

**FACULTAD LATINOAMERICANA DE CIENCIAS
SOCIALES - SEDE ECUADOR
MAESTRIA EN ANTROPOLOGIA
CONVOCATORIA 1993-1995**

**Guatemala women as refugees. A study of change in
gender relations in the context of social movements**

VERSION PREELIMINAR

Asesor/a: Blanca Muratorio, Ph.D.

Martha Gabriela Torres De la Vega

Quito, noviembre 1995

**FACULTAD LATINOAMERICANA DE CIENCIAS SOCIALES
SEDE-ECUADOR**

**Guatemala women as refugees. A study of change in gender relations
in the context of social movements.**

Autora. Martha Gabriela Torres de la Vega

Asesora: Blanca Muratorio

Quito Noviembre, 1995

ELACSO - Bibliotecas

Abstract

The Guatemalan government's counterinsurgency campaigns of the 1980s resulted in the deliberate assassination of more than one hundred thousand people and the enforced exile of more than fifty thousand Guatemalans. In exile, Guatemalan refugees faced not only their memories of their violent past but also structured radical changes in their way of life. The restrictions placed upon them by living in United Nations sponsored camps transformed household economies and constrained refugees in multiethnic compounds.

The changes induced by the process of refuge are entrenched in the formation of new identities in exile. Through the study of ethnic and gender relations it is possible to see the rethinking of individual and community identities. Ethnicity, redefined by the contact between different ethnic groups of Mayan origin and a loss of confidence in state authority, is transformed from a local identity based on linguistic ascription into a broad indigenous-Maya label inclusive of linguistic and cultural differences. Gender relations are similarly redefined by an improved esteem of female participation in household economies and an increased involvement of women in the communities' political organizations.

In looking at the changes that refugee populations have undergone it is important to highlight the context in which change occurs. The experience with violence, external influences, and the physical constraints of refugee life are among the influences explored in the study of life stories presented by Guatemalan refugees in Mexico.

Chapter One:

Introduction

Between 1981 and 1983 the Guatemalan army under president Gen. Rios Montt, following a counterinsurgency policy, destroyed 440 indigenous villages. The destruction of these villages was massive in both material and human terms. Most of the indigenous inhabitants were tortured, burnt or assassinated.¹ These 'Massacres in the Jungle'² produced the exodus of Guatemalans to Mexican and Honduran lands. The unparalleled and rapid forced migration came as a shock to many international observers who did not foresee the brutal pinnacle of the Guatemalan government's thirty year programme of societal militarization (Carmack, 1988:7).

At the end of January 1982 there were three thousand Guatemalan refugees in Mexico. By October of that same year, as a result of government repression, the number of Guatemalan refugees had expanded to more than thirty thousand according to United Nations conservative estimates (Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados II, 1983:46). Ten years later, in 1992, there were still an estimated 45 000 officially recognized United Nations sponsored refugees living in Mexican territory (UNHCR, 1993:1).

The exodus of almost 50 000 Guatemalans is a relatively small figure on the world scale. Even if we add to this figure the official estimate of internal refugees of 200 000, (UNHCR, 1994:8) it still makes up only 0.1% of the refugee migrations throughout the world. It pales, for instance, in comparison to African and Asian refugee flows (Nef, 1994:72). Yet, despite its small numbers on the global scale, Guatemala's refugees are a symbol and a symptom of state-sponsored violence whose aftermath is still being felt by the entire Guatemalan society.

Most of Guatemala's refugees are of Mayan descent and originate mainly from the departments of El Quiche, El Peten and

Huehuetenango (Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados, 1983:12;18).³ These departments suffered the brunt of the government's policies of counterinsurgency, controlled rural development, and scorched earth. The forced migration of many highland inhabitants, the physical destruction of property, and the continual military presence in the rural areas resulted in a general economic regression and recession in the early 1980s that particularly affected the area comprised by departments of El Quiche and Huehuetenango (Jonas,1991:14). The repression, combined with a loss of land and the subsequent inability to attain economic subsistence, resulted in the outward migrations of Guatemalans into Mexican territory.

1. Guatemalan Refugees Today:

In 1994, when this study was carried out, the official number of United Nations-sponsored refugees was still 45 000. Of this total, a third were estimated to be children of refugees born in Mexico. U.N.-sponsored refugees live in organized camps, developed in a wide range of conditions. The relocated camps⁴ in the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo are in the process of becoming permanent settlements with potential or actual access to running water, roads, electricity and arable land.⁵ In the state of Chiapas, camps do not have access to most essential services and are located so deep in jungle that refugees must walk for hours to reach a serviceable road. Many of the camps in Chiapas do not allow for access to arable land since they are located in the midst of Mexican settlements (Van Praag, 1986:20).

After ten years in exile, the first organized returns⁶ of Guatemalan refugees began in 1992. By 1994, more than 10 000 had returned to Guatemala under both repatriation and return programmes.⁷ At this point, it is not clear how many of the remaining refugees will actually return to Guatemala. What is clear, however, is that the returns will be slow and meticulously organized taking into account the lessons that the 'school of

refuge' has taught Guatemalans in Mexico.

