

# Rigoberta Menchú

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Rigoberta Menchú Tum** (b. 9 January 1959, Chimel, Quiché, Guatemala) is an indigenous Guatemalan, of the K'iche-Maya ethnic group. Menchú has dedicated her life to publicizing the plight of Guatemala's indigenous peoples during and after the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996), and to promoting indigenous rights in the country. She was the recipient of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize and Prince of Asturias Award in 1998. Menchú is a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. She is the subject of the testimonial biography *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983) and the author of the autobiographical work, *Crossing Borders*.

In 2006, Menchú was one of the founders of The Nobel Women's Initiative along with sister Nobel Peace Laureates Jody Williams, Shirin Ebadi, Wangari Maathai, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire. Six women representing North America and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa decided to bring together their experiences in a united effort for peace with justice and equality. It is the goal of the Nobel Women's Initiative to help strengthen work being done in support of women's rights around the world.<sup>[1]</sup>

On 12 February 2007, Menchú announced that she would form an indigenous political party called Encuentro por Guatemala and that she would stand in the 2007 presidential election. Had she been elected, she would have become Latin America's fourth indigenous president after Mexico's Benito Juárez, Peru's Alejandro Toledo and Bolivia's Evo Morales, and the third Nobel laureate after Costa Rica's Óscar Arias and South Africa's Nelson Mandela to become president. She would also have become Guatemala's first female president. On September 9, 2007, Menchú received 3% of the vote.

## Career

Menchú received a primary-school education as a student at several Catholic boarding schools. After leaving school, she worked as an activist campaigning against human rights violations committed by the Guatemalan armed forces during the country's Civil War that lasted from 1960 to 1996.

- In 1981 Rigoberta Menchú escaped to Mexico.
- In 1982, she was the subject of a book about her life, "Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia" (*My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and this is how my Conscience was Born*) that was transcribed from taped interviews and edited by Venezuelan-French author and Anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos. The book became a great success when translated into English (as "I, Rigoberta Menchú"), giving her a role on the international stage at the time of the ongoing conflict in Guatemala.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

In 1991, Menchú participated in the ongoing preparation by the United Nations of its Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Since the Civil War ended, Menchú has also campaigned to have members of the Guatemalan political and military establishment tried in Spanish courts. In 1999 she filed a complaint before a court in Spain because prosecutions of crimes committed during the civil war are practically impossible in Guatemala. These attempts stalled as the Spanish courts determined that the plaintiffs had not yet exhausted all possibility of seeking justice through the legal system of Guatemala. On 23 December 2006 Spain called for the extradition from Guatemala of seven former members of Guatemala's government on charges of genocide and torture. These include former military rulers Efraín Ríos Montt and Óscar Mejía. Spain's highest court ruled that cases of genocide committed abroad could be judged in Spain, even if no Spanish citizens have been involved. In addition to the deaths of Spanish citizens, the most serious charges include genocide against the Mayan people of Guatemala.

She has become involved in the Mexican pharmaceutical industry as President of the company Salud para Todos ("Health for All") and the company "Farmacias Similares", with the goal of offering low-cost generic medicines.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> She currently serves as presidential goodwill ambassador for the 1996 peace accords.

Menchú ran for president in the 9 September, 2007 Guatemalan presidential election, but was defeated in the first round.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Controversies about her testimony

More than a decade after the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, anthropologist David Stoll conducted a thorough investigation of Menchú's story, researching government documents, reports, and land claims (many filed by Menchú's very own family), and interviewing former neighbors, locals, friends, enemies, and others (although not Menchú) for his 1999 book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Stoll confirmed that Menchú grew up in a Mayan peasant village, which was visited by Marxist guerrillas and then attacked by the Guatemalan army. However, Stoll discovered that Menchú changed some elements of her life, family and village to meet the publicity needs of the guerrilla movement, which she joined as a political cadre after her parents were assassinated.

