

Anthropologist Challenges Veracity of Multicultural Icon

But many professors say they will stand by Rigoberta Menchu's memoir

By ROBIN WILSON

The autobiography of a poor Guatemalan woman whose family was oppressed by light-skinned landowners and brutalized by right-wing soldiers has become a cornerstone of the multicultural canon over the last 15 years. So far-reaching is its popularity -- it is read in courses ranging from history to literature to anthropology -- that its author, Rigoberta Menchu, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, has become a virtual icon on American campuses.

But in the last month, new research has emerged suggesting that major portions of the book, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (Verso, 1983), are untrue. A Middlebury College anthropology professor's new book, based on more than 120 interviews in Ms. Menchu's hometown, reports that key events detailed in the autobiography could not have taken place, and that the author's description of herself and her family conflicts with historical records.

The New York Times sent a reporter to Guatemala and published a story last month confirming the Middlebury professor's claims.

So what will the hundreds of faculty members who teach the autobiography do this semester? Most of them plan to go right on teaching it, although many will add material on the controversy. They say it doesn't matter if the facts in the book are wrong, because they believe Ms. Menchu's story speaks to a greater truth about the oppression of poor people in Central America.

"I think Rigoberta Menchu has been used by the right to negate the very important space that multiculturalism is providing in academia," says Marjorie Agosin, head of the Spanish department at Wellesley College. "Whether her book is true or not, I don't care. We should teach our students about the brutality of the Guatemalan military and the U.S. financing of it."

David Stoll, the Middlebury anthropologist, sits in the eye of the intellectual storm. He and other critics of Ms. Menchu's book contend that scholars have been quick to embrace it because of its leftist message.

In his book, *I, Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Westview Press, 1999), Mr. Stoll writes: "Books like *I, Rigoberta Menchu* will be exalted because they tell many academics what they want to hear. Such works provide rebels in far-off places, into whom careerists can project their fantasies of rebellion."

After years of research, Mr. Stoll concluded that the autobiography "cannot be the eyewitness account it purports to be." In chapter after chapter, he claims, Ms. Menchu describes "experiences she never had herself."

Ms. Menchu did grow up within one of the most oppressed groups in Guatemala, writes Mr. Stoll. She was a Maya Indian peasant, whose family farmed in a small village. But her book paints a life much more dismal than was the reality. Her brother was killed by Guatemala's right-wing military, but he wasn't burned to death before her eyes as she claims, writes Mr. Stoll. And a land battle that Ms. Menchu says her father waged against rich Guatemalans of European descent was actually a dispute between her father and his in-laws, charges Mr. Stoll. He believes she embellished her story

to gain sympathy in the West for a Communist guerrilla movement she backed that aimed to topple Guatemala's government.

The release of Mr. Stoll's book, and publication of the New York Times article, have hit the scholarly community like a bomb. The criticisms are particularly damning because even Ms. Menchu's advocates don't regard her book as a literary masterpiece; its value has been its claim to authenticity.

Professors in a variety of disciplines have used Ms. Menchu's autobiography in their courses, written articles and books based on it, and even encouraged graduate students to make it the subject of their dissertations.

"This has become the book one reads when one wants to learn about the problems of Indians in Latin America," says Gene Bell-Villada, a professor of Latin American literature at Williams College. "Students are always impressed and very moved by it."

Many scholars have accused Mr. Stoll of conducting a "Kenneth Starr-style" investigation of a memoir that never claimed to offer a strictly factual account. Even if some events didn't happen exactly as Ms. Menchu describes, professors contend, her book is important because tens of thousands of people were killed or brutalized by Guatemalan soldiers during the country's 36-year war.

Ms. Menchu, who is now 39 and runs the Rigoberta Menchu-Tum Foundation in Guatemala City, has been transformed from an unknown peasant into an international celebrity since her book was first published. She has campaigned for human rights and lectured widely in Europe and the United States, including on numerous campuses. Last month she was quoted in Guatemalan newspapers as saying she will defend her autobiography "to the death." Criticism of it, she said, amounted to "political provocations by academics to try to discredit me." (Ms. Menchu did not respond to attempts to contact her for this story.)

Robin Blackburn, an editor for Verso, says the publisher has sold 150,000 copies of the autobiography and stands behind it. "We think that it is a very accurate and eloquent statement of how things appeared to this young woman," Mr. Blackburn said in an interview from the publisher's London office. Last fall, Verso released a second book by Ms. Menchu -- *Crossing Borders* -- which the publisher calls "part memoir, part political manifesto."

