# just me & my morral

by lynne j. purvis

## one grrrl'z adventure as a human rights accompanier in rural guatemala

This is me.

This is my *morral*.

*Morral* is a guate-spanish word for a simple bag with straps, used by almost everyone in the country. I made my own, having learned to crochet in the villages of Guatemala, and once I had it, it was always at my side… until the rats ate a hole through it, but that's another story.

The story I want to tell is that of Guatemala. Well, honestly, the story I want to tell is of *my* journey in Guatemala, but I guess I *have* to give you a little background so you understand a bit more. I'll just mention the basics: Guatemala has one of those typical Latin American stories of Spanish conquest and white men wreaking havoc and robbing the indigenous peoples blind. They got independence and the same story continued, but soon US business interests were the new conquest. Then from 1944-1954, there was a bit of a democratic revolution, with populist presidents who instituted land reform and other pro-people changes. The US businessmen didn't like this and called up their CIA pals, who, doing what they do best, helped overthrow the democratic government and instate a military dictatorship. After a while some people from within military who had got slighted got angry and started an anti-national army guerilla

army. This spread, and by the mid 70s there were several guerilla groups and a full out civil war, with all the goodies latin american "civil" wars usually entail: disappearances, extreme repression, massacres, and the like.. The worst of it was during the early 80s, when the army began a "scorched earth" campaign against indigenous peasants and many, many massacres occurred. Some peasants took cover in the jungle, some left to Mexico, some joined the guerilla resistance, some tried to lay low in other parts of Guatemala, and some live in model villages created by the army and went along with the army's orders. The war came to an end officially in late 1996 with the signing of the Peace Accords, which have not yet been implemented by the government, though the violence has calmed and many refugees have returned.

I (yea! we're back to me) was in Guatemala for 10 months as a human rights accompanier as part of the Network In Solidarity with the People of Guatemala's "Guatemala Accompaniment Project" (NISGUA/GAP). NISGUA is a DC-based organization with offices in Guatemala City that spreads awareness on Guatemala issues in the US, lobbies the US government, supports grassroots organizations in the US, and trains and supports accompaniers. Accompaniers are sent into communities that have requested the presence of international observers to ward off acts of intimidation by the army or other state agents. These communities may be returned refugees or witnesses in legal cases against the state or the army itself and still feel threatened, so internationals come in and live with them to let them know they are not alone. Most of our job is to share their stories with a larger audience. This means you.

My assignment was living in one returnee community, and visiting others in the region, including witnesses in legal cases. I, for the most part, was the only foreigner in any of these villages, and a lot of my experience down there, apart from "work," was dealing with isolation. This is also why I called this booklet *me & my morral*, because not only was it just me and my bag, but also, just me and my morale. I've made it through, grown a whole lot, and now see the world differently. But you can read that about yourself.

## may 2003

Hi y'all! I am enclosing a letter/article/set of vignettes about my experience here in Guatemala so far, but its a little, shall we say, "free form" and perhaps lacking in specifics, so I'll load you up now:

On April 22nd, I flew into Guatemala City. I spent the rest of that week getting oriented, attending some workshops about the justice system, and meeting lots of human rights workers here in the capital. Then I spent one week in another city, Coban, taking private lessons in Q'eqchi', the indigenous language spoken in the area I'll be working. The language is difficult, and I need much more study. Then I went out with the accompanier I will be replacing to the main community I'll be living in, Santa Elena 20 de Octubre, a small village of about 40 families along side the Chixoy River. There is no electricity, no telephones, no running water, and my house is a dirt floor hut with corrugated metal roofing. They returned from refuge in Mexico in 1995, and settled on this land in 1997. A few days later I took a boat ride up the river to another village, Copal AA La Esperanza, and spent a week alone getting to know this village, which has a similar history. Then I returned to Santa Elena, this time alone, and began the chore of making a home: setting up my house, getting a routine, and making friends. I get to know people primarily by eating with them, as each day a different family is in charge of feeding me my three meals a day.

My monthly schedule is to spend most time in Santa Elena, visit Copal AA a few days, and spend about a week on what's called the "jungle trek." The jungle trek involves hiking between about 9 villages to visit people who are involved in a legal case against the former head of state General Romeo Lucas Garcia. They are witnesses to a massacre that took place late in Lucas Garcia's regime and their testimony will be used to prove charges of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. There is a similar case against Lucas Garcia's successor, Efraín Rios Montt, the current President of Congress and FRG party candidate for President of the Republic. I will go on my first jungle trek next week, so I cannot report on that yet.

Now I am back in Guatemala City for a week of meetings, workshops, and a chance to write my reports and letters. I ask that you print the attachment I have sent in Rich Text Format if you are interested in a more descriptive account of what I've been up to.

If you are moved to action, I suggest you look to the NISGUA website, www.nisgua.org and check out their Action Alerts section that gives you information and suggestions for action on specific events that are occurring here in Guatemala and also in the US. Keep in mind that the US is currently negotiating a Central America Free Trade Agreement

(CAFTA) and also a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) whose next negotiating summit is happening in Miami in November. A good website to look at for information on these is www.cispes.org. The people I am living with are the ones most affected by these policies, but it is the US who controls these things; so recognize the role you play as a US citizen! When you buy your coffee, think about how little of that money makes it to the farmers!

My next update will be in late July. Feel free to write me, either email or snail mail. Candy, children's books in Spanish, and batteries are always appreciated!

Until next time,
Lynne

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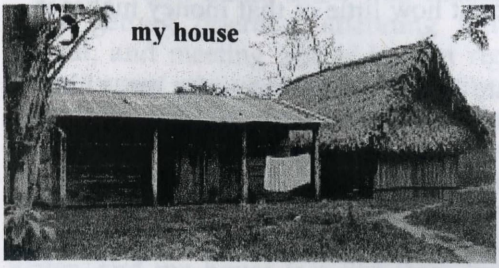
**may 2003**

*At 3pm, I stand on the banks of the Chixoy River. Surreal bird calls resound from all around – I try to locate them but they hide well in the thick vines that hang over the river. I am hot, sweaty, irritable, lethargic. But the moment is coming, the moment that changes everything. I stand here for a moment, relishing my anticipation. Then I dive. My hands slice the water; the water slices my afternoon – I suffered and groaned under the jungle humidity which hour by hour increased until this moment and from this point forward the world is different, cooler, optimistic, joyful.*

*A flock of boys in tattered underwear jump in and call to me to follow them across the river to the other bank. The current is strong and we fight our way across, and I think, if I stop swimming, I could let this current carry me all the way into Mexico where 8 years ago these villagers were finishing up to 12 years of exile in refugee camps. 8 years ago they were coaxed by the Guatemalan government to come "home," lured by assurances of a new Guatemala, a better life. The war which had sent them into refuge had not ended, but their feet craved to once again walk bare on their beloved Guatemalan soil. So they listened to the calls of the land, they listened to the promises of the government - they came home...*

My bare feet too stand on Guatemalan soil. I have realized that in living in a dirt floor house, the smell of the earth never leaves you. Little separates me from the land – I have a small square house made of a single layer of plywood board with gaps large enough for chickens, iguanas, scorpions, and tarantulas to crawl through. Over head is a corrugated metal roof that leaves a gap above the walls. At 5:30am in Santa Elena, the

morning light has already roused the village and coaxed me out of my mosquito net. I only have a little while to absorb the morning before a young boy or girl will peer at me through the slats, *"Acompañante, vamos a comer"* ("accompanier, let's go eat"). I never know who I will eat with until this young messenger arrives, and as I am new here, this is usually my first contact with the family at all.



**my house**

When I arrive, I am given a bowl of beans, or eggs, or often times noodles, and the ever present stack of tortillas that grows and grows while I eat as the women in the house keep smacking them out for the whole family. The Mayan way of conversing is very patient – small talk is sporadic. And even though most everyone speaks and understand Spanish, I try to reach out (and simultaneously entertain them) with my few phrases of Q'eqchi', their indigenous language: *Ma sa laa ch'ool?* I say, "how are you" and they giggle and turn to each other and reply *sa lin ch'ool, b'antiox*, "fine, thanks." Often times, the woman cooking for me is a mother younger than I am. *Jarub'chiab' wan aawe?* I ask, "how old are you?" "19 or 21. 22 maybe, I don't really know," she tells me, and I think she is joking or being evasive. "How could you not know," I ask. "I was born in the jungle," she tells me, and that is answer enough. For the people here, "the jungle" refers more to the time in their history than to the place, a painful time when the army roamed the countryside, massacring the Mayan population. When in 1982 the army marched into Santa Maria Dolores, where the Santa Elena folk originally lived, and started burning houses, the villagers took to the jungle, spending a year and a half (more, for some people) eating whatever food they could find, moving from location to location to avoid the army, depending only on themselves and the jungle for survival. Many got sick and died in the jungle before they made it into Mexico, and many were conceived and born in the jungle. And as people weren't reliant on dates, and certainly didn't go the government to file birth certificates, a whole generation of Guatemalans truly don't know exactly how old they are...

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"This is Don Guillermo's plot here, and over here is my father-in-law's land." I am in the village of Copal AA, and after days of begging one of the village leaders to take me with him to work in the fields, I am on my way. "I have brought a machete for you," Clemente says with a bit of a smile, "I hope you can endure the heat." Like most men, he is a bit dubious of a gringa being able to work. We are setting out to clear a piece of his land for planting for the first time. It is about a 35 minute walk through the woods and other peoples' farm plots. "This land is close." he tells me. "I have another piece of land about an hour and a half away." Along the way, he shows me different crops – cardamom, cacao, squash, melon, beans. And corn. Everyone has corn; this is the staple of the Guatemalan way of life.

When we get there, I see the task is daunting. The weeds and taller than me, and large trees rise overhead with thick vines cascading down. "Everything must go," he tells me and hands me my machete. This is our only tool. We begin feverishly chopping weeds. "Why have you never worked this land before?" I ask. "I am only now getting to it," he chuckles "because we have had much work. When we came here in 1997, the whole land looked like this. We had to build the village ourselves with just machetes and the sweat of our brow." How could I have forgotten? When the refugees came back from Mexico, they weren't able to return to their villages since the government had let other people settle there while they were gone. So instead, they were given other land, often old abandoned plantations. On this land, they had to construct everything from the ground up – homes, schools, farm plots. The government's promised assistance in rebuilding their villages rarely materialized Any aid that came in was from non-governmental, often international, organizations. If you drive by the entrance to almost any town in the region, you will see signs advertising projects like latrines, housing, potable water, and solar panel electricity that are brought in and paid for by various NGOs. These groups are providing the basic services that should be the national government's obligation. While there is some disparity among villages, as the NGOs have helped some more than others, the government's response, on the other hand, has been quite equitable: total abandonment.

After an hour and a half or so of working the machete, blisters appear on my hand, and I am told to sit down and just relax. I am a weak gringa after all, I admit. He sits with me among the weeds, and we begin to chat. "Is your family okay, with the war and everything?" he asks with a sincere

tone of worry. Most Guatemalans don't seem to realize that when the US makes war, it is always on other, faraway lands and our civilians do not have to witness or be subjected to the violence of battle. I explain that the war is not on US soil and my family is fine. "I am happy they are okay," he says. "I sympathize with the Iraqi people. War is a very sad thing, it only brings suffering. I saw what war does. I saw my family members killed and maimed by the army. I was 11 years old when I saw them mutilate my young cousin. I was so filled with rage." He pauses. "This President Bush of yours says he is making this war to create peace and liberate the people. This is nonsense. War can only bring suffering."

