

"TRUTH IS HOLY:"
INDIGENOUS NARRATIVES OF THE GUATEMALAN
GUERRA CIVIL

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INTRODUCTION AND GOALS OF STUDY

From the overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 until peace accords were signed in 1996, the nation of Guatemala was embroiled in a vicious civil war, a war that saw the overthrow of a democratically-elected president by U.S.-conceived and supplied “revolutionary forces,” the total breakdown of the tripartite Guatemalan governmental system, heinous human rights offenses committed by the Guatemalan army, and genocidal attacks against the country’s indigenous Maya population. A war of such magnitude and duration, (lasting over *thirty years*,) could not fail to leave an enduring mark on the country even after the large-scale violence had ceased.

During my fieldwork in San Andrés Xecul and its *aldea* Nimasac, I attempted to collect and classify indigenous narratives of the war, in order to summarize and make accessible a part of the indigenous perspective on the war as both a historical and personal concept. Within this work, I will present an organized classificatory system of common themes in the narratives and lessons I was taught by my respondents about the war; I will attempt as well, using articles and historical analyses, to provide some concomitant cultural context. My interest in the Guatemalan civil war stems, in part, from the highly organized and cut-and-dry way that the “objective” and “unbiased” historical narrative presents the entire concept. However, it is my belief that such a significant and emotionally-charged event in a country’s history cannot be rigidly or cleanly defined by a wholly external and reductionist perspective.

As such, I perceived the aim of my fieldwork as one that sought to combine history with ethnography and gain a more human and integrated perspective on the war; herein I attempt to describe and characterize the thoughts and feelings of a segment of the Guatemalan populace whose indigenous families suffered terribly during the protracted internal armed conflict. It is my hope that perusing this work will permit the reader a glimpse,

however small, into the minds and hearts of those who bear their own and their family's burden to this very day, and will allow the reader to better understand that the lasting effects of a violent civil war cannot be wholly and conveniently expressed in the pages of an academic journal.

METHODS

Given that my intent was to understand as many different perspectives on the war as possible, my population sample included any adult in the San Andrés Xecul area, male or female, who would consent to be interviewed. Most of my interviews came from people who were engaged in activities that kept them in one place for extended periods of time but still permitted them to speak. I found that many of my best interviews were found at the communal laundry, where women clean their household's clothing and were eager to talk to any passer-by while they worked. Also, on sunny days, groups of older men would lounge in the central plaza of town; they welcomed me into their circle to talk when I explained I was an American student attempting to learn about Guatemalan culture and history.

Another system that required outlay of money on my part but was nonetheless effective I discovered completely by chance. If a tienda sells bottled drinks and you purchase one, you must remain inside the shop and hand the bottle back when finished drinking. Often, there are many people standing in a shop drinking for exactly this reason. I found that paying two quetzals for a Coca-Cola provided me with a ready-made reason to stand and talk with shop owners and other customers. This period of time was often longer than might be expected; it seemed to be a well-established excuse for general gossip and chatter, two practices that I observed to play a pivotal role in daily interpersonal relations in San Andrés Xecul. This highly randomized system of finding respondents no doubt has led to scattering and inconsistency among the answers I received and the stories I was told. However, as my

goal was to collect as many points of view as possible, I feel this has helped rather than hindered my study.

Conversations with my respondents, while open-ended, often followed a general pattern. After greeting them and asking about their day, I would usually be asked what country I was from, where I was living, and what I was doing in Guatemala. After answering these questions, (saying that I was an American college student staying with a family in the town, and that I was here to learn about Guatemalan culture,) I would say that I was particularly interested in learning about the civil war. This general question led to highly varied responses but gave me the opportunity to see what aspects of the war my respondents considered significant, or, perhaps, those that they thought were appropriate to discuss with a young foreigner. Many people asked me, “What have you already learned?” In order to not affect their responses, I tried to parry this question by saying that I had read many books, and watched some movies, but was in Guatemala to be taught, to hear the story from the Guatemalan people themselves. After this response, my respondents often began discussing the war in general, while asking, often, if I had any specific questions.