2. Who Are The Refugees?

For the purposes of this paper, Guatemalan refugees will be defined as those officially recognized refugees living in United Nations-sponsored camps in the Mexican states of Chiapas, Campeche and Quintana Roo.⁸ For the sake of clarity, this definition does not include refugees living without official recognition in those states or in other parts of Mexico, or Guatemala's internal refugees.⁹ Furthermore, within this official refugee population the focus will be on the refugee population that intends to return to Guatemala.

3. The Effects of the Process of Refuge:

In the following passage Doña Lucia discusses the meaning that the process of refuge has in her life. This passage begins what will be the regular use of excerpts from taped interviews to demonstrate the refugees' own perspective and analysis of their situation.

"Por una parte sufrimos mucho, porque sufrimos en la venida pero también por otra parte aprendimos mucho. Porque esto, pues, antes nosotros no sabíamos que era esto de reuniones, de organizaciones, de grupos, de nada. Nosotros allá, como te lo vuelvo a decir, era no mas nuestra casa. En cambio el refugio si nos ha ayudado mucho porque como dice el dicho: nos ha quitado la venda de los ojos. Nosotros no sabíamos que si teníamos un valor y que si lo podíamos hacer. Nosotros pensabamos que solo nuestros maridos tenían ese valor. Que solo ellos podian mandar y [nosotros] no [podiamos]. Es

"On the one hand we suffered alot because we suffered when we came but on the other hand we have learned alot. Before we didn't know anything about meetings, organizations, groups or anything. Back there, like I told you before, we were only interested in our own house. Being refugees has helped us out alot because as the saying goes: it has taken off the covering from our eyes. We did not know that we were valuable and that we were able to do things. We thought that only our husbands had that value. That only they could rule and it isn't so. It is different and we have been able to organize with women

diferente y nosotros aca pudimos organizarnos con compañeras y si se puede hasta con compañeros. Y entonces el refugio ha sido como una escuela. Nos ha traído muchos aprendizajes y ahora después nos han dado capacitaciones de saber como se hace una hortaliza, de ver como se hacen abonos orgánicos, y de ver como se cuidan las gallinas y los conejos. Todo eso nos han enseñado como hacerlo." -Doña Lucía.

here and if it is possible we can even organize with men. And so refuge has been like a school to us. It has brought us much knowledge and after that they have begun to give us training so that we can know how to make a garden, how to make organic fertilizer, and how to take care of chickens and rabbits. They have taught us how to do all of that." -Doña Lucia.

Doña Lucia puts emphasis on two types of lessons learned in exile: practical subsistence training and the process leading up to the revaluing of gender identities. The process of refuge has had in Doña Lucia's account multiple consequences that are closely interrelated. For her, the violence that led the refugees to exile also led them into a process of rethinking social relations and the formation of ighly politicized organizations and communities. This study will look both at some of the so-called 'lessons' of refuge and at the process of restructuring social relations and identities that are described by Doña Lucia.

The experience of Guatemalan refugees is characterized by its origins in extreme politically and ideologically motivated violence, the conditions of extreme poverty and disease in which the population lived in the first years of exile, and its lengthy twelve year duration. Taking these general characteristics into account, in particular the time period, it is possible to argue that the lessons learned by refugees are not only temporary attitude or behavioral variations, but rather potential or active cultural reorganizations.

In my research I focused on two cultural reorganizations: the dynamic reconstruction of ethnic identity and the changes in gender relations resulting from the refugee experience of

Guatemalans in Mexico. I chose to analyze how such changes are put forth through the perceptions that refugee women have of their own societies and their personal participation in those societies. To obtain these perceptions of change, the biographical interview was chosen to be the basis for this investigation.

It must be emphasized that changes in ethnic identity and gender relations are just two aspects of the widespread societal changes that have resulted from the state of refuge. Gender relations have changed in conjunction with relations of production, and cultural attitudes towards age, occupation, and development. While an exhaustive analysis of these changes is certainly worthwhile, it will be impossible to present these changes within the scope of this paper. Still, there will be ample discussions of the alterations that have occurred in other social relations as it is impossible to look at one aspect of the refugee experience in isolation. An effort will be made, however, to discuss the changes in attitudes and other social relations only so far as they directly affect ethnic identity and gender relations.

Changes in gender relations are manifested in three key areas. First, women perceive an increased female participation in the social and political organizations of the refugee communities. This increased participation is seen by the women themselves as both a novelty and a challenge to the established cultural norms. Second, women have increasingly become more economically important participants in households. This enhanced economic role is a direct result of the situation of refuge, where a lack of access to arable land as well as development policies that favour women have altered the economic organization of the family unit. Finally, women have begun to perceive their participation in social movements and community organizations as part of a generalized process of consciousness-building, where awareness and a nascent collective identity intertwine to establish a complex vision of women as questioning social actors.