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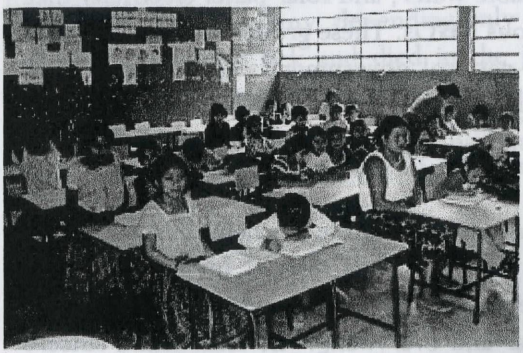
Heat. This is the defining feature of the afternoon. Right now, here in Guatemala, it is the end of "summer" – the hot, humid, dry season. In June we will begin "winter": the rainy season. Until those cooling rains come, I languish in my hammock inside the thatched roof cabana next to my house in Santa Elena. After lunch, kids come swarming in. "*Voy a dibujar?*" they say, "can I draw?" I pull out a stack of blank papers and crayons and they go wild. I notice some of the older kids there and ask why they aren't in school. "We have no teacher," they reply, never looking up from their drawings. They tell me he left for good because he couldn't get a contract. "Will you get another teacher?" "*Saber*," they reply. "What will you do to finish out the year?" "*Saber.*" *Saber* is a response I get for a lot of questions. It means "who knows?" but it conveys more, the constant sense of uncertainly that hangs over rural Guatemala. Even when promises are made, no one believes them until they materialize. The government is responsible for funding elementary schools, but the two room school house only has (had) two teachers to manage 7 grades and few teaching materials. Early this year, teachers across the nation went on strike, presenting a list of demands on the government for improving the educational system, including: more overall funding for education, better salaries and job guarantees for teachers, more books and teaching materials, support for teaching



indigenous languages and culture, and money for school lunches. The strike lasted a couple months, but here in this village the teachers only participated for 15 days before the government threatened to cancel their contracts. When I ask the village's teachers if the national strike had any positive results, they say little was gained. Many teachers have not yet received any salary this year at all, perhaps due to the government's claim that the strike was illegal. The kindergarten through second grade teacher and director of the school is himself just finishing *magisterio* (the equivalent of high school) at the end of this year, and the third through sixth grade teacher is only midway through *magisterio*. He is teaching this first semester as an unpaid internship, a requirement for his teaching certification. The government is unwilling to pay him to finish out the year. The school's only hope is to find another *magisterio* student who needs an internship for his teaching degree. The school director tells me if they cannot find anyone, the government offered to let the kids pass that year anyway, but the kids themselves tell me, "we don't care about passing the grade. We want to actually learn something."

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"*B'aanu*!", I call out, the Q'eqchi' way of announcing your presence. "*Huuuuuu*!" Magdalena responds. I have come to visit a woman I am becoming friends with, and she invited me into her yard and tells me to sit with her. She is sitting on the ground in front of her house among a huge pile of dried corn cobs, taking the kernels off by hand. "You have a lot of work," I comment, and she smiles. Behind her is a whole shed full of corn that her children play around on. I grab a cob and begin taking kernels off too – I have begun to be like most village women, who even while chatting keep their hands busy: shelling corn, making tortillas, holding babies, crocheting bags. "I saw some monkeys yesterday," I begin. She says casually, "so they are still around?" "Yes. And then that night I dreamt I became one of them." She laughs. "They say that we were once monkeys, do you think that is so?" It takes me a while to realize she is talking about evolutionary theory. "Yeah, I don't see why not" I say, worried maybe she is religiously opposed to evolutionary theory. The evangelical and Catholic

presence is very strong in Guatemala. "Then others say that we came from corn. I think I believe that more because when you look at people there are four races, white, yellow, red, and black." She pulls out a cob from the bag. It is the deep purple-black corn we know as blue corn. "Here is the black race." She looks further in the bag and finds a reddish one. "Here is the red race." The rest of the corn is white or yellow, and she points to those as the white and yellow race. "I think it makes more sense that we come from corn." I am fascinated by the great variety in color. She pulls out cobs of other colors, pink, dark blue, orange. "But they say this corn is no good for selling. When the buyers come buy, they want only white corn. Today they came and I tried to sell, but he said there were too many colored kernels. Now we must plant only the white corn, but it is good to have a variety. Better for the land."

I am surprised she worries about selling her corn. The price for corn is really low. Q45 (about $6) for a hundred pounds, which for example would buy a couple articles of clothing, about 9 liters of cooking oil, or bus fare for one person to the nearest city. I ask her why she sells if it brings so little money. "Yes, it is not much money, but when you have *no* money you must get what you can." The prices for other crops are also very low. Coffee, one of Guatemala's traditional cash crops has gone so low as to warrant a national "coffee crisis" and the government is responding with emergency food supplies and loans to help those affected by it (although these relief measures have not yet actualized). Cardamom, a popular cash crop in the Ixcán region where Santa Elena is located, has also dropped in price. The only local crop to have had a decent price this year is cacao, but people were so desperate for that money they were harvesting all the cacao they could, even the unripe beans. This lower quality harvest flooding the market lowered the price. When it started to run out, the price rose up again. I try to bring up the good news. "Magdalena, but I hear the price for cacao is high again." "Yes," she says, "but now there's none left on the trees."

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Land. To most Guatemalans, this is the most important thing, perhaps even the main reason people went to war. Now that the war is over and Peace Accords have been signed guaranteeing people better land distribution, do the people actually have it? In the case of the refugees, yes, well, sort of. As conditions of their return from Mexico, land was given

away or given on credit to the returnees. Maybe not the land they wanted, not the land they had grew up in, but land enough to build a village and grow enough crops to live on. They have occupation of the land, but many do not hold the title to it. To get the title, they would have to pay a lawyer to write one up, at a fee of between Q300-1100 per piece of land, and most have at least 2, often 3 or 4 divided small pieces. This cost is often prohibitive for the peasant farmer who gets Q50 for 100 pounds of corn. Many feel this stumbling block goes against the spirit of the Peace Accords' guarantees. All over the news these days are different commissions and organizations reporting on the various ways the Peace Accords remain unimplemented.

A new commission that's forming is called the National Reparations Plan, and it seeks to go after the various reparations promised under the accords, to compensate war victims for lost homes, land, businesses, family members, and more intangible losses too. "We must think long term," a member of the Copal AA town council says as he speaks to the assembled community about the plan. "They say it may take 10 or 11 years before anything happens." They have already waited over 6 years since the war ended.

Yet for a different group of Guatemalans, they only had to speak up for a year. Right now reparations are being paid out – not to victims, but to perpetrators of the war, the ex-PACs – the paramilitary squads of armed civilians forced into patrolling their villages on army orders. Though they were civilians and under coercion, many took advantage of their position of power, and these patrols have been cited with a full 18% of the human rights violations that occurred during the war. They were disbanded with the Peace Accords, but reorganized last summer to demand back pay for their years of forced service. The first payment was scheduled this spring, causing some very heated moments when the payment date kept being pushed back, and human rights groups were publicly blamed for impeding the payments. Threats were made and human rights workers were treated disdainfully by ex-PAC communities.

Things have cooled since the payment went out in May. Two more payments are scheduled, but conveniently *after* the elections this November. It is been not-so-subtly stated that if the current ruling party, the FRG doesn't win, they can't guarantee payments will continue. The strategy is

clear, vote for us or you won't get paid. The FRG is the partly closely associated with the military, and in fact the candidate they are putting forth for president this year is ex-General Efrain Rios Montt, the current President of the Congress and the man who gained control of Guatemala by a coup d'etat in 1982. Not only is it unconstitutional for him to be elected president after having committed a coup, there is also a court case pending against him, accusing him of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity for the atrocities he ordered while acting president. It is believed that Rios Montt will be blocked from the ballot as he was the last 2 times he attempted candidacy, but his campaign, combined with the recent corruption scandals involving people from all over the government and of different political parties, highlights the ridiculousness of the Guatemala electoral system. The sentiment I get from many Guatemalans is: "The candidates all criminals and no government has done anything for me." If I ask specifically, are you going to vote, the reply I often get is *"Saber."*

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*"¡Mama luuuunnnnnaaaaa!"* a young boy shouts, his call followed by the beating of drums and shrill whistles.. On the average night, the air is filled with the sounds of crickets, frogs, night birds, and other unidentifiable jungle creatures. But tonight there is an eclipse of the full moon and a makeshift marching band. It is 9pm, and I had already gone to bed – I have taken on the countryside schedule of waking and sleeping according to the sun. The shouts and whistles of the troupe of kids wakes me, and I go out to my hammock and watch the moon turn dark in the Copal AA sky. The solar powered light of the village hall comes on and a voice broadcasts over the loudspeaker to the whole village. "There is no need to be afraid. It's not that the moon and the sun are fighting, this is just the shadow of the Earth passing over the moon. Also, young ones, there is also no need to make a lot of racket." He repeats this message over and over, but the town youth are taking advantage of this celestial event for a night of merrymaking. Eventually the announcer realizes it is hopeless.

And why shouldn't they celebrate? After years of living in the jungle or in refugee camps, they are now in their own village. In a way, we are watching their own history unfold in the sky. Together, the whole village watches the bright full moon slowly get eaten away by shadow until the moon goes totally dark. As we stand outside, our bare feet gripping the

Guatemalan soil, our eyes looking upwards, waiting in anticipation for the shadow to pass, for the bright light of the Guatemalan moon to reappear, it seems it will take hours for the shadow to pass and not everyone is willing to wait up to see the reappearance. Some go back inside and go to sleep. But the youth of Copal AA are hopeful. So far, they are patient to sit out the darkness and believe the light will shine upon them soon.

## july 2003

Someone asked me if time is different here in Guatemala. You might expect me to say it goes slower, but more often than not, I find time running out too quickly. In general, everything takes longer to complete. If I want to bathe, I must go down to the river. If I need to relay a simple message or get information, I must walk to that person's house and engage in small talk before I get to the point. Conversation here is much more patient, much less direct than I would like sometimes, but I'm often offered a snack, so I can't complain. Being dependent on others for meals, I often end up sitting around a family's kitchen for up to an hour each meal. Simple chores can fill the morning or afternoon, and before I know it, night has fallen. I can see how mothers, who must cook 3 meals a day and hand wash the entire family's clothes each day, rarely has time to sit down with their children to engage them in projects or help them with schoolwork. Vacation is an alien concept

I am learning the village rhythm. My goals have become less ambitious. I want to learn to carry the jug of water on my head without holding it. I strive to become a fully respected member of the boys' river gang, which includes karate fighting on the cliff above the river, daring jumps off the cliff, back flips, swimming competitions, and chasing games. Sometimes just managing to stay awake and motivated during the midday heat is an accomplishment. The heat and mosquitoes have relented a bit, thankfully, though there are plenty of devious tiny little bugs I liked to call ChupaLindas (lynne-suckers, named after the fabled Chupacabras (goat-suckers) monster of Puerto Rico). I've learned to crochet, and my first morral (the bags almost everyone here carries) is on its way. I've designed it in honor of my new q'eqchi' name: Xoxa Chahim (Sky Star).