It was of primary importance to me throughout my fieldwork that I not create the impression that I was testing or judging my respondents’ knowledge of generally accepted academic historical narratives. Rather, I tried to make clear that I was there to listen and to learn, and that I was willing to be an attentive and willing student rather than a disinterested arbiter administering a history test. I feel that this relatively unstructured and humble approach allowed my respondents to discuss the war more openly as both a historical and personal concept, and assisted me in my goal of finding organic and honest indigenous narratives of the war and its effects on the country.

A CLASSIFICATION OF INDIGENOUS NARRATIVES OF THE *GUERRA CIVIL*

Although the responses I received and the stories I was told during my time in San Andrés Xecul varied widely and all had individual merit, I have been able to organize them into more general categories that represent accurately the thematic structure of my information. I do not personally feel that this is an inappropriately reductionist approach; presenting my respondents' stories as narrative categories both eliminates the inevitable chaos that would occur from trying to describe each interview individually and will assist the reader in seeing the ethnographical and historical connective tissue that spans the gaps between individual histories and perspectives.

What follows is a taxonomic system of indigenous narratives regarding the Guatemalan civil war, organized and defined by quotes from individual respondents that accurately represent each collective narrative. This system will show that in the aftermath of a violent civil war that affected many lives in many ways, an organized classification and description of narratives will show the critical common threads that reflect an entire sample group's view of their country's government, history, and future.

VENALITY, SECRECY, AND A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

“Everything in Guatemala, including the government, is for sale.” –Elena¹

This quote from a woman in San Andrés reflects a major theme in my respondents' discussion of their government. Nearly all of the people I interviewed impressed upon me repeatedly their belief that in Guatemala, money is directly equated with power. This belief is supported by Victor Montejo in his discussion of the Guatemalan class structure, in which he points out that the concentration of wealth in Guatemala is found most notably in 22 families of European descent, who possess “political and economic hegemony in Guatemala.”

(Montejo 2005: 3) I was told by a man in San Andrés Xecul named Eduardo that in Guatemala all levels of the government are highly venal; Eduardo believes, along with many

¹ “Elena,” like all specific respondents' names referenced in this work, is a pseudonym.

of my other respondents, that the police can be bribed to ignore any crime, that mayors and governors will change city or municipal laws in a heartbeat to accommodate a large business interest, that congressmen and judges can be bribed to rule in favor of or against any proposal, and that given enough monetary incentive, even the army can be paid off to terrorize one's opponents.

A man named Josè further explained that these institutions can be affected internally by rich Guatemalans or externally by other countries. Streeter (2000) writes that the rich and historically agriculturally-based families such as the Broils, Arenases, and the Samayoas (Perera 1993: 64) in Guatemala successfully prevailed upon the Guatemalan government to force the land-dependent poor off of their land by demanding titles and other legal documents that the long-time traditional owners of the land, (Indigenous Guatemalans,) never possessed. This redistribution of land led to the establishment of massive fincas for the purpose of growing cash crops such as coffee for export on the country's most fertile land; this is typified by Carlsen's representative example of the formation of fincas in the area of Lake Atitlan, while the poor were relocated to poor land far from market centers and their ancestral homes. (Carlsen 1997: 116)

However, these examples of internally motivated change by Guatemala's vastly wealthy upper class only tell a part of the story of the Guatemalan government's rampant corruption and how easily it has been convinced to cater to the world's richest and most powerful nations. A woman named Alisia, put it quite succinctly when she told me, "Guatemalans don't own, we don't control Guatemala."

Carlsen writes that many Guatemalan farmers have begun over-using chemical fertilizers and have stopped growing traditional Guatemalan crops such as corn, beans, and squash in favor of highly exportable cash crops that will bring the farmers more money when sold to countries such as the US, or on the general European market. (1997: 33, 118) Green

mentions in this vein that some indigenous people see the shift away from traditional crops toward more globally-focused and easily exportable produce as a harbinger of the loss of their cultural identity. (1999: 17-19) For these people, ceasing to grow corn on their milpas and to instead buy it at decreased prices from other countries is not culturally acceptable, as it indicates disrespect for tradition and their ancestors; Rigoberta Menchù expresses several times in her controversial autobiography that this is one of the greatest offenses a Maya can commit. (Burgos-Debray, Menchù 1983)

Moreover, these strong economic influences by other countries that represent the global market have affected Guatemala not only in agricultural and land-owning aspects, but in political and religious ways as well. The principal of the aldea Nimasac's confradía, Don Luìs, told me (through a translator) that Protestantism, the evangelical churches, and the country's integrationist "One Guatemala" campaign are all, "curses, curses from your country and other countries like it. They are trying to wipe our holy *costumbre* off of the earth, to drive it out of our country, to drive it out of our hearts, to drive it out of our memories. They wish that we would no longer be Maya."