In the book, Menchú maintained that her family was actively involved in fighting against their subjugation by wealthy Guatemalans of European descent and the Guatemalan government. She also claimed that her father, Vicente Menchú, had founded the peasant movement known as the Committee for Campesino Unity. Instead, Stoll and Rohter found that Vicente Menchú, while poor, was relatively prosperous by local Mayan standards. As leader of his community, he won a 27.53 km<sup>2</sup> land grant from the Guatemalan government. Unfortunately, his success led to a long-running dispute with his wife's relatives, in the Tum family, who claimed some of the same land. During the late 1970s, when Vicente Menchú's daughter claimed that he was an underground radical political organizer, he was at home in his village of Chimel working with U.S. Peace Corps volunteers.

In her 1982 life story, Menchú claimed that she and her family had been forced to work as peons on a distant coastal plantation for eight months of the year, as millions of other impoverished Mayan farmworkers continue to do every year. According to neighbors, however, the family was sufficiently well-off to avoid this fate. Menchú also claimed that her father refused to allow her to attend school, on the grounds that it would turn her into a non-indigenous "ladino" who would forget her Mayan

roots, but in reality, Catholic nuns supported her in a succession of schools until she reached the 8th grade.

In one episode in her 1982 story, Menchú claimed that her younger brother Petrocinio had been burned alive by Guatemala's military as she and her family were forced to watch in a town plaza. After interviewing local townspeople and reviewing contemporary human rights reports, Stoll concluded that Petrocinio was shot by Army-supported paramilitary groups, rather than burned to death and that Menchú and her family had not witnessed his death. However, Stoll argues that her 1983 story is not a hoax. The reason is that she in fact lost both her parents, two brothers, a sister-in-law and three nieces and nephews to the Guatemalan security forces.

In response to Stoll's findings, Menchú initially accused him of defending the Guatemalan military and seeking to discredit all victims of the violence, but later she acknowledged making certain changes in her story. The Nobel Committee has dismissed calls to revoke her Nobel prize because of the reported falsifications; however, Professor Geir Lundestad, the secretary of the Committee, said her prize "was not based exclusively or primarily on the autobiography".<sup>[3]</sup> According to the Nobel Committee, "Stoll approves of her Nobel prize and has no question about the picture of army atrocities which she presents. He says that her purpose in telling her story the way she did 'enabled her to focus international condemnation on an institution that deserved it, the Guatemalan army.'"<sup>[4]</sup>

## **[edit] Bibliography**

- Ament, Gail. "Recent Maya Incursions into Guatemalan Literary Historiography". *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History*. Eds. Mario J. Valdés & Djelal Kadir. 3 Vols. Vol 1: *Configurations of Literary Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: I: 216-215.
- Arias, Arturo. "After the Rigoberta Menchú Controversy: Lessons Learned About the Nature of Subalternity and the Specifics of the Indigenous Subject" *MLN* 117.2 (2002): 481-505.
- Beverley, John. "The Real Thing (Our Rigoberta)" *Modern Language Quarterly* 57:2 (June 1986): 129-235.
- Brittin, Alice A. "Close Encounters of the Third World Kind: Rigoberta Menchu and Elisabeth Burgos's Me llamo Rigoberta Menchu". *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Redefining Democracy: Cuba and Chiapas (Autumn, 1995), pp. 100-114.
- De Valdés, María Elena. "The Discourse of the Other: Testimonio and the Fiction of the Maya." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* (Liverpool), LXXIII (1996): 79-90.
- Feal, Rosemary Geisdorfer. "Women Writers into the Mainstream: Contemporary Latin American Narrative". *Philosophy and Literature in Latin America*. Eds. Jorge J.E. Gracia and Mireya Camurati. New York: State University of New York, 1989. An overview of women in contemporary Latin American letters.
- Golden, Tim. "Guatemalan Indian Wins the Nobel Peace Prize": *New York Times* (October 17, 1992):p.A1,A5.
- Golden, Tim. "Guatemalan to Fight On With Nobel as Trumpet": *New York Times* (October 19, 1992):p.A5.
- Gossen, Gary H. "Rigoberta Menchu and Her Epic Narrative". *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 26, No. 6, If Truth Be Told: A Forum on David Stoll's "Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans" (Nov., 1999), pp. 64-69.