4. Life Stories and the Representation of the Truth:

The basic instrument of inquiry was the biographical interview. In the last decade, the use of life stories and histories has regained theoretical validity in the social sciences (Pujadas, 1992:7). Life stories have been revalued as descriptions, discourses, and representations that are situated within the cultural contexts of the interviewee, which in turn contribute to the subject's perceptions of social phenomena and expression. Previous critiques have attempted to exclude life histories from the objective realm of scientific research techniques by claiming the emphasis it places on subjective knowledge is excessive (Pujadas, 1992:8).

Contemporary advances in the social sciences, particularly in the contributions made by feminist and gender theorists render this criticism obsolete. Feminist and gender theory have brought into question the validity of 'objective' labels. Nicholson reminds us that objectivity entails the absence of judgement based on cultural or individual value systems (1990:3). Yet, is it possible to reach this objective ideal? Are not our scientific judgements also constrained within the historical, economic and social contexts in which we live? As representations, scientific discourses, life stories and popular media must all be viewed within the limitations and biases derived by their own cultural and individual contexts (Nicholson, 1990:42).

There is, however, one particular 'objectivity' concern in dealing with life story data. In examining biographical discourses we must look for correlations between the story and the experience of the social actor (Nicholson, 1990:148). Social actors mediate between their memories of the past and the contexts that are contemporary to the storytelling (Passerini, 1990:61). When contested with written documents, this mediation results in what could be called 'factual inaccuracies', but it highlights the storyteller's perception of her present and future.

It is precisely the ability of life stories to put forth the subjects conscious and unconscious perceptions of her surrounding, her society and her historical process that led to the use of the biographical method in this paper. Life stories will be used not only as illustrations of the process of refuge but also as indicators of processes of socio-cultural change.

5. Personal Dimensions:

At this point I feel that it is important to present the personal context of my research and my particular interest in the subject. In trying to establish what Johannes Fabian has called 'coevalness' in anthropological writing and research the position of the anthropologist must be explicitly put forth. In choosing to research gender relations in Guatemalan refugee camps I have a specific vision derived from by my position as both a refugee and a woman.

Although this work is of academic nature, it is, as with any other discourse, politically motivated. This paper will serve, among other things, to morally condemn the politics of counterinsurgency and societal militarization that have been authored by the Guatemalan army and their civilian support networks. Making this political purpose explicit at the outset does not serve to discredit the claims that will follow. Rather, it attempts to give the reader insight into the choice of study subject and the methodological approaches from which the study was undertaken. This purpose was clear both to the author and to the women and men interviewed throughout the research.

Making the political purpose of this study explicit brought me some distinct advantages in my research. My personal position allowed for two main research advantages. First, in sharing the experience of extreme state violence and life in exile I was able to establish a rapport with the women I interviewed at both personal and political levels. Before the interviews, I explained how my research attempted to continue to break the silence

surrounding the Guatemalan experience in the academic sphere. This stance is also held by many refugees who work to attain recognition and remembrance of their experiences within and outside of their communities.

In the exchanges that occurred, it seemed to be as important to them to learn about my experience as a refugee in Canada as it was for me to hear of their experience in Mexico. Our conversations, as part of potentially publishable material, were seen by many of the women and men with whom I spoke to be part of an ongoing political process of turning traumatic experiences and events into concerted political actions. Thus, in the majority of the cases, my explicit political position helped to create an interest in my research on the part of those interviewed, as it was seen as another political tool.

Second, through ascription and self-ascription as a refugee I was able to partially obtain an insider's view of the refugee dilemma. In many of their conversations with me a lot was left out in the assumption that I shared a part of the process that they had experienced. This was particularly relevant when discussing the personal effects of violence, poverty, and exile. Many times women would describe their individual experience and then say "tu sabes como es eso".¹⁰

In the discussions with refugees where trust is very difficult to obtain, being perceived by them to be a part of their process proved to be very helpful in procuring detailed interviews. While it is not possible to say that a view 'from the inside' is qualitatively better than other perspectives, it is possible to view it positively as a perspective that is different and often difficult to obtain.

6. Field Work Location:

To carry out this analysis, I concentrated on a particular population: the community living in the refugee camp of Quetzal Edzná that returned to the department of El Petén in Guatemala on

April 5th, 1995. My interviews were carried out in Campeche and during my visit to Quetzal Edzná in October 1994 for the maximum of 10 days that Mexican immigration allowed me to stay. During this time I was able to live with two refugee families and interview women and men both formally and informally. Outside the refugee camps I interviewed refugees returning to the Petén area from other refugee camps throughout Mexico. Additionally, I participated in the General Assembly and gender workshops of the Vertiente Norte¹¹ where the April return to the cooperative of 'El Quetzal' was planned.