My host father Apollonio said to me at breakfast one morning in a tone of great disappointment and disgust, "All these gigantic companies like your country's Chiquita, (the successor of the infamous United Fruit company) ("United Fruit" Encyclopedia Britannica Online: accessed 1/3/2008) all these companies are owned by people who are not of us, they are owned by Americans, British, Canadians, whoever. But the rich countries in the world have always run Guatemala; they control every little thing, so why couldn't they have started our civil war if they wanted to?"

This equation of money with political power was a consistent and important theme in the stories of my respondents as they spoke about their government and how it manages its internal economic and social affairs. As Alisia told me, "Without our rich, without the rich

countries paying for our things, Guatemala would die. There is no way to expect the government to help us poor people when they are busy trying to win respect with other countries and make more money. Our government's eyes are not on the people, they are on the rich and on their own money. This will never change." My respondents had no faith in the legitimacy and steadfastness of their government, instead reporting to me that every aspect of their country will bend and adapt to those who can afford to pay. They appear to see their government not as a caring and responsible reflection of the will of the people; they consider it an unchangeable perpetuation of the continual enslavement of Guatemala to the rich and powerful, both internally and internationally.

"Everything the government does is secret. It is all secrets. With all governments and here, all secrets." –José

Another theme in the answers of my respondents was a widespread belief that the Guatemalan government makes all of its political deals and decides its policies in non-public forums where the interests of the wealthy and of other countries take precedence over the needs of the Guatemalan people. Clearly, this theme is connected to the narrative regarding the venal and easily influenced nature of the Guatemalan government. However, I have chosen to discuss the narrative about secrecy separately for one critical reason: my respondents connected their beliefs about the secret nature of the Guatemalan government and of governments in general to the initial causes of and external involvement in their civil war.

The historical academic literature on the Guatemalan civil war generally agrees that the high-level governmental connections that the agricultural giant United Fruit had in the US and a cold-war style fear of expanding communism in Central America caused the US to support and supply a coup of the Arbenz government. (Immerman 1980, Bowen 1983) Declassified CIA documents, statements given by ex-military citizens of the US and various

retrospective analyses of the Guatemalan civil war provide exceptionally strong evidence that the overthrow of President Arbenz was conceived and orchestrated by the CIA; it is demonstrably true that the US provided the Guatemalan military with weapons, vehicles, training, and in-country assistance from the US Army Green Berets. (Immerman 1980)

Articles I have consulted by Immerman, Bowen, Streeter, Jonas, and Brockett have all concluded that the start of the Guatemalan civil war was due in great part, if not wholly, to interventionist US foreign policy.

This general agreement becomes of great interest when my respondents answered my question, “why did the civil war start?” First, it is important that I mention that all of my respondents knew I was a young American student. Therefore, it is very possible that in their attempt to not upset me, they may have known about US involvement in the war but not mentioned it. However, nearly all of my respondents said that they thought the war wouldn’t have happened if United Fruit hadn’t had their lands taken away, because the company was very powerful and was able to convince the army to overthrow Arbenz.

A group of younger boys in school uniforms that I interviewed reported that they had been taught the following history in school: “Big companies had lots of land, and made lots of money from it. Then president Arbenz wanted to take their land back for the people. So, the companies got mad, and paid the army to take over and get them their land back. Then, the army got greedy and wanted even more power, and they started the war and killed many people.” This is interesting because they identify the large companies as villains in the vein of the “money is power” narrative but do not mention US involvement in the start of the war. This pattern confused me at first. However, a man named José explained to me his perceptions of US involvement in the war and how it related to governments keeping their actions secret.

