biography. (The remaining respondent again disputed the use of the word 'biography' in the question.)

Despite the fact that almost all respondents said they would not change their views on the basis of the factual accuracy of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, a majority did rate this book as either 'important' or 'very important' in the formation of their views on Guatemala. Eighty-five per cent had read more than ten books or in-depth articles about Guatemala – not surprising, given the population from which the sample was taken. People inclined to devote a lot of time to solidarity activities will probably also find time to keep up with their reading. Combined with other sources of information available to them (Guatemalan friends living in exile, videos, travel, among other things), the evidence suggests that solidarity activists are reasonably well informed about Guatemala.

The energetic response to Stoll's book in other circles was also apparent in additional comments that a few respondents provided. However, despite the reactions that Stoll's book has aroused in the general solidarity community, most respondents who had not read it resisted the temptation to dismiss it outright. Over two-thirds said they couldn't pass judgement on the accuracy of Stoll's accounts, because they had not read the book. Of the four respondents who found Stoll's book to be an 'unlikely' account of events, two had actually read it. This, too, supports the conclusion that activists analyse what they read, and are not inclined to read just one book and accept it as the truth.

In follow-up interviews, I asked some respondents why *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was important to them. One said that, 'As a young woman, I was horrified by her story and Guatemalan history'. The book motivated increased interest in Guatemala, and probably contributed to other activities, including personal visits, that deepened her understanding of the country. Another respondent indicated that the book was important both for the historical facts, and for the 'human face' that it put on the recent tragedies in Guatemala. Finally, another respondent said that the book '[fitted] in to what I was learning at the time'.

Of those who responded that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was irrelevant to their views on Guatemala, one respondent indicated that this was because they knew that events like those recounted in the book did happen, even if they didn't happen to Menchú Tum herself. This person went on to say that their opinion of Menchú Tum might change depending on the outcome of the dispute between the two books, but not their opinion of what happened in Guatemala.

The survey suggests that the martyr figure probably motivated activists to learn more and get more involved. However, it also shows that activists have a deeper and broader understanding of the issues than comes from reading one book.

## Conclusion

The martyr is a powerful symbol for solidarity movements. Martyrs attract people to the cause, or at least motivate them to find out more about what is behind the martyr. As people take up a cause and become activists, they increase their knowledge, and this knowledge allows them to evaluate new information critically, including information about their martyr. Activists don't devote time, money, and energy to their cause on the basis of a simplistic understanding of events.

Unless people are taken beyond the initial exposure to a martyr, however, the martyr figure becomes counter-productive. As soon as the events that create the martyrs cease, so does interest in the cause. For movements that are trying to create long-term social change, this means that their support from solidarity groups disappears exactly when they could really start to take advantage of it. Another danger of investing everything in the image of a martyr is that, by discrediting the martyr, the whole cause is also discredited. If a martyr is to be used to generate public support for a cause, then activists have to be capable of taking public understanding beyond the simplistic analysis of that martyr's suffering. Finally, a solidarity movement that is built on people who were attracted to a martyr element will continue to be influenced by its members' attraction to martyrs. Their tendency to see their Southern partners in this way can affect all aspects of their work, and can alienate people who should be their partners. Solidarity activists have to see their Southern partners as something other than suffering people in order to do effective work.

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## Notes

- 1 Two interesting debates are a series of articles and letters in the *Nation* (Grandin and Goldman 1999, Stoll 1999, Grandin 1999, Goldman 1999, Nelson 1999), available at: [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com). See also the Chronicle of Higher Education's web site (Chronicle 1999).

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