Working with Guatemalan refugees at the end of 1994 was complicated by the EZLN (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) rebellion in Chiapas. From the outset of this rebellion, attempts were made by the media to establish links between the Guatemalan refugee population and the rebels. In the best of situations the Guatemalan refugees were seen as a factor that led to the Zapatista revolt (Russell, 1995:8). This situation all but eliminated my involvement with refugees in the State of Chiapas and restricted the participation that I was allowed to have by the Mexican authorities in the camps in state of Campeche.

7. Looking Ahead:

In the chapters that follow this essay will attempt to illustrate the fundamental changes in social relations and self-perceptions that have resulted from the refugee experience. The extreme violence of the 1980s threatened the material and cultural existence of mainly rural indigenous populations and instigated radical social changes in those societies.

The process of refuge- fleeing Guatemala, the establishment of refugee communities in Mexico, and the return to Guatemala or the taking up of permanent residence in Mexico- has resulted in widespread changes in the social relations of refugee communities. Because of the refugee communities' impulse to return, the social changes that will be discussed below are not only relevant to the

refugee communities themselves but to the future of Guatemalan society in general. The most notable changes in social relations are seen in this paper through an exploration of gender and ethnic identities. Refugee women's life stories introduced through out this essay present transformed visions on ethnicity and gender relations.

In describing their experiences, the encounter with extreme violence is the paramount moulding influence in their lives. The violence to which refugees were exposed was possible because of three main factors: the historical marginalization of rural indigenous peoples in Guatemala, the economic and social crisis that the country experienced in the early 1980s, and the civil war between the URNG and the Guatemalan Army. There are two social changes that resulted directly from extreme violence. First, extreme violence led refugees to hold suspect the basis for authority of the Guatemalan government and army. Second, refugees used their experience with violence as the basis for building negative traditions- traditions based on the belief that to survive one cannot forget the past.

Much of the changes that have resulted in gender relations and ethnicity stem from these two main effects of extreme violence. In the discussion of ethnicity, the distrust of state authority translates into the creation of identities and communities based on ethnic self-reliance. In terms of gender relations, it is possible to see that they are irrevocably altered by the increased participation of women the community organizations that aim to ensure that violence will not reoccur in their communities.

In addition to the influence of violence, the refugee experience was shaped simply by the original geographic migration to Mexico and subsequent resettlements in northern Mexican states. The effects of these migrations can be liberally defined as the broadening of the "world vision" of indigenous peasants. In terms of ethnic identities, multiethnic refugee camps led to the

rethinking of local ethnic identities and to the creation of an encompassing "Mayan" ethnicity. In restructuring gender relations, the settlement in Mexico changed the balance by giving women's work as homemakers greater influence than men's work as agriculturalists.

Chapter two will attempt to show that while the particular ethnicity of the victims of Guatemala's Massacres in the Jungle is a result of the geographic location where counterinsurgency policies were carried out, the historical marginalization of indigenous people in Guatemala allowed the mass destruction of indigenous habitats and material culture to happen. Thus, this chapter will also concentrate on the political, economic and social manifestations of indigenous people's marginalization.

Chapter three will concentrate specifically on the impact that the extreme violence of the Guatemalan government's counterinsurgency campaigns had on the civilian populations. Looking through the life stories of refugee women it is possible to see that the experience with extreme violence not only altered their indigenous and peasant way of life, but also lead to the restructuring of the refugees' cultural institutions and ethnic and gender identities.

Chapter four will explore how the restructuring of ethnic identities by refugees takes place in the context of constant conflict with ethnic identities formulated by state policies and actions. In this 'image conflict', the refugees favour a kind of generic Mayan ethnicity that incorporates Spanish solely as a 'Lingua Franca'. It is an identity that also demands a hereditary right to traditional Mayan territory and that utilizes indigenous rituals to cement the political actions of the refugee communities. Furthermore, chapter four will explore the complexities involved in the rethinking of ethnicity in the refugee context. Reviewing ethnic identity entails a complex dynamic of incorporating, rejecting, and re-vamping cultural elements from their own indigenous contexts and from the cultural

contexts of the Ladino society with which they live.

Finally, chapter five will show how the process of overcoming the experience with extreme violence has led to politically active organizations within the refugee community. The refugee situation has placed relatively higher emphasis on women's work in the processes of immediate adjustment to the Mexican settlements. Political organization in combination with a reevaluation of women's work has resulted in a greater participation of indigenous women in their community development and restructuring. As with the rethinking of ethnic identity, gender roles have also been reconsidered through the refugee experience.

Endnotes to Chapter One:

The Guatemalan Commission on Human Rights estimates that between 1981 and 1985 massacres took place in 19 of the 22 departments of Guatemala (CEIG, 1986:37). The most affected departments were the Quiché, with the largest number of massacres (estimated 117), Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz and Chimaltemaltenango. Among the most affected ethnic groups are the K'iche', Kanjobal, K'eqchi, Ixil, Mam and Jacaltecos.

The period of the 'Massacres in the Jungle' has been defined by the Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla in his book by the same name as the period of heightened government repression between 1975-1982.