José said to me, “I have been told that your country was responsible for our war. I’ve heard that you were worried about communists and your bananas. But we can never truly know. Governments never tell their people anything. Yours tells you nothing either; it is stupid to think you know what your government does. Why should I blame your country when I cannot believe anything anyone says about what our governments do, and especially not the governments themselves?” A woman named Lucia told me, “I believe that the US did some bad things. They may have started our war. But what good is it to worry? The war has already killed many; we should concentrate now on helping ourselves and each other rather than blaming other countries. What use is your question? Why our war began is no longer important.”

Furthermore, many of my respondents told me that during the civil war, they heard no stories of *gringos* killing the Guatemalan people. A man named Jesús told me, “Your country does many evil things. But no American soldier killed my parents, my own countrymen did. I know what I saw.” My respondents seemed determined to not place the responsibility for the actions of the war on another country; they talked about the war as a solely Guatemalan issue and told me that they cannot ignore that their own people were turned against their families and cities in the civil patrols, or left to join the army and came back a “ladinized” hater of the indigenous people. A woman named Francisca said to me, “We did these things. We fought that war against ourselves.”

The overarching theme in the lessons I was taught by the people I interviewed was that they perceived the war as wholly internal, a Guatemalan problem that they must solve and move past as indigenous Guatemalans, and not hide the truth of what happened in the country by blaming it on foreign influence.

While it is possible that they placed the blame on themselves in order to avoid blaming the US and hurting the feelings of the young American student, the passion with

which many of my respondents expressed this view has convinced me that they identify the civil war as a terrible part of their history where Guatemalans were turned against other Guatemalans, and to place the blame on other nations is to disrespect the deaths and sacrifices made by the refugees and the persecuted; to blame a foreign country is to remove the potency of memory they have regarding the war and to remove their collective responsibility for repairing the damage wrought by the genocidal attacks on communities like theirs during the conflict.

I felt very humbled and ashamed in light of this attitude, especially considering of my own American culture, which places lots of importance on finding guilty parties and ascribing blame correctly. My respondents' relatives had suffered mightily in the civil war, and yet, rather than blaming and searching for the individually guilty they were acknowledging national responsibility and trying to move past blame and toward a more peaceful future.

My respondents seemed mostly unconcerned with the start of the war, ascribing it to corrupt businesses and governments, and saying that the secrecy present in governments means we can never know the truth. The answers I received to these questions taught me about Mayan indigenous solidarity, their hardiness, and their lack of trust and faith in the openness of their national government. I was impressed and deeply affected by this forward-looking attitude that ignored a retrospective historical search for blame for the sake of a unified effort to help those still in need.

THE STRUCTURE, THE INDECISION, AND THE PERPETUATION OF THE CIVIL WAR

“You call it the *Guerra Civil*. But you must understand that we fought two wars, here, in this country. Two wars, two different wars, not one war. We just fought them at the same time.” –Don Luis

This interview with *cofradía principal* Don Luis was perhaps the single most personally significant experience I had during my fieldwork, and was a remarkable stroke of luck for me as an ethnographer. He didn't speak Spanish, and another member of the *cofradía* whom I had met named José had to translate for me. Don Luis gave me a fascinating perspective on the Guatemalan civil war that I had not found in any book, article, or lecture. The story he told me was fraught with authority and sadness, he is a very small and old man who nonetheless speaks with incredible determination and passion. The lesson I learned from Don Luis was that the civil war, which is described as one single conflict by our history texts, was for him a time in Guatemalan history when two wars with totally different aims were being fought. Don Luis is very pan-Mayan, and I found out later that many people in Guatemala thought his views were very extreme. However, his perspective as a religious elder in a traditionally definitive and powerful belief system that Green describes as going through a continual decline in power and significance is worthy of its own discussion. (Green: 1999, 12)

The first war, as Don Luis describes it, was a war by the army to keep themselves in power, and to protect the Guatemalan ladino upper class. The second war was a struggle by the guerilla movement to regain the "rightful" indigenous place in Guatemala. Don Luis told me that prior to the start of the civil war and the overthrow of Arbenz, the indigenous population was already being oppressed, losing their ancient lands, and having their religious traditions placed under attack by evangelist churches. The period of 1944-1954 that Jonas defines as the "democratic revolution" (Jonas 2000: 18) was for Don Luis the time when the guerilla movement was inchoate, mobilizing to fight for the reestablishment of Mayan rights. According to Don Luis, the Maya had been abused for many years before the war, and the Guerilla movement was a righteous crusade by the Maya to retake their proper place in Guatemalan society.