- Gray Díaz, Nancy. "Indian Women Writers of Spanish America". *Spanish American Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book*. Ed. Diane E. Marting. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.
- Millay, Amy Naus. *Voices from the Fuente Viva: The Effect of Orality in Twentieth-Century Spanish American Narrative*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005.
- Logan, Kathleen. "Personal Testimony: Latin American Women Telling Their Lives". *Latin American Research Review* 32.1 (1997): 199-211. Review Essay.
- Nelan, Bruce W. "Striking Against Racism". *Time* 140:61 (October 26, 1992): p.61.
- Stanford, Victoria. "Between Rigoberta Menchu and La Violencia: Deconstructing David Stoll's History of Guatemala" *Latin American Perspectives* 26.6, If Truth Be Told: A Forum on David Stoll's "Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans" (Nov., 1999), pp. 38-46.
- ---. "From I, Rigoberta to the Commissioning of Truth Maya Women and the Reshaping of Guatemalan History". *Cultural Critique* 47 (2001) 16-53.
- Sommer, Doris. "Rigoberta's Secrets" *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 18, No. 3, *Voices of the Voiceless in Testimonial Literature*, Part I. (Summer, 1991), pp. 32-50.
- Stoll, David "I, Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans" (Westview Press, 1999)
- ---. "Slaps and Embraces: A Rhetoric of Particularism". *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*. Ed. Iliana Rodríguez. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Ward, Thomas. *La resistencia cultural: la nación en el ensayo de las Américas*. Lima: Universidad Ricardo Palma, 2004: 285-302,
- Zimmerman, Marc. "Rigoberta Menchú After the Nobel: From Militant Narrative to Postmodern Politics. *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

**Rigoberta Menchú** was born on January 9, 1959 to a poor Indian peasant family and raised in the Quiche branch of the Mayan culture. In her early years she helped with the family farm work, either in the northern highlands where her family lived, or on the Pacific coast, where both adults and children went to pick coffee on the big plantations.

Rigoberta Menchú soon became involved in social reform activities through the Catholic Church, and became prominent in the women's rights movement when still only a teenager. Such reform work aroused considerable opposition in influential circles, especially after a guerilla organization established itself in the area. The Menchú family was accused of taking part in guerrilla activities and Rigoberta's father, Vicente, was imprisoned and tortured for allegedly having participated in the execution of a local plantation owner. After his release, he joined the recently founded Committee of the Peasant Union (CUC).

In 1979, Rigoberta, too, joined the CUC. That year her brother was arrested, tortured and killed by the army. The following year, her father was killed when security forces in the capital stormed the Spanish Embassy where he and some other peasants were staying. Shortly afterwards, her mother also died after having been arrested, tortured and raped. Rigoberta became increasingly active in the CUC, and taught herself Spanish as well as other Mayan languages than her native Quiche. In 1980, she figured prominently in a strike the CUC organized for better conditions for farm workers on the Pacific coast, and on May 1, 1981, she was active in large demonstrations in the capital. She joined the radical 31st of January Popular Front, in which her contribution chiefly consisted of educating the Indian peasant

population in resistance to massive military oppression.

In 1981, Rigoberta Menchú had to go into hiding in Guatemala, and then flee to Mexico. That marked the beginning of a new phase in her life: as the organizer abroad of resistance to oppression in Guatemala and the struggle for Indian peasant peoples' rights. In 1982, she took part in the founding of the joint opposition body, The United Representation of the Guatemalan Opposition (RUOG). In 1983, she told her life story to Elisabeth Burgos Debray. The resulting book, called in English, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, is a gripping human document which attracted considerable international attention. In 1986, Rigoberta Menchú became a member of the National Coordinating Committee of the CUC, and the following year she performed as the narrator in a powerful film called *When the Mountains Tremble*, about the struggles and sufferings of the Maya people. On at least three occasions, Rigoberta Menchú has returned to Guatemala to plead the cause of the Indian peasants, but death threats have forced her to return into exile.