For a more detailed description of the migration flow of refugees to Campeche please refer to Map 1: Guatemala's Mayan Cultures.

In 1984, there were four refugee camps created outside of the Mexican state of Campeche to halt continued assaults against the refugee populations by the Guatemalan government (Van Praag, 1986:27). More than eleven thousand people were relocated to these camps in Campeche and two camps in Quintana Roo (Van Praag, 1986:27). Currently, Campeche houses four Guatemalan refugee camps. Although no further massacres have occurred to the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo the populations in these camps have grown by fifty percent in the past 12 years. This increase in population combined with United Nations' sponsored self-sufficiency programs have led to the creation of the two new camps in Campeche.

For a more detailed description of the migration flow of refugees to Campeche please refer to Map 2.

Both the terms *return* and *repatriation* are used to define the return of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico to Guatemala. The official term for this process- *repatriation*- was first used by Guatemalan president Vinicio Cerezo to define his reformed policy.

wing refugees to return to Guatemala without necessarily being interned in 'Development Poles' or army controlled and managed areas of forced labour and restricted movement (Maldonado, 1986:22). The term *repatriation* is still the preferred by the Guatemalan and Mexican governments and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 1993:1). The term *return* was put forward by the Permanent Commission of Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico (CCPP) as a response to the use of the Guatemalan government has given to the term *repatriation*. A further discussion of conflicting terminology will be given in chapter four. This essay will only use the term *return* in accordance with the meanings given to this word by the refugee representatives.

Before 1992, 8273 people had returned to Guatemala under repatriation program (La Jornada, June 4th, 1992). In 1993, the first official return of 2 500 people took place (Egan and Simmons, 1994:4).

A refugee is defined by the United Nation's 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as "a person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted on grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country" (Melander, 1995:9). This definition endorsed by Melander highlights elements used in the definition of a refugee identity in the case of Guatemalan exiles in Mexico. In the Declaration put forth on April 6th 1995 by returning refugees it was clear that refugees still retained a very strong link with their "beloved homeland" and that "a long night of darkness, pain, death and destruction descended 13 years ago" (Melander, 1995:1). Thus, even as they return to Guatemala the refugees are confident of their national adscription and remember that their origin as a group began with the violence. These two elements of refugee identity are shared by many refugees across the globe (Zetter, 1988:5).

Many Guatemalans fleeing their homeland were not organized into concentrated camps but rather integrated themselves into Mexican villages, towns, and cities. It is estimated that between 150 000 and 400 000 Guatemalans, not officially recognized as refugees, were discretely assimilated into Mexican society (La Jornada, 20 de junio; Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados I, 1983:39). Additionally, more than one million people were displaced within Guatemala as a result of the violence.

"You know how it is".

The Permanent Commissions of Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico (CCPP) were formed to provide for an official refugee representation before Mexican, Guatemalan and United Nations authorities. The members of the CCPP are refugees elected by their communities. In the early 1990s, when the need to plan the return to Guatemala arose, the CCPP organized itself into three 'vertientes' or branches: la vertiente noroccidental, encompassing people who planned to return to the regions of El Petén and Alta Verapaz; la vertiente noroccidental, encompassing people returning to the highland regions of Guatemala and Huehuetenango; and la vertiente sur, representing those who wanted to return to the southern coast of Guatemala.

Chapter Two:

Don Pedro's Guatemala

1. Human Contexts:

Any treatment of the refugee problem must be contextualized within the framework of the historical and economic background including the contemporary effects of counterinsurgency policies that reached their most brutal heyday in 1982. This chapter will attempt to raise to the foreground some of the hidden cultural, social or individual effects of the systemic economic and social deterioration of Guatemalan society. In order to reach the hidden effects I will present the abridged life history of Don Pedro. Don Pedro, an 82 year old K'akchiquel indigenous man is currently living in one of the Guatemalan refugee camps in Campeche, Mexico. Don Pedro's life is a perfect illustration of the process of impoverishment and ethnic marginalization that has characterized the economic and social crisis experienced by a large number of rural Guatemalans.

The economic deterioration of Guatemalan society, during the 1980s, has had three concrete effects. First, the economic crisis destroyed the material bases for cultural reproduction in some parts of rural Guatemala. Second, the growing social polarization of Guatemalan society made economic status into an important identity marker. Finally, shift into waged labour economies and the migration flows that ensued led to the forced integration of mostly indigenous rural poor into spanish-speaking cultural and language systems. All of these effects are distinctly non-economic results of an economic crisis. Are there also non-economic factors to blame for the cultural and individual effects of a deteriorating economy?

To open a more detailed analysis of the issues, I wish to present the following life history which highlights the close relationship between economic and socio-cultural factors that

characterized the crisis of the 1980s.

2. Don Pedro's Guatemala:

"Nací a 20 kilómetros de la capital en San Juan Sacatepequez. Cuando era niño mi padre se tomó todo el dinero que ganaba y hasta todo el ganado y un día se fue.