Don Luis' reason for why the two wars were fought at the same time in history was that the oppression by the army galvanized the movement for Mayan rights into action; he believes that they were fighting not against the army, but to bring their cause to the public eye and regain Mayan primacy in the country. He also made two statements with which many of my other respondents vehemently disagreed: first, that all of the different guerilla groups were the same and all fought for the same pan-Mayan cause, and that everyone who would self-identify as Maya supported the Guerillas. While many of my other respondents would disagree with Don Luis' views, my interview with him taught me how fiercely a person could be dedicated to traditional Mayan beliefs and traditions, and I was truly fortunate that he shared his beliefs and his life with me.

“Don't think that all of us, all the Maya, supported the guerillas. Most of us were forced to go to one side or the other; we were caught between the two sides.” –Josefina

In stark contrast to Don Luis' assertion that all self-identified Maya supported the guerilla movement was the pattern of responses from many of my later interviews that denounced both the army and the guerilla movement as violence-obsessed groups who worked solely for their own benefit while ignoring the people. Perrera mentions an interview in which a woman expresses her opinion of the army and guerrilla groups by saying, “As far as I am concerned, the army and the guerrillas are the same. They are all bad. If any of them show their faces here again, I will boil water and throw it in their faces.” (1993: 146)

This point of view held true in many of my own interviews in San Andrés Xecul when my respondents told me that they feel a great portion of the violence could have been lessened if the guerillas were not so persistent in attacking urban centers where the army was garrisoned. A man named Jesús, whose parents were killed by a civil patrol, had this to say: “My parents were shot down by the civil patrol in my village (he did not identify the village) when I was living with my grandmother. The guerillas attacked the army base, and fled. The

army made the civil patrol chase them, and they ran through the village. My mother and father were not guerillas, but the civil patrol shot them anyway. They needed to show bodies to the army, or the whole village would be punished.”

While the civil patrols were supposedly established by the Guatemalan army to “protect their villages from terrorists” (Carlsen 1997: 145) and to “participate in the war effort,” (Schirmer 2002: 1) they often committed many of the violent acts in villages simply out of confusion and fear of army reprisal. Carlsen tells stories of the Civil patrol in Santiago Atitlan wherein the indigenous leaders of the civil patrols received the authority to violate the law, and used this authority to extort money and favors. (1997: 145-146) One of my respondents, Merrari, claimed the civil patrols were responsible for much division and internal strife within many Guatemalan villages and cities, a point of view shared by Carlsen, Schirmer, and Immerman. However, Merrari added that in his opinion, if the guerillas had not recruited so aggressively in villages and attacked army stations in urban centers, the civil patrols would not have been so pressured by the army to such high levels of violence, and would have consequently divided the town’s families less, and resulted in fewer internal issues to overcome after the war.

My respondents told me that the war was not between the rich who supported the army and the Maya who supported the guerillas. These responses opened my eyes appreciably, and although I had read that the Maya throughout the country were “caught between two fires” (Perera 1993: 86) I was not conscious of the extent of the resentment of the guerillas and the reciprocal violence their actions drew by the army that still brews among some people. Many of my respondents told me that the Maya were neutral, victims in the war, and that they suffered mightily because of the guerillas’ actions as well as the army’s.

Perrera’s respondent’s expression of abandonment and abuse by guerilla groups is succinct: “The guerillas demanded our allegiance, but when the army came, they abandoned

us to our fate.” (1993: 146) The guerilla movement, while high-minded and good to the people in the war’s early stages, quickly became attuned to the realities of war, and through their actions caused many Maya communities to endure much violence and repression. (1993: 119-121)

These points and interviews demonstrate that the Mayan role in the war is not easily summarized and was often unclear. The indigenous narrative of their experience with Guerillas and army forces is one of victimization, division, and abuse, not of rebellion and unified support for the various independent guerilla groups.