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Justice, a concept sometimes as elusive as the world market is capricious, is also on peoples' minds these days. For decades, people who experienced unimaginable atrocities were intimidated into silence about what was going on – if you spoke up, you could be subjected to secret, middle-of-the-night, often fatal visits. The terror has certainly subsided, and many people are much more willing to speak. Casual conversation on my part often leads to detailed narrations of villages being burned, family members mutilated, little kids being sent to help bury massacre victims into mass graves. At least one group is trying to take all these tortured memories and use them to seek out that fabled promised land known as "justice." CALDH (the Human Rights Legal Action Center) has a team of lawyers that are working on 2 cases to finally legally place the blame for the genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity of the civil war where it belongs – the men (and yes, they are all men) who directed the army and the country during that time, primarily General Romeo Lucas García and General Efrain Rios Montt.

Part of my assignment is to accompany some of the people who, because they witnessed a massacre by the army in 1982, are testifying in CALDH's case. In early June, I went with the five or so families to a two day session with the lawyers. The purpose of the gathering was for each witness to tell his/her account of the massacre and for them collectively to reconstruct the timeline. Trying to get people to remember details of a traumatic event that happened 21 years ago (during which time they probably tried hard to forget) proved difficult. Where one person said 8 days had passed between two events, another said it was 45 days. Add to this that this case is against former leaders of the military, an institution which still holds major power here, involves hundreds of witnesses with similar sketchy memory, and the persecution that all human rights groups are facing right now, and you see that the lawyers' have quite a tough assignment. Some people, when seeing all the chips stacked against them, might give up on a tough assignment, but the wonderful folks at CALDH always seem to be optimistic. Even if they don't win outright, the organization of the people and public awareness that's been created by their work, is an accomplishment on its own.

A few days after the meeting, I went out to a community where the witness organization was holding a commemoration of the massacre, partially funded by CALDH and a mental health team working with the witnesses. The event started with a ceremony at the burial site, followed by mass conducted by a visiting Zairian priest. After a huge lunch prepared by the village women, we watched *Hija del Puma*, the dramatic film account of a Guatemalan massacre. There were perhaps a hundred people packed into a small, almost windowless church (creating one of the most intense moist heats I've ever endured!), gathered round a small screen watching a

story much like their own history. Then the marimba played, and they begged us to stay and dance the night away, but, alas, we had to make it out before nightfall. The roads are rough and dangerous after dark.

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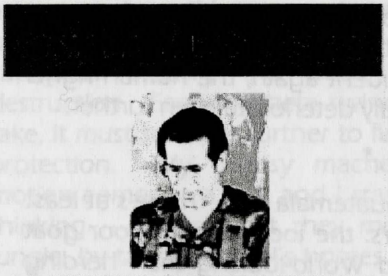
I want to tell you a story about a man. A man who led the army during the 70s and 80s and ordered the destruction of villages and massacres of people, a man who committed a coup d'etat to usurp power over Guatemala, a man who is charged with genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity by CALDH, a man who RIGHT NOW is trying to run for president, despite a Constitutional ban on his candidacy. This man is General Efraín Ríos Montt.

I returned to Guatemala City for my bimonthly meeting amidst uproar of the illegal decision by the Constitutional Court (CC - the highest court in the land) to allow Rios Montt to run for president. He is forbidden from running by an article in the constitution that states that anyone who formerly gained the presidency from a coup d'etat cannot ever be a candidate for the presidency. However, since he is currently the president of the Congress, his party, FRG (Guatemalan Republican Front) holds power in the government (with well-known influence in the CC), and he still has strong military ties, "law," even the Constitution, has become unbelievably flexible. Rios Montt has tried to run in the past and was twice denied by the CC. The Constitution has not since changed, only the FRG's political power in the court - half of the judges are known FRG supporters. The UN, various national human rights groups, lawyer's teams, political parties, and others have denounced the decision. Down here on the streets of the city, there have been daily marches and protests (including a Mayan cleansing ritual performed on the CC to rid it of "bad spirits"), and a poll taken across the nation shows 95% of the public is opposed to the court's decision. The US has come out saying that they would not be able to maintain regular relations with Guatemala should Rios Montt gain presidency. As the US and Guatemala are currently negotiating a free trade agreement (CAFTA), this might have immediate and specific meaning.




On July 24, streets that were once filled with the chants of righteous indignation that the CC would disregard the Constitution so flagrantly became overrun with masked men wreaking havoc upon the city in

support of Ríos Montt's candidacy. In what is being called "Black Thursday," FRG organizers bused in thousands of people from the interior of the country to participate in violent protests – passing out sticks, gasoline, tires (to burn), and possibly even Molotov cocktails to the mobs. Journalists were chased and attacked, an office building with over 900 inhabitants was sealed off for 10 hours by masked men burning tires and chanting that Ríos Montt was pro-poor and anti-business. The protesters were demanding that Ríos Montt be inscribed as candidate. The city shut down, schools and offices closed, and the police were criticized for inaction. The FRG party officials denied any involvement in the revolt, but it was a clearly organized event and just a few days earlier Ríos Montt had publicly stated that if he were not inscribed, he would not be able to control his supporters and there might be violence.

As for my own safety, the events have been mainly confined to the capital city. I had been out of the city with the other accompaniers for our weeklong meetings. We had been planning on returning to the capital that Thursday, but it was decided it was not safe and we returned the next day when things were calmer. These events are particularly worrisome in that it shows that the FRG is not above violence, bribery, and fraud to put Ríos Montt in power. If he were to become president again, the human rights situation, already alarming, would undoubtedly deteriorate even further.

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But not everything is gone to hell in Guatemala City. There's at least one man who has his head on his shoulders: the local door-to-door goat milk vendor. When I came across this Old World-looking man herding about a dozen goats through the city streets, I was very curious. First of all, where did these goats come from and what was he doing with them? "Taking your goats out for a stroll?" I asked, lightheartedly. "No," he replied. "Selling milk." What he did next turned my initial curiosity into pure joy. He knocked on a woman's door, she opened up and, apparently expecting him, quickly handed him an empty mug. He bent down, grabbed a goat by the leg, emptied its udders into the mug, handed it back to the women, and collected his money. While he was doing this, the other goats wandered off, gnawing at the trees and garbage in the gutter and generally dispersing down side streets. Within a minute he had them rounded back up and was on to the next customer. The human rights, political, and judicial systems might be falling to pieces, but it was business as usual for Goat Milk Man!

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Question: What is a forest slasher, path opener, weed cutter, nut cracker, pineapple peeler, door propper, nail cutter, and back scratcher all in one?

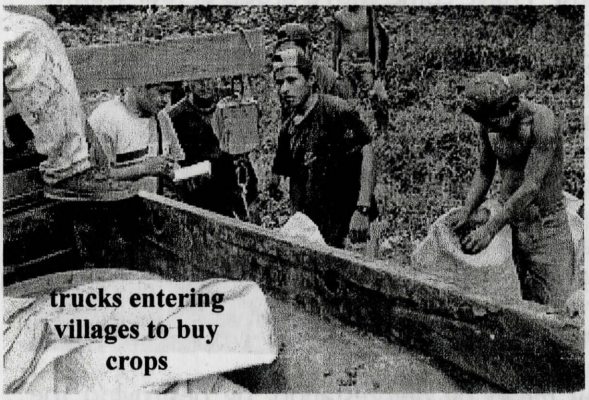
Answer: No it's not some do-it-all machine sold on late night infomercials, it's the machete. This simple metal blade, seen at any campesino's side, is constantly changing the landscape of this country. I wield it awkwardly, finding it heavy and dangerous, but the women I am worth hack the trees and bushes in front of us as if they were mere weeds. The preteen girls are using machetes to crack open corozo seeds to eat, and even the 6 year olds are using these long blades to chop down banana leaves to use for their playhouse. I have come with a group of four women and their children to clear a piece of land for a new vegetable garden. As I am trying my best to effectively "clean" the land, pulling back the overgrowth with a wooden hook and chopping with the machete, I notice a beautiful huge green caterpillar fleeing my path of destruction. Each machete swing I take, it must scamper further to find protection. My clumsy machete motion comes to a halt and I stand thinking – this is what they mean by deforestation, by destroying the jungle, by taking animal's homes. A week ago a man told me that in Alta Verapaz (the department my village is located in) there used to be what was called *chipi chipi* – a light drizzle that used to hang constantly over the land. Now it is gone, the area becoming drier and hotter all the time. This has been attributed to large scale clearing and burning of lands to be turned into farmland. Burning is a particularly environmentally damaging practice, filling the skies with smoke for weeks, burning up plant material that would be natural fertilizer for the soil, and often getting out of control. But this is the only way to prepare large plots of land for planting in a timely manner. How much can one man and one machete do?


Women clearing the field

The fight between man and nature is evident here. In order for his family to eat, the campesino must carve out farmland from the jungle. After several cycles of planting and burning, the land grows infertile and farmers must plant on new plots, pushing further into the jungles. The indigenous peoples traditionally used more sustainable agriculture methods, planting a variety of crops on the same plot and letting dead plant material fertilize the land. The civil war disrupted life, pulling people off generations' old working farms, forcing them to flee to the jungles or Mexico for over a decade, where they did not do subsistence farming and thus lost a lot of technical knowledge. People like those of Santa Elena, who sought refuge in Mexico and then returned to Guatemala, had to start over on virgin lands

in a much more monetarized economy where intensive cash cropping was encouraged and often unavoidable. So families put most of the effort into raising corn and a few, non-basic crops, like cardamom and cacao. They sell these at whatever price the trucks that come into the rural villages want to pay, then use that money to buy food. Those prices are already low, and if CAFTA, the trade agreement the US is trying to work with Central America, comes to pass as the business and politicians have it laid out, things will get even worse.

A fine example of how this trade agreement will affect the people I am getting to know and love here in Guatemala is corn. To most Guatemalans, corn is quintessential. The tortillas at each meal is the food; whatever beans or eggs prepared generally have "condiment status," – something to give the tortilla flavor. They say that if they have had not tortillas, they have not eaten. Each new family I eat with is stunned when I say we in the US do not eat tortillas daily. "Then what do you eat?" they ask earnestly. Most of their farmland is dedicated to corn, and even though the price for corn is low, they rely heavily on selling this corn. CAFTA seeks to remove trade barriers, i.e. tariffs, preferential treatment for local or domestic products, restrictive labor or environmental laws, etc, i.e. whatever makes it difficult for large corporations to extract the most profit out of a transaction.