A los pocos días llegó un telegrama que nadie podía leer, pero logramos que alguien lo leyera y nos dimos cuenta que lo había atropellado un tren y su hermano fue a enterrarlo.

Nosotros nos fuimos a una finca en la costa cerca de Escuintla. Ahí trabaje mas de 25 años como potrero. Me hice amistad del dueño de la finca y así pude traer a mis amistades y a mis familiares a que trabajaran en la finca porque yo tenía la confianza del finquero.

Cuando estaba en la costa yo andaba en bicicleta. Una vez regresando de ver a un amigo unos camiones atropellaron a dos amigos y destruyeron sus bicicletas. Las autoridades recogieron las bicicletas y tuvieron que pagar para sacarlas.

En la finca conocí a un padre Holandés que ofreció ayudarme para comprar un terreno. Yo no quería. Pero, bueno, me animé y compré dos pequeñas parcelas cerca de un río en San Juan Sacatepequez. Empecé a cultivar ajonjolí porque la tierra era muy arenosa y no era buena para el maíz pero para el ajonjolí y el frijol si era buena.

Después supe que estaban regalando tierra en el Petén y me fuí con mi familia allá. Me

"I was born 20 kilometres away from the capital city in San Juan Sacatepequez. When I was a child, my father took all of the money he had and even the all of our animals and left us.

A few days after he left we received a telegram that no one could read. Still, we finally were able to get someone to read it and that way we found out that he had been killed by a train. His brother went away to bury him.

We went to a plantation on the coast near Escuintla. I worked there for 25 years as a stable boy. I became friends with the owner of the plantation and I was able to bring my friends and family to work at the plantation. I had the owner's trust.

When I was in the coast we used to go around on bicycles. One time when we were coming back from visiting a friend some trucks ran over two friends who were with me. Their bicycles were destroyed and they had to pay to get them back from the authorities who confiscated them.

In the plantation I met a Dutch priest who offered to help me buy some land. I didn't want to, but in the end I was convinced and I bought two small plots near a river in San Juan Sacatepequez.

I began to plant sesame seeds because the land was too sandy and I couldn't grow corn there. But it was good for sesame seeds and beans.

Afterwards I found out that they were giving away land in the

dieron 70 caballerías para 35 familias o sea dos caballerías por familia. Y regalé el terreno en la sierra. Después me dicen que se inundó ese terreno y ya no sirvió.

Al llegar al Petén fuimos a traer a unos profesionales de la Universidad para que nos urbanizaran los terrenos. Ellos vinieron y midieron todo pero no nos cobraron porque dijeron que de por sí lo nuestro era por pocos años.

En esa parcela vivimos por 10 años antes de que nos echaran. La tierra en el Petén era buena y se podía cultivar bien. Pero, no era posible vender las cosechas porque no había mercado y era muy difícil llevar las cosas a un poblado donde sí las compraban. ¿Que íbamos a hacer, pues? ¿Irlas a vender maíz? No, pues.

Cuando nos echaron vinimos por la selva caminando y después nos trajeron aquí. Y bueno, aquí tengo mi pedazo de tierra de 7 mecatres por 25.

¿Que iba saber que iba a dejar mi pellejo aquí en México? Y bueno, yo regresar a Guatemala para que? ¿Que tengo allá? Pues, si me echan de aquí pues allá voy. Así es la vida de un pobre- a donde lo lleve el viento allí se quedó." -Don Pedro.

department of el Petén. I went with my family there. They gave me 70 caballerias for 35 families. That is two caballerias per family. I gave away my land in the highlands which I was told was flooded later and is now useless.

When we got to El Petén we went to get some professionals from the University so that they could measure and urbanize our plots. They came but didn't charge us anything because they said that our land wasn't going to be ours for long.

We lived for ten years on that land before they threw us out. The land in El Petén was good and we were able to cultivate crops. It was really hard to sell those crops because there was no market and it was difficult to take the things to a settlement where they would be bought. What were we going to do- sell them corn? No.

When we were thrown out we walked through the jungle and then we were brought here. Well, here I have a piece of land about 7 mecatres by 25.

How was I going to know that I would leave my skin here in Mexico? And well, why should I go back to Guatemala? What is left there for me? Well, if they throw us out of here, well, I'll go there. That's the life of a poor person- he has no choice but to stay where the wind takes him."- Don Pedro.

Don Pedro presented his life history structured along chronological lines, following his own changes in land holdings. The most striking aspect of Don Pedro's story is the extensive

Don Pedro's self perception as a marginal element in his society. In his eight decades of life, Don Pedro has tried to succeed but he is always pushed back to being 'the poor'.