“The war is not over, but the killing has stopped.” –Josefina

Concomitant with Green’s point about a changing world influencing Maya culture (1999: 14-16) is an interesting and important narrative expressed by my respondents. My respondent Josefina, in the above quote, is poetically referencing a “One Guatemala” campaign undertaken by elements of the Guatemalan government. This campaign stresses a single national identity, and proposes that Guatemalans should not consider themselves to be ladino, or Mayan, but rather simply Guatemalan. All of my respondents that addressed this point, perhaps predictably, were intensely opposed to this idea.

As Demetrio Guajàn discusses in his work “Maya Culture and Politics of Development,” this represents what the Maya understand as an assimilationist attack on Mayan culture; by eliminating the “disruptive and divisive” identification with Mayan tradition, (which Rigobert Menchú expresses has a very tenacious belief in rejection of outsiders and maintaining a sense of Mayan identity,) (1983: 9) the effort could eventually eliminate Mayan culture itself. My respondents were generally very proud and possessive of their ethnic identity; when I told them I was interviewing Mayan people about their country’s history, they often responded in the vein of, “*Si, soy Maya.*”

This association of “national unity” with cultural loss was very present in my interviews. My respondents told me, in accordance with the writings of Rigoberta Menchú, that Mayan communities wish, primarily, for a lack of interference by the larger governmental authorities, and the ability to follow their traditions and live in unmolested. They believe that the “One Guatemala” argument is a cleverer extension of the civil war, an attempt by the army to achieve by cunning what they could not by force, the extinction by absorption of indigenous Mayan culture. My respondents view the war, in their context, not as a struggle against the ruling classes of Guatemala and their army representatives by the guerillas, but as a Mayan fight to preserve their history and their traditions. As my respondent Josefina told me, “The war will be over when we are left in peace, when we must not always fight to protect our *costumbre*, when our way of life is safe again.”

WHY THEY TELL THEIR STORY, AND WHY THEY TELL IT TO OUTSIDERS

“Silence is the enemy of truth.” –Lucia

I approached my search for indigenous narratives of the *Guerra Civil* with a great deal of consternation; I was worried that none of my respondents would be open with me, that I wouldn’t find anyone willing to talk about such a sensitive matter as the war, and moreover, that it would be nigh impossible to find someone willing to talk about an intimate cultural issue with a young American student. What I found instead was a universal willingness and eagerness among my respondents to share their histories, those of their relatives, and their perspectives on the war and its implications for their future. During my final days in San Andrés Xecul, I tried to find out why my respondents were so eager to talk about the war with a stranger. What my respondents told me was both touching and practical.

Both Perera and Green have mentioned the role of silence in war, with Perrera discussing how it can affect testimony (1993: 121) and Green writing that silence is a result of a people not being able to express their suffering, and having no idea how to cope. (1999:

11-13) However, in the current situation in Guatemala, with the peace accords having been signed and the active large-scale violence at a standstill, my respondents told me that the time has come to spread their families' stories about the war and perpetuate their memory. One of the most important points that I learned relates to direct experience of the war; nearly all of my respondents told me that they heard everything they know about the war orally from parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, or older siblings. This separation allows the war to not traumatize them directly, while still teaching them the gravity and seriousness of how the war affected their families. A man named Merrari told me, "The people who were directly involved don't usually talk about it, but those who were taught have to talk."

One of my respondents, Lucia, told me that, "Our silence is what the evil people depend on, and we have to conquer our fear and speak out." Josefina told me, "We tell our stories so that the world can hear, our families gave us everything and lost their lives, and by talking about their sacrifices we can honor them. We don't want just other Guatemalans to hear. This is something the whole world should hear." Merrari told me, "Maybe, if we talk about it, we can all learn more, and then a war like that will not happen again." Their general attitude seemed to be that everyone needed to hear about the war in order that the memories of those who suffered would not be lost, and a hope that by spreading the stories of the war's terrible events, the populace could be determined to prevent it from occurring again.