Ms. Menchu told her life story to an ethnologist in Paris in 1982, after she had fled Guatemala to escape the country's raging civil war. She was 23 years old. In her book, she writes: "I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people." First published in Spanish and translated into English a year later, the book tells how she and her family were forced to live in squalid conditions while working on coffee and cotton plantations.

Ms. Menchu recounts how the Guatemalan army attacked her village, and tortured and killed her mother and brother. The police killed her father. The atrocities, she says, raised her political consciousness, leading her to join efforts by Guatemalan guerrillas to overthrow the government.

Although Ms. Menchu's story has been popular on American campuses, it has been criticized before. The book caught the attention of Dinesh D'Souza after it was included in a new humanities course created at Stanford University in 1988 to replace its Western-civilization requirement.

In his 1991 book, *Illiberal Education* (Free Press), Mr. D'Souza, now a research scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, bashed the autobiography and Stanford's use of it. "Rigoberta's victim status may be unfortunate for her personal happiness," Mr. D'Souza wrote, "but is indispensable for her academic reputation."

David Stoll was a doctoral student in anthropology at Stanford when the humanities requirement was being debated, but that isn't what spurred his interest in Ms. Menchu, he says. Before he enrolled at Stanford, he spent nearly a decade as an independent scholar, studying and writing about Protestant missionaries and their work in Latin America.

At Stanford, Mr. Stoll's dissertation focused on Guatemala. He wanted to learn how its people coped with long-term political violence during the country's civil war, which was still in progress when Mr. Stoll made a 1989 trip there.

It was during his travels that year that Mr. Stoll happened upon the town plaza of Chajul, which is near Ms. Menchu's village of Chimal. In passing, he mentioned a key passage in Ms. Menchu's autobiography to a villager. Wasn't this plaza the place where the army burned prisoners, including Ms. Menchu's brother, asked Mr. Stoll. The elderly villager looked puzzled, recalls Mr. Stoll, and told him that the army had never burned prisoners alive in the plaza. Six other townsmen told Mr. Stoll the same thing, yet Ms. Menchu's book claimed she was an eyewitness to the torture and burning of her younger brother, Petrocinio, in that very place.

Mr. Stoll's findings began to leak out even before he earned his Ph.D. from Stanford in 1992, and they did not make him popular in academic circles. "Whenever you're told that you shouldn't look into something," says Mr. Stoll, now an assistant professor at Middlebury, "for some people, that is a very clear directive that you ought to keep looking."

Mr. Stoll does not dispute that the Guatemalan army committed atrocities. But he questions why Ms. Menchu's story should be considered beyond reproach by U.S. academics. He says they have ignored stories told by less-militant Mayans who did not side with the guerrilla movement but simply wanted the fighting in their country to end.

In his 336-page book, Mr. Stoll painstakingly details what he says are inaccuracies in Ms. Menchu's account. While she claims she was never formally educated, Mr. Stoll says she was, in fact, quite privileged, compared with other peasants. Vicente Menchu, writes Mr. Stoll, sent his daughter to a Catholic boarding school in Guatemala, where she was educated by nuns, receiving the equivalent of an eighth-grade education.

Ms. Menchu's book offers up horrible stories of life on Guatemala's plantations, where she says that as a child she was forced to work for up to eight months a year, and where she claims to have seen her two older brothers die of malnutrition. But Mr. Stoll writes that Ms. Menchu was away at school while her family worked on the plantations. Not only did she not witness her brothers' deaths, he writes, she never set foot on the plantations as a child.

Central to Ms. Menchu's tale is a 30-year-long struggle for land she says her family and their indigenous neighbors waged against ladinos or light-skinned Guatemalans of European descent. The ladinos subjugated her family, she says, depriving them of land to live on and farm. Mr. Stoll, however, says the land struggle Ms. Menchu points to as the catalyst for her political involvement was remembered by other villagers as a battle between Ms. Menchu's father and his in-laws.

Mr. Stoll suggests that members of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor, who advised Ms. Menchu, may have prodded her to "broaden her story, to make it more typical of the oppression of the Guatemalan peasants" so that it would have more appeal.

Mr. Stoll realizes he has jumped into a snake pit. Throughout his research, he writes in his book, he was told not to challenge Ms. Menchu because "that would violate the right of a native person to tell her story in her own way." However, he says he felt compelled to continue his work after he realized that not all Mayans sided with the guerrillas, and yet those Mayans "were often discounted" by foreigners.

All of the professors who have taught Ms. Menchu's autobiography and who spoke to *The Chronicle* say Mr. Stoll has exaggerated the importance of the discrepancies he claims to have found. Some even doubt that Mr. Stoll's version of events is correct, given that the Maya villagers he interviewed probably would have been reluctant to tell the truth to a white, American academic whom they had never met before. But even if everything Mr. Stoll writes is true, say academics, it is important to remember that Ms. Menchu's book is a narrative, not a piece of legal testimony.