**trucks entering villages to buy crops**

This is to put everyone on "level playing ground," the negotiators say, but how could the economically depressed, technologically deficient peasant farmers of Central American fairly compete with the highly industrialized, government -subsidized agribusinesses of the US? Because of subsidies (via the taxes you may or may not have paid), technology, and genetic engineering, imported US corn sells for less than local-grown corn. This would rob peasant farmers of their main edible and saleable crop, corn, whilst introducing transgenic corn into the country, which would contaminate local farmers' corn. To the Maya, corn is sacred - their entire creation myth revolves around it - and the idea of genetically manipulated non-natural corn is sacrilegious (not to mention that its long-term effects on health are unknown). The negotiators of the trade agreements, generally politicians and large corporations, say they offer "jobs," but fail to mention that those jobs would mostly be in sweatshops at low wages. The negotiators say they are looking to reduce poverty and help the average

*citizen, but why aren't those average citizens given any say at all in the negotiations?*

*While in the US, most people are far removed from the effects of trade agreements and probably don't even know they are being negotiated, but here, even the uneducated peasants discuss it over dinner. Because every time they go to market to try to sell their corn (or their cardamom or coffee) and come home with pocket change for months of efforts, they feel deeply the effects of the world market.*

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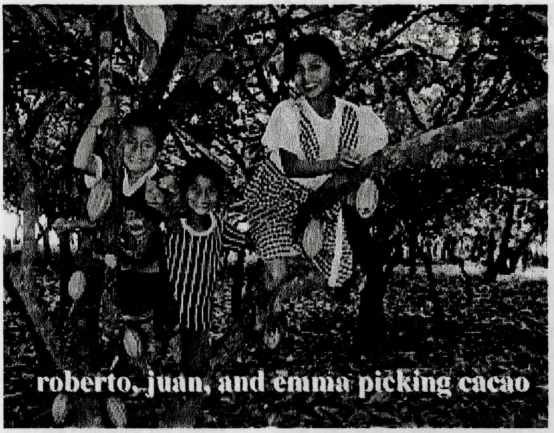
September 2003

We were out in the fields - another accompanier (David) I had asked to come spend my birthday with me, a local man named Otto, and I - preparing to maintain the cardamom field, when the monkeys began to howl. I have been hearing the howler monkeys for months, begging people to seek them out with me, but had never been lucky enough to see them. "Do you want to go find them?" Otto asks, and both David and I immediately agree. The sound is coming from perhaps a half a kilometer away, and we begin to walk towards it. Right after we start moving, the sound stops and I think our chance of finding them is lost. Yet Otto pursues. Several minutes later he says, "It was from over this way, right?", and David and I shrug, but he wasn't really looking to us for guidance. We pass small streams, our path wiggling through unkempt corn and bean fields and the beginnings of forest. About 15 minutes later Otto stops in front of a tree and says "It came from this tree, right?" David and I look at each other as if he is joking. Then he begins to emit a low, hoarse sound, repeating it over and over until a similar sound starts up from within the forest. Otto smiles and continues and the sound from the tree gets louder and louder, David's and my eyes getting wider and wider, until the animal in the tree breaks out into the full howl only the monkeys make. Soon we are able to discern its body among the branches. I am beside myself with amazement at Otto's locating abilities and honor at finally meeting the howler monkeys. Within a few minutes, 6 or 7 of them had crawled out, jumping between branches, hanging from their tails, and eating tiny fruit. I had developed a joke many months ago that I had a monkey for a boyfriend, and just the day

before one family and I were joking about whether or not my "boyfriend" would show up for my birthday. Indeed he had, and it was to be one of my most wonderful birthdays ever.

* * * * * *

'Tis the season of small pickable fruit. Everywhere you look there are kids hanging off of trees, shaking trees, crawling out on branches, and throwing sticks at higher branches - anything to get those fruit down. Kids wander out of classrooms, returning holding up the edge of their shirts to contain the tiny nances or jocotes or guavas. Every walk you take with them takes longer these days, as they cannot pass an orange tree without "lowering" 6 or 7, which always means 2 or 3 for me.



roberto, juan, and emma picking cacao

These days I am feeling very at home in Santa Elena and falling into the step of community life. People now regularly seek me out to work with them in the fields, go with them to the river, or come to church. I am learning to ride horses, have started to wear traditional dress, and am successfully communicating to those who only speak q'eqchi'. I have a regular Sunday night card game set up with the teenagers and get invited to story nights with different families. By far my favorite part of the community, the river has never ceased to be a source of physical and emotional rejuvenation. For my birthday, I spent several hours there, and then in the evening threw a marimba dance birthday party which almost everyone in the village attended, though getting people to dance takes some real motivation strategy…

* * * * * *

These past two months have been filled with activity. With so much at stake in this November's elections, several social justice organizations have been entering even the smallest of communities to encourage people to vote and to educate themselves about the candidates. They do not make propaganda for any candidate except to urge people not to vote for Rios Montt, the man who was head of state 1982-1983 due to a coup d'etats, under whom some of the worst atrocities of the civil war took place, and who is currently indicted with genocide. Rios Montt (RM) just a few days ago planned a rally in Ixcán, the municipality comprised mainly of returned refugee communities (my communities are very nearby but just across the municipality border). The local civil and human rights organizations wrote and broadcast a request that RM not have a rally in their city out of respect for the thousands of returned refugees who hold him accountable for the violence of the 80s. RM's party, the FRG, broadcast a response that these human rights organizations were trying to obstruct the FRG's legal right to campaign and placing the blame on the human rights community if any violence broke out at the rally. This is a popular strategy, to publicly blame the human rights communities for problems in the country. RM did hold his rally but only spoke for 15 minutes before rock throwing forced him to leave the stage.

A rather progressive women's organization, Mama Maquín, has been stepping up their efforts in the past months. They have been holding workshops on elections, free trade agreements, the Plan Puebla Panama (a plan to turn Central America into a major transportation hub for cheap imported products on their way to the US). I am constantly amazed at how information on such things as free trade agreements is making its way into even the smallest, rural communities (though my experience isn't totally

representative because I am in returned refugee communities which tend to have much higher levels of conscientization and political involvement) when I think that most US citizens have probably never heard of CAFTA or FTAA. Of course, those outside the US are always the ones more aversely affected by these agreements.

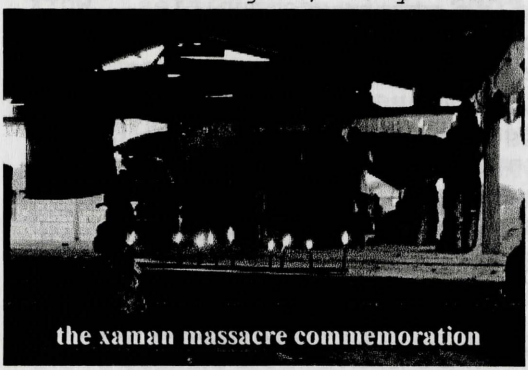
I had the chance to delve more deeply into world trade issues by going to Cancun, Mexico during the World Trade Organization's (WTO) ministerial summit, where thousands of people, including university students, peasant farmers, indigenous rights activists, NGO's, and other activist youth showed up to oppose the WTO's neoliberal agenda. Dozens of alternative forums were being held by NGOs, research institutes, and peasants' organizations. These discussed the effects neoliberal world trade has had on the people of the world, created strategies to combat the power of such groups as the WTO, and proposed other economic models. Most everyone who came camped out in Cancun, with a large peasant camp in and outside of a gymnasium, a student camp in the baseball field, another youth camp in a main city park, and the South Korean delegation camping out at the entrance to Cancun's hotel zone where the WTO delegates stayed and met. Activities went on all night. It was very nice after months of living in rural Guatemala with low levels of education and sometimes strict behavioral norms, to be meeting activists from all over Mexico and the world, talking politics, learning slang, running around the city at night, and making action plans.

A major focus of the event were protests of the WTO's meeting, including the highly dramatic suicide of a South Korean peasant farmer organization's leader. Right in front of the police barricading us from getting near the WTO summit, he gave a speech about how WTO policies are killing farmers in South Korea, then he pulled out a knife and stabbed himself fatally in the heart. This more than anything else, showed how serious the people of the developing world were when they say that neoliberal economics are devastating them. This self-sacrifice aimed at getting our message to the world and into the WTO conference rooms, unified all of us outside the barricades and reminded us that the battle is a serious one with grave consequences for

the people of the world. How much his suicide or the thousands of protesters outside were discussed inside the WTO, we'll never know, but the end result is that the WTO delegate failed to come to any agreements because of developing countries' disgust with the developed countries refusal to address their concerns. So we have a slight victory: a couple more years to organize, persuade our official "representatives," and create alternatives before they convene again to decide the economic fate of the world's peoples.

* * * * * *

Meanwhile, here on the ground in Guatemala, I've been witness to the struggle for historical justice. A new feature of my assignment is my involvement in the Xamán massacre case. In 1995, a newly settled returned refugee community, known as Xamán, was preparing for their first anniversary party, when a group of soldiers arrived into the community, supposedly to ask if they could come to the party. The returnees, highly anti-military, said the army had no right to be on their lands and demanded they leave. A scuttle broke out and the soldiers ended up breaking into fire against the unarmed crowd and killed 11 people and injured dozens more. The community, with support from the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation, has brought criminal and civil charges against the soldiers, and the cases have been through the courts several times with disappointing results. In August, they went to court again. Xamán has an accompanier (the aforementioned David) who lives in the community full-time and who travels with the witnesses for any case-related business. There is a slight fear that while some of the witnesses are out at court (in 3 day/3 night stints since the court is several hours away) the army might arrive in the community to intimidate the other witnesses or their family members, so Xamán requests the presence of another accompanier during those times. This means me! This has given me the



the xaman massacre commemoration

opportunity to see a different type of rural community, as Xamán is much larger than Santa Elena or Copal AA. The case seems to be going much better than previous instances, with fewer irregularities and fairer judges and should conclude in the next couple of months.

The other cases I'm involved in are the genocide cases against Ríos Montt and Lucas Garcia. I'm supposed to be visiting several witnesses in the case in their homes, but had not done so until the past month because of several complications. Now, I have gone into their communities once and will return every month with a partner to travel through the 5 communities over the span of 7 or 8 days to visit the witnesses, providing a form of international solidarity and also to find out if they've been experiencing any intimidation. There are some challenges to these goals, being that they only speak q'eqchi' and that the presence of internationals in villages unused to it tends to arouse suspicion and jealousy (equating foreigners with economic aid). But I am excited to test out my q'eqchi' ability and help create the first international relationship in these communities.

This month there was a national meeting of all the witnesses involved in the genocide cases. They meet to discuss advances in the case, get further education about the justice system (including practical knowledge of how courts work so that they know what's going on when they are called to court), talk about elections, discuss what's happening in their communities, work toward healing their wounds from the war, and find mutual support. There was a particularly moving moment at the end of the several day event. We had watched a documentary about a Guatemala woman, Dominga Sis, who had grown up in the United States after her family was killed in a massacre, but who had buried all of her memories of the massacre until she was an adult. She then went on a quest to discover her past and is now one of the witnesses in the genocide case. The film ended with her feeling incredibly confused about her identity, torn between two countries, and very alone.

The witnesses in the room stood up one by one to express sympathy for Dominga, who unlike them, has been separated from her community and now is all alone in her pain. They expressed that they felt supported by

each other, the team of lawyers and psychologists working with them on this case, and the international accompaniers who are sacrificing their comfort and leaving their friends and family to live amongst them. It was beautiful for me to look around the room and see people from so many different ethnic groups who for so many years were forced into isolation by the repressive regime, now able to come together, recognize how much they have in common, and strengthen each other to seek justice for the wrong done to them. Sometimes my spirits get low, and I wonder if my presence as an accompanier is really doing anything, and this evening drove it home that our quiet, passive presence is indeed supporting these people and furthering their work. When I start feeling unsure again, I will think about Margarita, a Caqchikel women in traditional dress and large 70s style eyeglasses, taking off her earrings and pressing them into my hand as thanks for me being there, even though I don't work in her community nor had ever met her before. Thank you, Margarita!