Rigoberta Menchú tells of the Mayan importance of perpetuating tradition and family memories and stories, (1983: 12-13, 57-58) and this practice seemed the primary motivating force behind my respondents' eagerness to share their families' stories with an ignorant young researcher claiming he was looking for the truth.

This rejection of fear and silence was characteristic of all my interviews regarding the civil war; I encountered a group of people determined that their voices and the voices of their families be heard, willing to give human information on a cold and historically biased topic,

and grateful that I was willing to listen, ask questions, and return to listen more. I conclude, then, that silence has been identified by my respondents as a tool of the army and the Guatemalan government; in order to maintain their collective Mayan voice they are determined to perpetuate the histories of their ancestors and relatives who lost their homes, families, and lives in the *Guerra Civil*. This determination allowed me to hear their history, and to retell it in a larger context within this work.

CONCLUSIONS AND MY PERSONAL ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE

In the process of collecting and organizing these indigenous narratives on the civil war, I came to learn many vital things about my role as a foreign ethnographer, as a tourist attempting to be more than a tourist, and as an American learning more about the language and existence of a foreign country. Initially, and foolishly, I had assumed that the historical articles I had read taught me everything I needed to know about the effects of the Guatemalan civil war. My respondents taught me that I was utterly wrong. My fieldwork in San Andrés Xecul has affected me more deeply than any other single event in my recent memory.

First, I discovered that someone in my position as an ethnographer from the US, even a young person, is considered by the indigenous people to be immensely powerful. Never before have I been so aware of the important role of an anthropologist, or the awesome responsibility we carry to faithfully and correctly report the stories we are told and describe the cultures that we study. My respondent Merrari told me that the indigenous people now depended on people like me, who had the power and the academic ability to lift up their stories and share them with the world community. He said, “We are poor here. We cannot leave and talk about our parents, and the war, and our country. We have families and we have to take care of them. Even if we could leave and try to tell people about our families and what Maya have to fight, we would not know how. We have no power. So, we talk to people like you. We say that you must tell our stories to everyone.” Josefina told me, “Being a student is

important. We are all students of God, and students of the world, but you can be a student of us. When we teach you our culture, you can teach it to others, to important people. A people should not be forgotten.”

As a 21-year-old undergraduate student in the US, I am currently in a phase of life in our country when one is supposed to be simply studying, learning what others have already done, and not making waves nor possessing pretensions of real importance. However, what my respondents told me has taught me something different. These people laid their history and as much of their culture as they could at my feet, with the expectation that I would take it to others and spread the stories that they could not tell on a large scale themselves. This responsibility, to me, is staggering but also incredibly beautiful.

For the first time, these people made me feel as though my studies truly mattered on a larger scale than my GPA and my undergraduate graduation requirements. My respondents trusted me with not only their confidence and the intimate stories of their past, but also trusted me to take what I had learned from them and use it to influence the body of world knowledge about Guatemala and indigenous existence. This trust, which seemed to be given so freely, I believe, is truly epic, at once larger than life and exactly life-sized. This gift of my respondents’ history taught me a great lesson: that with my ethnographical privilege, (possessing the money, education, and connections to perform my study,) comes a great moral obligation to open my eyes and the eyes of others who are currently as ignorant as I once was.

Second, in the beginning of my fieldwork, I encountered and dealt with many stereotypes about white people and tourists that exist in San Andrés Xecul; unfortunately, by watching groups of tourists come and go during my fieldwork, I learned that many of these stereotypes are true. My respondent Lucia told me, “I am glad that you are trying to understand us. Most *gringos* just take pictures of the yellow church and ask women to

balance things on their heads.” Late in my second week of fieldwork, I explained to a group of German tourists, (only one of whom spoke Spanish,) that the reason the young boys playing soccer were upset at their incessant picture-taking was that it was impolite to take photos of people in San Andrés Xecul without asking first. They were very surprised.

It occurred to me that the cultural ignorance that is so consistently displayed by tourists must be maddening to the indigenous people in the town who are treated by the visitors as photographable objects rather than people with a great culture and a painful history. In this vein, my constant attempts to explain that I wanted to be taught by the people and not judge what they had to say to me were invaluable.