What matters, professors say, is that the kinds of crimes she wrote of were committed by the military, and indigenous people such as Ms. Menchu bore the brunt of the violence. "Even if she didn't watch her little brother being murdered, the military did murder people in Guatemala," says Ms. Agosin of Wellesley.

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

Mr. Webb coedited *Teaching and Testimony: Rigoberta Menchu and the North American Classroom* (State University of New York Press, 1996). It is a collection of articles on how professors and high-school teachers have used the text in such disciplines as political science, Spanish, and introductory composition. Although Mr. Webb says he will continue to use Ms. Menchu's book in his own courses, he will tell students about Mr. Stoll's critique and allow them "to see for themselves what seems to be the truth." Other professors who spoke to *The Chronicle* say they will do the same.

John R. Beverley, a professor of Spanish and Latin American literature at the University of Pittsburgh, says he has never taught Ms. Menchu's book as if it were the absolute truth. A course he offered last semester called "Testimonial and Ethnographic Narrative" featured her text. He has also contributed to a book entitled *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America* (Duke University Press, 1996), which explores Latin American testimonios and features Ms. Menchu's book as a model of the genre. A testimonio, says Mr. Beverley, is a personal story that also contains a message from a subordinated group involved in a political struggle.

"What I want students to try to get when they read Rigoberta Menchu is not only that she's this transparent reporter to us, and we're the receivers of this nice, P.C., third-world person's story," says Mr. Beverley. "I would like to get students to see her as a person with an ideological agenda. Her book wants to create solidarity."

In the course she offers on Mesoamerican civilizations at Harvard University, Kay B. Warren has wasted no time getting into the controversy over Ms. Menchu's book. She read the New York Times article at breakfast and went to class later that day armed with a copy to see how her students would react. Ms. Warren, a professor of anthropology, had already introduced students to her own book, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton University Press, 1998), so Mr. Stoll's charges were pertinent.

His book has reminded her, says Ms. Warren, that "this is really a new world for anthropologists, one in which our scholarship on ethnic politics is drawn into ongoing political debates here and abroad." She is concerned that Mr. Stoll's book may negatively affect the continuing peace process in Guatemala. A United Nations-appointed truth commission is poised to issue its findings, documenting cases of violence against citizens by the Guatemalan army. "What I worry about is that this controversy may be used to undermine the findings of the truth commission and deflect attention away from attempts to reform the army," she says.

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." A professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Georgetown University, Ms. Rappaport says that Mr. Stoll is going against the grain in cultural anthropology, which no longer advocates studying indigenous people as objects. "What I find is that I am increasingly engaged in a dialogue with people I used to study," she says. Mr. Stoll, on the other hand, she says, risks cutting off "the possibilities of dialogue" between researchers and their subjects by discrediting Ms. Menchu and establishing himself as the ultimate authority on what happened to her.

Some scholars, however, find it hard to understand why their colleagues are criticizing Mr. Stoll, not Ms. Menchu.

"There's something wrong with scholars who say the facts don't matter," says Daniel H. Levine, a professor of political science at the University of Michigan who wrote a paper with Mr. Stoll on grassroots religious movements. "People don't want to discuss this because Rigoberta Menchu is an icon."

Says Daphne Patai, a professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst: "Rigoberta Menchu is not admired as a creative writer. She is admired as the embodiment of a certain struggle. For her to be compromised is not okay, anymore than if we found that the diary of Anne Frank was written by her father."

Diane M. Nelson, an assistant professor of anthropology at Lewis and Clark College, feels conflicted by Mr. Stoll's charges. "I kind of wish she had done what we wish Clinton had done," and told the truth when questions were raised, says Ms. Nelson. However, she also counts herself as a friend of Ms. Menchu. The two met when Ms. Nelson translated for Ms. Menchu at talks the author gave in the United States.

Ms. Nelson has just completed a book, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala*, to be published in March by the University of California Press. The title comes from an expression people in Guatemala use when discussing the Maya indigenous movement there. One chapter is about jokes people have told about Ms. Menchu since she won the Nobel prize. The jokes, say Ms. Nelson, reflect how difficult it is for Guatemalan culture to absorb the idea of a powerful woman.

Like other academics, Ms. Nelson believes I, Rigoberta Menchu is valuable, even if it isn't entirely true. While "hanging around" in Ms. Menchu's living room in Guatemala last summer, Ms. Nelson asked the author about the charges. The professor recalls: "She refused to address them."

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