Thank you all for your support. I now have plenty of batteries, so no need to send more. Candy is still always appreciated, as are children's books. Also don't forget to check NISGUA'S website www.nisgua.org for action alerts and news.

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**november 2003 elections**

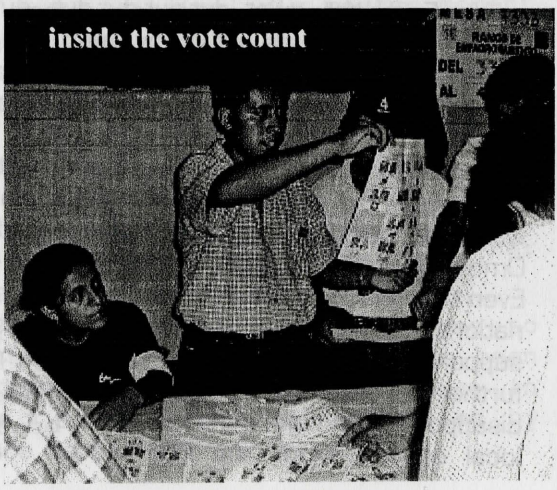
At 5am, the quiet dut-dut-dut-dut, dut-dut-dut-dut of my partner's alarm watch calls me out of my sleep. My partner, David, and I stare up into the darkness for a few moments before motivating ourselves out of our beds. We dress quietly and quickly, and step out into the black of predawn morning, grabbing only a cup of rice in hot milk, (a local breakfast beverage). We have a 5am meeting (notice we only woke up at 5am, we know that in Guatemala to show up at the prescribed time would be pointless) with the local coordinator of the Human Rights Ombudsman's' (known as the PDH) office electoral observation mission. Even though we are internationals, we chose to plug into and support the national observation mission, being that as accompaniers, our role is to support the development of local movements instead of encouraging further dependence on international institutions. In this case, we were disappointed though. When we arrive, it appears that 10 out of the 12 local observers for the PDH never showed up last night and the

coordinator has no clear plan for how we, now only 4, will observe the electoral process in a city with 31 voting tables spread out in 6 voting centers.

David and I are distracted from this matter though by loud shouts and rolling cheers coming from one of the distant voting centers. We decide to go check it out and arrive at the school where 16 voting tables are located, and though it is a full hour and half before voting is to begin, the lines are enormous, perhaps up to a couple hundred people in each. Most voters showed up in town yesterday, coming from villages several hours away, and with no where to stay, spent all night wandering around town or trying to catch some sleep in the park in between downpours. This makes for an anxious, grumpy, and riled up crowd. We work our way to the front of the lines, from where the racket is still emanating, and find that the boisterous cheers in response to people smashing windows and throwing around desks and chairs they've pulled from the classrooms. We are worried, yet when we talk to the voting officials, they seem to brush it off. We realize, however, that this is an early start on what will be a *very* long day.

Luckily, it was the only violence of the day, and it calmed down once the voting tables opened. David and I, with no real team to speak of, spent the day trying to cover the whole city center. This meant wandering around to all the different voting centers, monitoring selected voting tables for small stints, watching in the streets around the voting centers for any illegal campaigning, and checking out the party headquarters for any suspicious activity. It clearly was not a thorough observation, but we got a general feel for how they were running the elections. On one hand the local voting administrators seemed to playing fair and giving their best effort, but on the other hand, the system was so entirely messed up that it was very difficult for many voters to successfully cast their vote.

The problem was this: voters were assigned one of the 31 tables based on their voter registration number. These assignments were posted in many locations all over the city, but expecting peasant farmers (who may not be able to read) to stand in front of a poster


inside the vote count

and understand number ranges was too ambitious. Add to this that there was some glitch in the assignments so that the ranges were repeated 3 different times, each time at a different table, (so that every registration number was listed under 3 different tables) and the whole thing became impossible. There were only 2 people in the entire city who were officially helping people locate their assignment. This meant that everyone who saw us, with official observer badges and T-shirts, gathered around us begging for help. Assisting voters locate their assignment certainly was outside of our role as observers, but the situation was so dire, we could not stand to watch so many voters turned away again and again. The best we could do was tell people (me often having to try to explain everything in q'eqchi') the 3 possible tables their name could be at and encourage them to keep trying. We talked to the city electoral directive throughout the day and only after several hours into the voting were we explained how to determine which of the 3 possible tables corresponded to each voter, but even this information did not always guarantee someone'd find their right table. Many people made gallant efforts to cast their vote, standing in various lines from 4am until the tables closed, but still many went home unsuccessful.

Who was to blame for this massive error? It could have stemmed from the new computerization in registration records with people not properly trained in how to use the system. It could have come from a lack of communication from a higher office and enough staff to explain to voters how to locate their tables. Or it could have been an intentional, institutional attempt to discourage people from voting this round and in the future. We'll never know for sure.

All in all, the successful voting rate (including voter turnout) was in no way satisfactory, but the results weren't devastating. Rios Montt, the former dictator charged with genocide, came in third for president, meaning he will not be one of the two candidates to pass to the second round of voting in late December. Many mayoral results are still being hotly contested - one example being when I arrived in Playa Grande, Ixcán the day after elections, just in time to witness the ballot boxes being carried off by a protesting mob to be burned in the town plaza. Or the death threats being aired on Radio Ixcán as "paid advertising." Nationally, at least one candidate was murdered, and there are many substantiated allegations of fraud. The local human rights office and police are "looking into" the incidents, but with the international community pleased with Rios Montt's loss, the pressure's off, and what was a very anomalous election will probably just be written off as standard for Guatemala.

## november 2003

There is only one chance for a happy sleepless night out here in the villages (assuming that excessive heat, sickness, or bugs make for an *un*happy sleepless night) – el baile! Only community dances have the power to coax a village out of its 9pm total curfew and give the howler monkeys a run for their money with loud pumping music resonating through the jungle late into the wee hours.

I have had the pleasure of attending 5 of these in the past two months, each with a slightly different character. One of them was very small, in the village neighboring Santa Elena and was held in the dirt floor schoolhouse with a stereo system and CDs. This was my first experience in late night exoduses through the woods – a stream of excited teenagers passing under the jungle to get to the next village, then walking back at 2am, already bursting with gossip and reliving the dance. The return was accompanied by a light rain that turned the whole path into mud, forcing me to abandon my slippery plastic shoes and rely on a gentleman's guiding hand to keep my balance.

Another dance was in another somewhat nearby village that had hired Santa Elena's marimba band to celebrate the changing of church authorities. We had to walk out to where the truck would meet us, about an hour, and this meant carrying the marimba out too. The standard way of carrying things 'round here is by a strap that goes around your forehead and sustains the object on your back, and it was no exception for the two 6ft long marimbas.

The marimba played for 10 straight hours, the dance floor occupied almost all of that time, women dancing with women, men dancing with men (usually after they're drunk – but I was told that this was "traditional"), and then the young men and women with each other. Unfortunately for us most of the authorities in the community got drunk and when it was time to drive the band (and its roadies like me) home no one was in any shape to attend to us. In the only complete lack of hospitality I've ever seen in the villages, they totally abandoned us and we ended up trying to sleep on terribly skinny church benches, but the mosquitoes were too carnivorous to let us sleep. We ended up walking at 2:30am out to the road (another hour walk – thankfully there was moonlight since none of us had thought to bring flashlights). However,

there was no public car to take us to our village's entrance until 5:30, so we stayed up chatting and enduring the cold along the highway.

The other three dances were on consecutive nights in the village of Xamán, in celebration of their 9th anniversary as a community. They hired an all synthesizer band (complete with 3 stage dancers) that kept the teenagers bouncing all night to a mix of salsa, disco, and something called *caballito* – a Mexican music requiring a bouncy little dance that the kids go crazy over.

This Xamán party lasted four days and included a soccer tournament, a queen competition (think beauty pageant, young girls competing to be queen of the community, but dressed in their finest indigenous *traje*, giving speeches, and performing a very awkward "walk"), carnival games, foosball, and even a hand powered Ferris wheel. The celebration started off with a solemn commemoration to the massacre that happened just days before the community celebrated their first anniversary.

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The other exciting new part of my last couple months is finally making it out on what we call the jungle trek. This is a weeklong adventure through some isolated, q'eqchi'-only speaking communities to visit witnesses in the genocide case against Lucas García. Though I have been dreading it for months, because of the language barrier and past-accompanier's reports of extreme awkwardness, it went surprisingly well. My months of perhaps half-heartedly studying the language paid off, as I was able to successfully communicate with the people, and even tell jokes. I have a little book full of riddles, tongue twisters, songs, and stories in q'eqchi' and this really wins me points with all the kids, as we stay up reading riddles by candlelight and they turn to me for answers. My willingness to speak the language did take me far, perhaps too far, such as when we stopped by somebody's grandma's house, and after saying a few greetings to her in q'eqchi', she launched off into all the troubles of her life and ending up crying on my shoulder, all in rapid, quiet, and sniffly q'eqchi'. I was able to pick up about 50% of what she said and could throw in affirming statements or clarifying questions now and again, but I certainly was worried that at some point she'd find out that I was only pretending to fully understand. There are many other wonderful stories about this jungle trek, and my partner on the trek, Arthur, has written a thorough account of this, so I've chosen to just include his account in a following email.

As for my personal self, I've been pretty healthy and after a brief spell of depression in October, I am back to being very excited and in love with everything I'm doing. Always on the lookout for field work, I've decided that cutting rice is perhaps my favorite kind of work. I would like cardamom picking more if it wasn't guaranteed that I'd be infested with chigger bites every time I went. The exhausting effort of shelling corn is also quite satisfying– you put all the corn in a net then beat it with a stick until all the kernels fall off. This is mainly men's style of shelling; the women do it by hand shelling each ear individually. I dedicated three days to a shelling effort, and as I watched the massive amounts of corn around us, I began to wonder, how many grains of corn have passed through these peoples hands in their lifetimes? Many millions. Corn is their life.


porfirio shelling corn

The weather is actually cooler now due to rains which now fall during the day (making having dry, mildew-free clothes an insurmountable challenge), which reminds me that other people are experiencing winter. I am greatly looking forward to these next two months – my last two months in community – though I fear that I have grown too in love with the country life and will not want to leave.

I send holiday wishes out to everyone. I will be warm and happy watching the Christmas traditions roll out in the village and plan to have a Zapatista New Years in Chiapas.

## Guest Star: J. Arthur Knox

Arthur and I go on a 7 day trek through the muddy jungle to visit genocide case witnesses, about every 6 weeks. Here is an account of one trip Arthur wrote:

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**Best Laid Plans**
**by Justin Arthur Knox**

The best laid plans are never best laid, for the very reason that they were laid down somewhere in the first place. The assumption behind

'planning' things is that you understand more or less how you will proceed from time and space point A, to time and space point B. And, the fundamental presupposition deeply underlying all this is that you know just what the hell is going on. The word, or better put, the concept of 'the plan' reaches dimensions of irony here in Guatemala I had never thought possible. So it is that more often than not we find ourselves suddenly doing something previously unexpected as little as ten minutes before, such as following a blue ghost in the gray rain of an overwhelmingly green landscape punctuated only by the twelve inches of red mud through which we slog.

The massacre which has come to be known as San Juan Rio Negro took place in March of 1982. Though I believe in my last letter I wrote that it was committed under Rios Montt, such was not the case (please excuse the error). Falling as it did just before the coup in which Rios Montt took power it was the last massacre of the Lucas Garcia government.