Over the years, Rigoberta Menchú has become widely known as a leading advocate of Indian rights and ethno-cultural reconciliation, not only in Guatemala but in the Western Hemisphere generally, and her work has earned her several international awards.

From *Les Prix Nobel. The Nobel Prizes 1992*, Editor Tore Frängsmyr, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 1993

This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and later published in the book series *Les Prix Nobel/Nobel Lectures*. The information is sometimes updated with an addendum submitted by the Laureate. To cite this document, always state the source as shown above.

### **Selected Bibliography**

*By Rigoberta Menchú Tum*

*Crossing Borders: An Autobiography*. New York: Verso, 1998. (First published in Italian, October 1997, and in Spanish, April 1998.)

*I, Rigoberta Menchú. An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Edited and introduced by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. New York and London: Verso, 1984. (Her life story, based on a week of recorded interviews with the editor, a Latin American anthropologist, who revised and arranged the transcripts. The original Spanish title in 1983 was "My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and This is How My Consciousness Was Raised." Translated into more than twelve languages and received several international awards. The autobiography became a most influential image internationally of the atrocities committed by the Guatemalan army in peasant villages during the civil war. In 1999 a controversy arose over its credibility, see Stoll below.)

*Other Sources*

Calvert, Peter. *Guatemala. A Nation in Turmoil*. Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1985. (Excellent historical introduction to Guatemala's social and economic problems, with the comparative perspective of other volumes in Westview's series on the Nations of Contemporary Latin America. By a British scholar.)

Hooks, Margaret, ed. *Guatemalan Women Speak*. Introduction by Rigoberta Menchú Tum. London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1991.

Perera, Victor. *Unfinished Conquest. The Guatemalan Tragedy*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: Univ. of California Press, 1993. (By a native Guatemalan, whose story of the civil conflict is based on both personal experience and scholarship. With an important bibliographical essay.)

Simon, Jean-Marie. *Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1987.

Sommer, Doris. "No Secrets: Rigoberta's Guarded Truth." *Women's Studies* 20 (1991): 51–72. (Analyses *I, Rigoberta* as an example of women's testimonial literature and discusses implications of the contrasts between Rigoberta's mother tongue and Spanish, a hierarchical language with gender concepts very different from Quiché.)

Stoll, David. *Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999. Stoll's critical examination of Rigoberta's autobiography, based on local interviews and documentary sources, shows that parts of her own and her family history are not correct, even when she speaks as an eyewitness of events described. Stoll approves of her Nobel prize and has no question about the picture of army atrocities which she presents. He says that her purpose in telling her story the way she did "enabled her to focus international condemnation on an institution that deserved it, the Guatemalan army". As an anthropologist who has studied the Mayan peasants, however, he feels that by inaccurately portraying the events in her own village as representative of what happened in all such indigenous villages in Guatemala, she gives a misleading interpretation of the relationship of the Mayan peasants to the revolutionary movement. Asked about Stoll's allegations, Professor Geir Lundestad, the secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, declared that the decision to award the prize to Menchú "was not based exclusively or primarily on the autobiography", and he dismissed any suggestion that the Committee should consider revoking the prize.

Tedlock, Dennis, transl. *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985. (The sacred text of the Maya.)

From *Nobel Lectures, Peace 1991-1995*, Editor Irwin Abrams, World Scientific Publishing Co., Singapore, 1999

This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and first published in the book series *Les Prix Nobel*. It was later edited and republished in *Nobel Lectures*. To cite this document, always state the source as shown above.