The conception of the impotency of the poor is shared in the discourses of many rural peasants. In the life stories appended to Contrainsurgencia y Desarrollo Rural en Guatemala, a similar attitude is put forth through several stories. In an interview found in CEIG's 40th tape of interviews, an indigenous peasant from the department of El Petén says: "Porque se ha visto: muchos coroneles o generales son dueños de tantas caballerías de tierra. Talvez un pobre correteado salió... Y es donde se nota que es pobre... No vale nada!" (CEIG, 1986:100).¹

In addition to raising refugee's self conceptions to the limelight, Don Pedro's life story also discusses broader historical and political contexts that are of direct relevance to the current situation of Guatemalan refugees. The sections that follow will examine three key aspects of this historical background. First, a discussion will be made of the economic and social crisis that has shaped the experience of the refugees. Second, there will be a brief exploration of ethnic interrelations within Guatemalan society. Finally, a examination will be made of the rise of the civil war within the aforementioned historical contexts.

3. Crisis in the 1980s:

The process of social, economic and political deterioration that gave rise to the civil war crisis of the early 1980s is a direct result of an unequal land distribution that makes Guatemala the only Central American state without a reformed land tenure system (Jonas, 1994:102). The inequality of land distribution in the last half of this century has lead to a slow destruction of rural peasant economies, resulting in an inability for family and

migration that his family undertook in the search for land and subsistence. It is necessary to view his experience not only as an example of indigenous hardship that span over a lifetime, but rather as a testimonial that exhibits what Burgos has called "the life of a peoples" (Burgos/Menchu, 1985:7). While his life history details with clarity the characteristic migration from different subsistence labour activities- from the coastal plantation wage labour to United Nations-sponsored refugee camps- it also reflects two important autonomous conceptualizations of ethnicity and class.

For Don Pedro, his own ethnic identity and class status are, despite the pride he has in his heritage, social markers that have served to marginalize and denigrate him throughout his life. In his life story, which was told over two nights, Don Pedro mentioned the bicycle incident several times, I think, as a metaphor that suggests a characteristic double injustice experienced not only by Don Pedro throughout his life, but also generally by indigenous peoples in Guatemala. While nothing happened to the truckers who ran over his indigenous friends, his friends were not only physically hurt, but had to pay to retrieve their bicycles which were confiscated by the authorities.

Another concept that can be emphasized in Don Pedro's account is found in his last statement: "Así es la vida del pobre- a donde lo lleve el viento allí se quedó". While this statement outside its context denotes a passive acceptance of the fate of the poor, in Don Pedro's account it shows that the individual can affect his destiny. When put in the context of his life history, Don Pedro's potential passivity is contrasted with his continual search for good arable land. Poverty never restricts his actions. Don Pedro fatalistic rhetoric contrasts with his struggle to survive and better himself from his original life destiny as an orphan to his position as the provider of sustenance to his extended family in Petén. What this contrast between actions and rhetoric points to

extended family units to fulfil basic subsistence needs (Pérez-Armiñan, 1992:27). In 1980, prior to the so-called 'decade of political crisis', a conservative estimate calculates that 71.1% of the population lived under conditions of poverty. By 1987, this figure had grown by over 10% to 83% in a period of less than ten years (Valdez, 1992:18).

In order to alleviate a growing inability to fulfil subsistence needs, rural peasants began to undertake alternative income earning activities that ranged from seasonal and temporary migrations to work in the coastal plantations, Guatemalan urban centres, and abroad to Mexico and the United States (Pérez-Armiñan, 1992:30), to the incorporation of female waged labour into the subsistence economy (AVANSCO, 1992: 224). The change towards an out-of-home participation of women has been defined by Maria Pérez-Armiñan as a factor leading to the dissolution of Mayan culture in rural Guatemala. While Pérez-Armiñan is correct in giving the economic crisis a pivotal role in the development of rural societies Don Pedro's life story has shown thus far that Mayan culture has not been dissolved, but it has been irrevocably altered.

Using traditional economic indicators, we can appreciate an aspect of the economic disaster in Guatemala. While the deterioration of Guatemala's economy is partly attributed to external factors- the dissolution of the Central American Common Market, the fall in the commodity prices of important agricultural exports, and the generalized petroleum crisis of the 1970s-(CEIG, 1986: 19), the internal economic structures of Guatemalan society have also contributed to the economic crisis.

Principally, Guatemala's economy is characterized by a growing polarization between economic elites and rural and urban poor (Jonas, 1991:109). In 1987, 87% of Guatemala's population lived under the poverty line and only 35% of the economically active population were employed full-time throughout the year

(Jonas, 1991:109-118). Breaking down these figures, the greatest concentrations of poor were found in the rural areas. This situation resulted in the migration of more than 400 000 people per year to the costal areas as seasonal workers (Ramirez, 1993:226).

In response to the rapidly deteriorating economic situation, there has been a growth of popular movements in Guatemala beginning in the 1970s. Such movements include activist rural catechism, cooperative associations, peasants organizations, and urban trade unionists. Among the most prominent movements was the 'Acción Católica' or Catholic Action Movement of the 1970s, started by the clergy of the Catholic Church to cleanse the faithful's syncretic religious practices and to counteract the threat of protestantism (Rojas Lima, 1994:233).