In late December of 81' a number of soldiers arrived in the town of El Remolino and collected the cedulas (identification cards) belonging to the community members, instructing them to present themselves to the Playa Grande military base in order to get them back. Shortly thereafter, on January 8th 82', members of the guerillas arrived and warned the community members not to present themselves, as it was a trick, and those who had gone to retrieve their cedulas had disappeared inside the base not to emerge again. After the warning the town they burned a cardamom dryer belonging to some wealthy landowners and thereby made potential accomplices out of the community members in the eyes of the authorities who so often associated the non combatants with the guerrilla. Over the next few weeks the community members became increasingly worried about the possible repercussions from the burning of the dryer and on the 5th of February the fled.

At the Rio Chixoy they split in two groups. One group crossed immediately to the other side and began walking south. The other group, mostly men and children, loaded themselves and the heavier cargo the community members had fled with into three large canoes belonging to the guerilla and headed down river, and into the waiting arms of a 60 strong military patrol who had anticipated such a move. Found as they were in guerrilla boats, they were immediately taken captive and lead to a finca (plantation) named Finca San Jose Río Negro. There they were held for a period of days not known, forced into manual labor and tortured. On Saturday the 13th people in the neighboring town of San Isidro heard the screams of men and children which lasted for a period of hours after which time it went quiet. Later, after the army had left, it was discovered that around 100 people had been murdered inside the finca.

Though none in the finca were left alive there are a number of witnesses to what happened. Some saw them captured, some heard the cries, and some saw with their own eyes what the army had left in its wake. Those witnesses

who, in one way or another, know what happened now live spread out among various communities in the southern reaches of the Ixcán and the northern parts of Alta Verapaz.

There are eight communities in all and I have just recently returned from a week long trip in which another accompanier and I spent time with the witnesses in each of these communities.

There is the expression 'to have walked through fire and water', usually referring to some sort of trial endured, but I would challenge that 'to have walked through mud and water' is a trial much harder still. It may sound less sexy, less fantastic and more mundane, but I assure you, it's got to be more trying than fire. At least fire is dry.

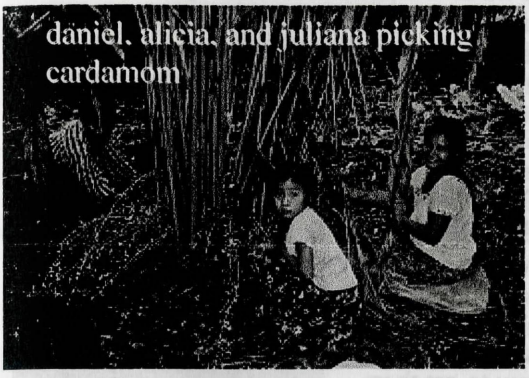
I think the best way to relate this experience is by dividing it between the times of day, morning afternoon and evening, to which, each of them, belong a very distinctive set of routines and sensory perceptions.

**Morning**

Morning is early...very early. Whoever started the myth that roosters crow to the rising sun was a very sound sleeper, as in my experience they begin crowing at least two hours before first light, and continue more or less regularly until the dawn has reached full morning. The situation is no different in Cuarto Pueblo and Santa María Tzejá, however, in those places these offending insomniatic animals are not crowing within, or just beyond the houses in which we sleep. Distance makes a difference. Grim determination and exhaustion usually sufficed to see us back off to sleep for another hour until the women awake to begin their day, which including as it does the preparation of breakfast, is early as well. Shortly there after, as the ongoing conversations in an unknown language succeed in pushing sleep's walls from us, we crawl from bed and confront our day. This first part of our day consisted mainly in figuring out just what to do with our time.

The purpose of this tour is to check in with these witnesses, answer any questions or concerns they might have and relate or take any messages either to CALDH from them or vice versa. However, here in Guatemala, and especially between people from different cultures, in-between which a slight language barrier exists, such information cannot be simply and directly told or related. More often than not, important questions, doubts, fears or messages emerge slowly, indirectly and suddenly from a process which we know little of and hence cannot anticipate. So in each place we spend enough time to hopefully let anything emerge which is to emerge. Resulting from this is a fair chunk of empty time.....waiting..... waiting to be filled.

One day we accompanied one of the witnesses to his cattle pasture, just to see what exactly one does when they go out to check on their cattle. The word 'pasture' is misleading, as I believe it connotes flatness. A 'cattle ravine' would fit the reality more accurately. I was previously unaware that it was possible to 'call in' cattle. The language barrier frequently left us deducing just what was going on rather than knowing from the explanations just given us. So it was that we found ourselves perched on a slope, listening to this man making loud noises, the purpose of which baffled us until from over the ravine lip came about 13 cows who then proceeded to converge upon us. Give shots of vitamins, we now know, is often times what those who go to the cattle ravine go there to do.


daniel, alicia, and juliana picking cardamom

Now is the cardamom harvest here in Guatemala and the people in the Ixcán cultivate a lot of it. So it was that one day we found ourselves picking cardamom with two young boys belonging to the family with whom we had stayed the night before. Cardamom grows 'bajo la montaña' (in the thick of the jungle) and so it is kept company by hosts of mosquitoes, AND, the cardamom seeds which are picked grow down close to the ground where the chiggers live. So 'itchy' and 'cardamom' are now forever associated in my mind. I wonder if Pavlov liked cardamom? Chigger bites don't show up till the next day (but they make up for their tardiness by staying an extra bit longer), and so later that day, still optimistic that we had escaped unscathed, and wishing to ensure this, we bathed using a powdered laundry detergent that people told us helped kill chiggers. The stinging sensation it gave us led us to believe it would work, but alas, no.

In the five hours we were there, Lynne and I managed to pick about 22 pounds of cardamom seeds. Our two young friends picked, in that same time, 45 pounds. Cardamom has been harvested here in the Ixcán since the seventies, but the price then was much higher, around about 1 dollar to the pound. However, due to international markets opening up, the average price per pound of cardamom for the last three years has hovered around twenty 0.25 cents. So during those five hours that our friends picked their 45 pounds they were earning about one dollar an hour each. And, this price does not take into account any of the previous months of planting and continual maintenance of the cardamom as it grows, or the work to carry it to a market. So by and large, all things factored in, they probably make negative dollars an hour for their efforts. Yaayyy for the global economy!!!

Other days found us accompanying other witnesses to neighboring towns where they had errands to do, and which had phones we could use to check in with the capital. On one such day the entire two hour walk was filled with falling rain in various levels of intensity. Mud. There are many different kinds and qualities of mud. Here I will relate just one.

There is a kind of mud in which deep boot prints are left behind, and which are then slowly filled with the rainwater as it drizzles down. When those water filled boot prints are then stepped into just so, a vacuum of sorts is created in which the accumulated water is rapidly evacuated upwards as far as say, the chest, thigh or crotch region. A particularly well orchestrated step can launch a spray of water upwards with a trajectory just right for landing that water back down and inside your boots. Mud is fun...we like mud. Or so we repeated to ourselves to stave of that deep frustration which resembles a psychotic break.

So were our mornings spent. Invariably after lunch we had to make our way to the next community, and this brings us to:

**Afternoon**

**mud pit path**

Afternoons found us traveling between communities, and, as neither of us had been to a few of these places, wondering how to get there. The always generous and hospitable older generation was quick to volunteer the guiding services of their kids. However, these kids were, at times, less than eager to comply. It's our theory that, resenting their assignment, they decided to take it out on us. So it was that we often found ourselves struggling to keep up on steep upward and downward slopes of slick slippery mud, a task made more difficult by the packs we were struggling under, while our guides effortlessly negotiated the trails and smiled on at our attempts at balance. We did however take solace in the knowledge that, were the pack on the other back so to speak, the situation would have been quite different. Kids or no, I'd like to see 'em laugh like that while wearing my pack!

The landscape through which we walked is beautiful. The trails wound their ways under the jungle canopy most of the time, but occasionally we would top out on a ridge line and see a rolling, densely forested landscape with the Guatemalan highlands hovering just beyond.

One to four hours later we would arrive muddy, sweaty and bitten in the next community and begin:

**Evening**

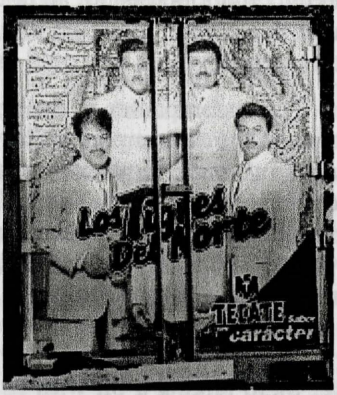
In some communities we knew where we were to stay, making this first step quite easy. But in a few we had names only. Usually simply asking around isn't a problem, however as we were asked by CALDH and the witnesses to keep our presence in the community as low profile as possible, knocking on doors was not an option. So our tactic was to follow intuition and wander in a certain direction until some one recognized us or until we found a solitary person whom we could ask. This seemed to work out.

The accompanier in the returned refugee community of Xamán coined the term, 'The Accompanier Show', to refer to the intensity with which we are watched by those in our communities. The accompanier show is very popular in Cuarto Pueblo and Santa María Tzejá, but arriving in these remote communities in which foreign presence is rarely if ever felt, the accompanier show was suddenly on every channel. If televisions were sentient beings I know how they would feel. But, as uncomfortable and forward such scrutiny can be it comes from a genuine curiosity, a thing which I respect and value, we were often able to, through laughter (as it was easy to get them to laugh at us) to get them talking a bit with us, thereby satisfying all our curiosities in more than a passive observational way. Such were a few good exchanges sparked, from which I can now boast that I can say 'my farts stink' in Q'eqchi' (if anybody is curious, 'chew lin kiss'). The accompanier show usually went from our baths in the river, through dinner and on until we bedded down for the night (as our sleeping accoutrements were an especially popular part, the finale one could say, of the show).

The level in which we shared of their lives was of a different intensity than it is in my other communities. In Cuarto Pueblo and Santa María Tzejá we have our own living spaces, and though we are often in the homes of our friends there, it is only for an hour or two at a time. This last week we were welcomed in and we stayed a while. Sitting in silence, attempting conversation, eating their food, sleeping in their beds surrounded by a snoring family of eight. Breathing in the wood smoke from their cook fire, stepping around dogs and chickens, looking for dry places to hang our wet muddy clothes and learning to inhabit, with a large family, a small house which was not made with people of my height in mind.

And then there was the forced abstinence from any kind of planning which I mentioned earlier. When not able to seriously consider our next steps, I found my attention landing instead in each step I made in the present. The forced awareness of the present combined with the intensity of what fills that present created impressive time, which is to say Time which impresses itself upon you. It was a memorable week.

This has been an action-packed two months. December started off with another Jungle Trek, which went smoothly and even ended early allowing me time to go.....see Los Tigres del Norte (the extrafamous Mexican norteña band) in concert! The concert took place in Zacapa, a dry, hot ranching town in the Southeast of the country, a place overrun with pistol-packing, Stetson-wearing cowboys. My ex-accompanier friend Jennifer came with me, and we danced the night away with many of the above mentioned cowboys (pistols left at home).