By trying to set myself apart from the usual tourist “shutterbug” and show a real interest in the people, I feel that I was able to demonstrate my commitment to my project and give them reason to talk with me. One afternoon, Pete Jones had introduced me to two adult male friends he had made in the town. While we were standing in the square talking, a group of tourists disembarked from a van and immediately began snapping pictures of the Catholic Church. Pete chuckled, and pointing to himself and to me, said to his two friends, “*No somos de ellos.*”

Many of my respondents praised me for my real interest in their culture; for me, a defining moment was when my respondent Lucia’s daughter asked her in K’iché, upon meeting me, if I was a tourist. Lucia responded in Spanish, “*No, no, es un estudiante.*” This critical distinction between ignorant, self-focused tourist and humble student was what brought me success, and taught me that humility and a legitimate initial assumption that I knew nothing are critical to a process of true ethnographic learning and achievement. Throughout my fieldwork, I grew to love and respect the power of the sentence, “*Sólo quiero aprender.*”

Third, the cultural difficulties and partial language barriers present throughout my fieldwork functioned both as frustrating obstacles and (occasionally amusing) learning opportunities. Obviously, in a town where nearly all the adults speak K'iché, often I had no idea what they were saying to each other beyond catching the occasional verb such as “think” or “speak.” However, this aspect of continual development in terms of my language skills and my sensitivity to indigenous culture represents one of the most rewarding elements of my fieldwork: the opportunity to see how my personal experiences and growth interacted directly with my project. In the early stages of my project I was uneasy with my Spanish, and consequently was uncomfortable trying to direct interviews toward specific questions I had. I was also uncomfortable admitting that I hadn't understood a sentence, for fear of being labeled an ignorant tourist and being laughed at. My lack of rapport with anyone in town led my early respondents to be less open with me and, it seemed, suspicious of my motives.

I told two of my respondents early in my fieldwork, Francisca and Maria, that I was nervous asking difficult questions and uneasy with my Spanish ability. Yet, they comforted me, as Francisca said, “Truth is holy. You should keep looking for it.” As my comfort in the language grew and I began to meet various people about town, I felt more comfortable being laughed at for not understanding everything people told me in Spanish, more confident directing conversations, and able to better understand the social cues that told me who was appropriate to interview and when I should let someone go about their business.

This personal development is reflected in my research, which I feel was richer and more personal toward the end of my fieldwork. I was grateful for the improvements in my Spanish that resulted from my interviews, and was also conscious of the greater cultural comfort and sensitivity that my fieldwork gave me. The immersion in the field and living with an indigenous family permitted me to step outside my originally purely academic intentions and see my project and my search for personal historical narrative as a human

endeavor. My opportunity to share in the lives and histories of my respondents and their family was deeply significant for me on a personal level as well as functioning as an effective academic experience.

Each succeeding day, as I sensed the growth of my ability to speak with and understand the people of San Andrés Xecul, I became more involved in their lives, more accepted in the community, and more conscious of my personal growth and mounting awareness of the common human desire to understand and share with each other. I regret that it is utterly impossible to express the depth of meaning and resonance that my fieldwork has within me in a formal academic summary of my methods and results.

My specific intent while writing this summary work was to demonstrate that such a complex human issue as the Guatemalan civil war cannot be summarized neatly and accurately from a purely Etic historical perspective.

My summary of indigenous narratives of the Guatemalan civil war shows that despite the fact that different families in the San Andrés Xecul area experienced the war in different ways and to different extents, common themes can be identified in their stories and explained in a cultural context. I consider my report to be somewhat in the anthropological vein of Green's work "Fear as a Way of Life," in which Green interacts with indigenous women directly and on their own terms in order to better understand their human experience of the events of *La Violencia*. It is my hope that this work has shown that the effects and cultural importance of the Guatemala civil war are not solely historical concepts, but inherently interpreted and personal ones as well. In order to effectively understand these difficult concepts, it is necessary to merge history with ethnography: to let those directly involved in the Guatemala civil war and their descendants to speak for themselves - and through those of us who are willing to listen, learn, and faithfully report, to perpetuate their own unique history.