Despite these reactionary aims, the Acción Católica is important as the first popular movement that brought ethnic issues to the forefront (Rojas Lima, 1994:234). While it did not explicitly address ethnicity, it did concentrate on the training of indigenous catechists and, thus, provided a meeting ground for indigenous leaders (Bastos, 1993:24). Its religious training also served as an important education in organizational and public education techniques for new indigenous leaders within the church structures and in a variety of popular and insurgent movements. Additionally, in addressing indigenous practices in religious ceremonies, the Catholic Action Movement sought to redefine the category of 'indigenous'. In highlighting the ethnicity of the catechists the movement put in a critical light the ethnic interrelationships both inside and outside the church (Rojas Lima, 1994:235).

Another relevant movement is the peasant organizations movement that also developed in the 1970s. The Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC), organized in the late 1970s to champion peasant's land and labour rights, is the most important of these peasant

movements (Bastos, 1993:28). In its efforts to defend peasants' rights to land this movement also became an important champion of indigenous issues. In bringing indigenous concerns to the limelight these seminal movements began a shift in Guatemalan society. This change culminated with the award of the nobel peace prize to Rigoberta Menchu from CUC and her gradual acceptance as an indigenous leader in both the national and international level.

4. Ethnicity and the Guatemalan Nation:

At the time of their flight from Guatemala, many of the refugees could not explain the reasons for the repression against them. Many left simply to save their lives. Few admit to having had explicit knowledge or sympathies with the guerrilla groups that the counterinsurgency policies sought to eliminate. It is undeniable that the political, military, and ideological positions of the Guatemalan government and army played a prominent role in the genocidal repression resulting from the counterinsurgency policies of the eighties. Nevertheless, emphasis must also be given to the long-standing discrimination and marginalization of indigenous peoples that has historically characterized both Guatemalan society and government.

Within the Americas, Guatemala is probably the country with the greatest percentage of indigenous population; at an estimated 60% of the total population, that is a total of 4 778 136 people in 1984 (Valdez, 1992:29). However, the demographic weight of the indigenous population has had limited impact upon the 'ladino' or 'mestizo' culture, as social, political, and economic marginalization along ethnic lines continues to be practiced in mainstream Guatemalan society (Urban, 1991:24).

Much of the anthropological literature on Guatemala concentrates on these unequal ethnic relations (Fried, 1983; Smith, 1990; Pérez-Armiñan, 1992). Approaches towards this subject range from the historical to the ethnographic. This study will

attempt to give a dynamic ethnography that will focus on the changes in ethnic relations in an isolated microcosm of Guatemalan society- the refugee camp.

5. Guerillas, Militarization and Civil War:

The strength of the Guatemalan military apparatus arose after 1954 with the CIA-sponsored military coup d'etat that overthrew president Jacobo Arbenz ²(Black, 1984:18). During the 1960s, this military apparatus was further strengthened by financial aid from the United States government (Barry, 1991:273). The United States viewed Guatemala as a strategic geographical position for fending off communism in the Central American area (Black, 1984:20). By the 1980s, the Guatemalan army was among the most sophisticated counterinsurgency apparatus of Latin America (Barry, 1991:234). Beginning in the 1970s, this apparatus was used to destroy any real or imagined political opposition (Amnesty International, 1987:6).

The militarization of Guatemalan society was also felt in the economic and political power circles of the country. Between 1970-1984, the armed forces of Guatemala had active control among other things of the country's national airline, the international airport, the production of electricity, and the telephone company (Barry, 1991:236). In addition to wielding such economic power, the armed forces had almost exclusive control of political power between 1954 and 1983 ³(Black, 1984:43). The vast political and economic influence of the Guatemalan army ensured its success in counterinsurgency measures in the 1980s.

The rise in popular movements discussed above paralleled the formation of several guerrilla organizations that also found their support from the rural areas. The involvement of indigenous peoples in guerrilla organizations in the late 1970s and 1980s is part of what Warren has called a transformation of the socio-cultural basis of indian identity (Warren, 1978:12). For Warren,

this transformation resulted from a clash between traditional indigenous leadership and a new generation of politicized indigenous leaders. For her, the involvement of indigenous youths in mainstream popular organizations and later guerrilla movements was a result of their inability to exercise their leadership in their traditional communities. While this explanation leaves little room for the personal conviction of social actors it does point to the effects of popular movements upon the indigenous societies themselves. The effects of both popular and insurgent movements, not these movements in themselves, will be the focus of what remains of this study.

Chapter Two Endnotes:

"Why is it possible that many colonels or generals are owners of so many fincas of land. Maybe because they chased a poor person out of that land. That you know he is poor. He doesn't count."

For further details on the 1954 coup d'etat and its political and economic consequences please see Stephen Kinzer and Stephen Schlesinger, Bitter Fruit (1981)

One exception of four years must be made to this statement. Julio César Méndez Montenegro, president from 1966 to 1970, was not an active member of the armed forces.