Then I was springboarded into 3 full weeks in Santa Elena, which I was very much looking forward to as my last solid time in that community. Jennifer came with me for the first week, and we went planting, horse riding, and swimming aplenty. The day she left though, I started feeling achy and sleepy, which was the beginning of a weeklong adventure in bad health called MALARIA. How did it affect me? It made me very, very sleepy, and I found it hard to wake up before noon. I suffered alternating fever and chills that lasted through the early afternoon then diminish for the evening. It killed my appetite and made eating a nauseating chore. It took me a few days to realize what it was I had, after which community members insisted on preparing herbal remedies for me. I must have let it go on too long though, and was forced to go to the doctor in town and get some chemical pills, which cleared it up with a couple days. The malaria, though, left a weeklong legacy of lethargy and completely dampened my spirit. Besides the malaria, I also had diarrhea and a gum infection, and later got a cold. I wanted to go home to the US, where I wouldn't be sick all the time (and where people would love and care for me). But I had a realization - the people here get sick all the time and they *are* home. When they are sick, they can't just hide out in their house all day sleeping, they had to keep up with their physically taxing daily tasks. This to me, is what it means to be poor - to be living in conditions that harbor sickness, not having the health care to combat it, and having to keep on laboring right through it.

Christmas was celebrated with *posadas*, a recreation of Joseph & Mary seeking a place to spend the night right before baby Jesus is born. Statuettes of the couple are carried around in a cart followed by a singing candlelit procession to a different house each night. At each house, the procession stands outside the house and asks for lodging with the family, and a group of people inside the house sing a response, initially denying them. This goes back and forth for a while until the couple is given permission, then everyone enters for a small church service inside the house, followed by atoles (warm milk drinks) for everyone. On the 24th, everyone stays up until midnight, at which time there is an explosion of fireworks and passing out of tamales (banana leaf-wrapped corn and meat treats).

At the end of December, I met up with a friend, Panagioti, in Chiapas where we spent several days in several Zapatista communities celebrating both New Year's and the 10th Anniversary of the Zapatista uprising. The Zapatista movement is an armed movement of indigenous peasants in Chiapas who's main goal is self-determination and autonomy from the federal government. There have not been armed clashes with the Mexican army since its first year, and the main features now are autonomous municipalities that are independent from the Mexican authority structure. These municipalities are governed in centers called Caracoles (Snails) where the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Good Government Councils) meet. Inside the caracoles are also where most collective projects (shoe factories, weaving cooperatives, bike workshops, etc) and municipal infrastructure (clinics, schools, etc) are located. A striking characteristic of the Good Government Councils is that the members are made up of community members that serve only 15-day terms. This means that the council is always rotating and a significant percentage of the community population gets to see how governing a community works.

For the New Year's celebration, there were several hundred people, internationals and locals, camping out in the center of town and preparing meals together. As always, the key feature of the celebration was a dance, and the two bands hired to play, played *all day* and *all night*, breaking only between 5 and 6 AM.

The partying continued when I returned to Guatemala: first the wedding of one of NISGUA's coordinators, complete with a Mayan ceremony, Catholic ceremony, and dance; then the anniversary of Copal AA, another several nights of games and dancing. I went on another Jungle Trek, which went very smoothly. My language skills are getting me pretty far and I feel much more comfortable being in Q'eqchi' only communities. Some of the time, I spend reading Q'eqchi' books with the children, and even in my short days there have developed some friendships.

Mayan marriage ceremony

At this point, I have one more week in Santa Elena for goodbyes and a final dance party. Leaving will clearly be hard, and the sadness only abated by my tentative plans to return this year for Christmas. Or at least, having that idea in my head will make it easier to leave. Then I will visit another returnee community in the Petén, Guatemala's wild jungle state. The plan after that is to spend a week or so in the capital saying goodbye, then off to the United States, by land through Mexico. Arrival "home" cannot be scheduled, but mid-March is the current estimate.

For those of you who may have something to mail me, this is your last chance, with things being mailed by February 7 still reaching me with plenty of time. Thanks to internet infrastructure in the least expected places, I will be within electronic reach throughout the rest of my adventures, so keep those emails coming. Expect a final update before I leave the country.

## january 2004

Once, many months ago, I had been questioning whether in going to Guatemala I was moving forward down the path towards my life purpose or if I was merely taking a side trail. A wise man named Bobby heard my heart's wavering, and he reminded me of a great truth: "it's all about the ride, man." In the spirit, then, that concerning any journey, its not the destination that matters as much as getting there, I would like to tell you about the ride, or more accurately, two of the rides:

Example of a Bad Ride: This bad ride begins at 3:30am, an unfortunately common time for trips to begin in this country. The night was beautiful, though, and as we stood in complete darkness at the road crossing, a great many luminous silver stars twinkled down upon us. A pickup truck approaches and we flash our flashlights to let the driver know where we are. We get into the caged truckbed, and so do about 20 other people, all of us cramped. *Thankfully it's only a 30 minute ride in this car*, I think, and try to ignore my physical discomfort by looking up at the stars. We get to a river bank where we are to empty out of the truck and pile into a ferry, just as another truck as jam-packed as we were arrives. We cross together in several ferry trips. On the other side, however, is just one truck – same size – waiting...for ALL of us. People get in, many more than should be possible. Some hang out the back, others off the side. I am terribly squished, unable to breathe in fully, my body twisted, and am only able to garner enough bar space to put one hand and enough floor space to put down one foot. Unlike the other ride, this one is 90 minutes over very bumpy dirt roads, and mid-ride my body starts to cramp painfully, pushed into the bodies of others who are likewise uncomfortable. When we arrive finally, I feel exhausted and slightly beaten up, so much that I actually lie out on the steps of the municipal building and rest for an hour before beginning the rest of the day.

Example of a Good Ride: This ride of genuine delivery begins after 4 days of my last ever jungle trek, taking me away from those communities forever (well, never say never). We had hiked about 2½

hours that day, and came to the top of the hill to wait for a ride and ceremonially change out of our sweaty, muddy clothes. Within minutes, a truck carrying several tons of corn arrives one, and one man hops on back. At this point in the road, with another 2½ hours or uphill road to go, I am reluctant to take a cargo truck , as they are often very slow. I suggest waiting for a passenger minivan to arrive, but then my partner points out: what's the hurry? Besides, in the afternoons, we can't be certain another ride is coming. So we swing our packs over our shoulders and hop onto the corn. The truck is only carrying about 5 other passengers, and space is aplenty. The sky was blue and the sun shining, and it was nice to be riding out in the open air, looking out over the hills. I started off standing up, and reaching over into passing vines and bushes to snag flowers to put in my hair. Later, as the sun started going down, we climbed higher into the mountain, and the mist descended, I arranged the corn sacks and lay down over them, pulling out my blanket and snuggling into a light sleep.

Transportation down here, like many other things, is predictably unpredictable. This is part of this country's beauty. I have had to get out of cars not only to push our own car, but to push a stranded truck with over 15,000 pounds of cardamom in it. I have been in cars that stopped for over half an hour so that the driver could pick pineapples from his field. I have been in buses where everyone abandoned their seats and remained standing and stomping because a plague of cockroaches stormed the bus. All of these experiences created a sense of camaraderie among the people, got us talking and joking and laughing together. This does not happen inside one's private car in the US. This does not happen on the clockwork, streamlined commuter trains. This does not even happen on the Greyhound. And this type of bonding can be found all over the place – I see it when men come together at 3am to slaughter a bull, when women gather to cook up a pot of atol for a community party, when teenagers walk home through the forest in the rain at 2am after a nearby community's dance.

So many communal experiences are precluded by US efficiency and individualism: We buy our food ready for cooking (beef already

off the cow), prepare it in our small homes for our small families, we drive our own cars, we pick up our own children after a dance. If we work with a "team," the relationship rarely extends beyond business hours, and our bosses' demand for efficiency leaves little room for socializing and community-building. The truth is, we have very few comprehensive communities in the US, and the ones that do exist require dedication to create. When so many young Guatemalan men talk to me of wanting to go to the US to work, they see only the dollars; they do not see the spiritual wealth they would be leaving behind. This is also why those that do make it across the border, work very hard, and then come back. When those men and women who have left the US talk to me and tell me why they longed for home, they can't put their finger on it. But I can.

It is for these things, that love for Guatemala has snuggled into the depth of my heart.

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**february 2004**

Well, everyone, my time here in Guatemala is now up. In 4 days I will be crossing the border into Mexico, to begin the road trip home. Of course, I am in love with this country and am already planning my next trip back.

My last week in Santa Elena went splendidly - got some good river swimming in, a little farmwork, and a small goodbye party. After that my friend Panagioti and I went up to Petén, the northern state of Guatemala that is mostly jungle. We went to several sites of Mayan ruins, picked up a horrendous tick infestation that still itches me 2 weeks later!, had a 2 day hike through the jungle, and met some of the people who live off of collecting plants out of the jungle. Then we visited another returnee community where my friend Abby is accompanying, got out to a controversial squatter community, walked to Mexico (a 3.5 hour walk), and also attended a 2 day assembly of all the social action grassroots groups in Petén, which was held in a demobilized ex-guerrilla community. All very lovely. I have written up much of what I learned about the various forces at work in the jungle, an article which I am sending in a separate email. So now I am in the capital, finalizing things and preparing to move

on. A small incident was that yesterday was the Day of the Victim, and there was a large march, headed up by CALDH, the human rights legal action center that are the ones pressing forth the genocide case we work with. They had all of the genocide case witnesses make up patches with the names of people they lost during the war, which were sewn into large quilts for each state. These banners were tied onto large scaffolding structures, which essentially turned them into sails, which led the to the tumbling down of the heavy scaffolds. I unfortunately, was sitting underneath these structures, and didn't get out in time and got hit by them. I don't think the impact was much, but some how I sliced by lip open, was spewing forth blood and had to get rushed to the hospital for 5 stitches in my lip. Not exactly a fun day, but I am feeling fine now. My lip is still humongous and I feel like a monster walking around. Lots of people were taking pictures of me when I was still pouring out blood, and we were all hoping my picture would make it into the local gory tabloid, but unfortunately I was not even awarded that honor.

This weekend we will spend at the beautiful Lake Atitlán, then off to Mexico! Thank you all for supporting me in this journey. As always, keep looking at www.nisgua.org for more information about the issues I've discussed with you in my letters.

With much love,

Lynne

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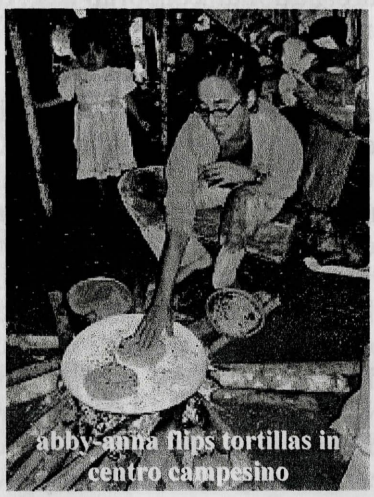
## february 2004

From campesinos (peasant farmers) to archeologists, conservationists to oil corporations, loggers to tourism enterprises, everybody wants a piece of the Petén, Guatemala's vast, jungle-covered northern province. Take Centro Campesino for example, a small community in Northwest Petén. Centro Campesino was initially established in the late 70s as a cooperative community and was rather successful until the armed conflict between the army and guerrilla forces forced them to abandon the community, fleeing either further into the jungle or over the Mexican border. The area was then taken over as a guerrilla camp, and later named as part of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park, thereby legally closing it to

resettlement. After the war, those who fled the community came back to the area but locked out of Centro Campesino, settled in other communities. In recent years, new settlers, forced out of other areas of the country due to lack of available land, have begun turning up, looking to make their home in Centro Campesino, much to the chagrin of CONAP, the national forest service.

CONAP's job is to preserve the regions that have been declared Protected Areas, including national parks and biosphere reserves. They are responsible for controlling illegal logging and other industrial activities that are rampant in Petén, along with campesino invasions. They fault campesinos with cutting down too much wood (for firewood and building materials) and also causing forest fires when the burning of their cornfields gets out of hand. CONAP has on many occasions tried to evict the Centro Campesino, going so far as to burn down the entire community - houses and everything in them - last June, with national police and the human rights office watching. Not surprisingly, the community was outraged after this violent eviction attempt, and they simply rebuilt when the fires cooled.


abby-anna flips tortillas in centro campesino

To use the word humble to describe how the community looks these days is certainly an understatement. The several dozen families living there at the time we passed through were spread out on scratchy, recently cleared pieces of land, living in mostly un-walled structures made of palm leaves, wood, scrap metal, and tarpaulin. Scattered over the community are old, rusting army vehicles and the old cooperative's farm equipment that was burned by the army during the civil war. One palm leaf and wood structure is dedicated as a school, but the only person there able to give classes has been unsuccessful finding someone to pay her. There is no clinic or even medicines.

When we arrived, three young United States citizens, the town committee met with us to explain their situation and ask for any help we could give. Getting legal permission to re-establish the community is priority. According to the committee, they have

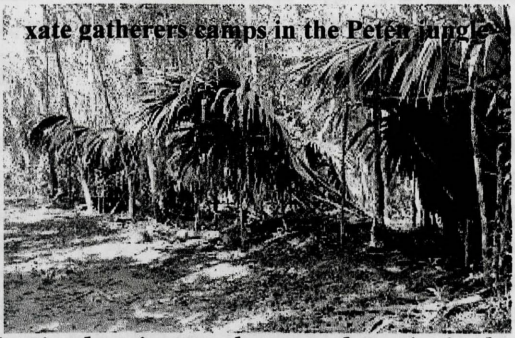
several points in their favor: they point out that because this area had been cleared and settled before being declared a national park, there is a historical claim for a community. Plus, this also means that the area is not virgin forest and shouldn't be held to the same restrictions as "nucleus zones." They pointed out a group of campesinos who moved into virgin areas of the park to set up a village and recently got legal permission to settle there. The Centro Campesino folk say there are some less-than-legal logging deals involving CONAP that explains this inconsistency.

Furthermore, putting all the blame on campesinos for starting forest fires ignores the reality that many forest fires are caused by out-of-control fires on large ranches and fincas owned by wealthy, large-scale landowners. Also the cutting that communities do for day-to-day living isn't the Petén's most significant deforestation threat - it is the big-time illegal logging going on by large, often international corporations, that CONAP is currently not powerful enough to stop, or as some believe, is complicit in.

They also point out that if forest preservation is CONAP's goal, small campesino communities often do better at protecting the forest, than the understaffed CONAP ranger force. Other established communities in the Petén jungle have shown how this is possible, under the basic principle that people who are dependent on the forest for basic survival will take care of it. In the nearby cooperative village of Unión Maya Itzá, there are community bylaws to protect the forest, with measures such as prohibiting habitation or clearing of areas near water sources. There are rules on how cutting for firewood or other projects may be done, and in fact, there is a US NGO, Smart Wood, that works with community members to teach them how to do sustainable cutting. Smart Wood then certifies the community so that any wood products they sell can go to international markets that support fair, sustainable wood production initiatives, where they get a higher price. Community members also underwent training on how to make other products, such as baskets made out of vines, to ease the dependency on lumber-extraction.

The government has given several communities concessions in protected forest areas to extract certain products, like xate (an ornamental fern shipped to the US), chicle (natural gum), and pimienta, along with some lumber from certain tracts of land. These concession contracts allow communities to make a living off the forest, while establishing regulations that ensure sustainability and

preservation. If the regulations are broken, the concession can be retracted, meaning that the community members not only adhere to the rules, but essentially police their area to make sure no one else is violating the regulations on their lands. This can be a very effective way to keep large-scale lumber activities out.


xate gatherers camps in the Petén jungle

Many of these concessions are now under threat, though, by an initiative to expand the National Park "El Mirador" to include conceded areas. El Mirador, in North central Petén is the site of some of the largest Mayan ruins left in Mesoamerica, but is currently reachable only by helicopter or a several day hike through the jungle, and is thus, one of the least visited. The archeological team working at the ruins, headed up by Richard Hanson, wants to expand the park, and there are plans to develop the area to be more accessible and more attractive to tourists. A presidential decree in favor of the expansion was made, with no consultation with the affected communities and in complete disregard of the 25-year concession contracts the government gave just a few years back. Many of the affected communities have organized into ACOFOP, the Association of Forest Communities of Petén, and are challenging the presidential decree and the entire expansion project.


Mayan ruins at Naxatún

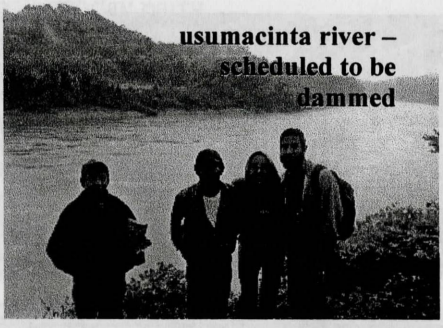
Here again we see several forces vying for their piece of the Petén. On one hand we have communities, who have nowhere else to go, struggling to survive. On the other hand we have archeologists interested in preserving ancient Mayan sites and the surrounding jungle. On the third hand we have the large corporations that also have industrial concessions on the land in question, who are thus temporarily aligning with ACOFOP against the park expansion. If you can find one more hand, there are the investors who want to exploit the archeological and natural value of the area and turn the

expanded El Mirador into another "Tikal," the most developed and most visited of all of Guatemala's ruins. This would imply constructing high-speed access roads and tourist infrastructure such as hotels and restaurants in or near the park.

This development is part of a larger project, Proyecto Mundo Maya, being directed by the tourist ministries of Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, to create a more unified tourist causeway among all the Mayan ruins in the area, and connect them to existing tourist centers such as Cancún. These projects parade under the name ecotourism, but in fact often bring great ecological damage to the area, not to mention the disruption of local communities. It is commonly estimated that along any paved road into the forest, up to 20 kilometers on either side of the road becomes destroyed or compromised. This from the increased traffic, new settlements that spring up to cater to those passing on the roads, and improved access for illegal loggers and squatters. Though they are promised benefits such as construction jobs, easier travel due to the paved roads and income from tourist activities, local communities always get the short end of the stick in these ecotourism mega projects. They may lose valuable forest concessions, watch the forest deteriorate, see natural resources rerouted towards tourist infrastructures and made unavailable to them, and end up having to deal with the wastes that the mostly first-world tourists leave behind. One Petén resident, speaking of the mega-projects planned and the promises made to the locals, said "What have we gotten from the development of Tikal? A whole lot of garbage, that's it."

Community members are almost always unable to participate in the most lucrative economic activities (transportation, hotels, and restaurants) because they do not have capital to invest. Who does? Private corporations, naturally. Examining a typical tourist's trip, we see how the corporations profit almost every step of the way: A would-be tourist calls a travel agency in the US and perhaps buys a complete tour package with a US company. That company then subcontracts transportation with a US airline and a Guatemalan van company. On arrival, our tourist gets driven directly to the tourist site, where she stays at a "nice," probably foreign-owned hotel where she also eats her meals. She pays a relatively small fee to enter the ruins, maybe buys some snacks from a local store, gets souvenirs from a souvenir store (quite possibly foreign owned), or if she's adventurous buys them off a local who hangs outside the park to sell

artisan works. Then our tourist goes back home with the same van company and airline. What have the locals gotten? Maybe a few bucks of profit from snack purchases and cheap souvenirs. The site fee usually gets fed back into maintaining or developing the park for more tourist activity. The Petén jungle, once lived in and cared for and belonging to its residents, has been usurped by foreign investors, and the local communities pushed out.



usumacinta river – scheduled to be dammed

As if all the above mentioned problems weren't enough there are plans to build several dams on the Usumacinta River, which defines the border between Guatemala and Mexico. If carried out, the project could flood a large portion of the Petén and force out dozens of communities. In a country already cramped for viable land, where would they go? Again, the communities that would be affected have organized themselves. The Frente Petenero Contra Las Represas (Petén Front Against Dams) are working hard to educate surrounding communities and confront the government with their complete disapproval of any dam project. Frente Petenero sees how this fits into the Plan Puebla Panama (PPP)- a dam is built to create energy for industries to spring up, and simultaneously labor is procured as people are forced out of an agricultural lifestyle by lack of land and must find non-agricultural work.

But the Peteneros are not ready to let it go down like that. La Alianza por La Vida y La Paz (Alliance for Life and Peace) is an alliance of a large number of grassroots organizations, including ACOFOP and Frente Petenero, working on the most pertinent topics for Petén residents. Their main goal is reclaiming the Petén for those who live there and protecting the resources. In their second assembly in mid-February, representatives from over 50 organizations and communities got together to discuss basic topics such as health, education, and land, along with figuring out how to face the abuse of natural resources, industrial pillaging of the land for oil and lumber, and the threats of tourism projects, the PPP, and the hydroelectric dam. They broke into several working groups on each them that produced short, medium, and long term action plans.

An important action is planned for March 14, the International Day Against Dams.

The Alliance´s motto is "Agua, Maíz, y Tierra son nuestros...resiste y lucha." (Water, Corn, and Land are ours...resist and fight), and indeed they have a lot to resist and a lot to fight against.

## Guest Star: David Rice

This is from David, who you've read about in many of my above letters: the regular Xamán accompanier, my birthday visitor, and my elections observation partner. This letter, which I received after I had left Guatemala, I found very profound and unsettling. The sick baby and mother he speaks about were in the village I lived in (Santa Elena), in fact were my next door neighbors, and the party where he danced and apparently scared this woman were my birthday party.

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Dear Friends and Family,

Within 24 hours of your receipt of this email, I will have left Guatemala, where I spent the last fourteen months stumbling around as a stranger in a strange land. I came hoping that my mere presence would have a positive effect on the security of a small group of people, although I knew that such an effect could never be assessed. By any measurable standard, my presence has had little effect. The penal case is stalled in the Supreme Court of Constitutionality. The civil case is stalled until a decision is made in the penal case. The election that I participated in as an independent observer resulted in an administration run by a different, more subtly corrupt political clique. This is the reason that it is so easy to burn out doing human rights work, because success is so elusive. Yet I maintain that the hope of success is not essential. I did what I felt I was supposed to do without any definite expectations of outcome. What other option does anyone have?

The unknown effects of my presence and my determination to act with or without hope of success have left their mark on me, manifested physically as a shaved head. Allow me to explain: as I wrote this letter, I got a phone call from fellow accompanier who informed me that I had unknowingly scared a woman in her community several months ago. In Mayan culture, fright, or susto, is a sickness, and more traditional Mayans believe it can only be cured by burning the hair of the person who caused the fright. This woman had seen me playing with kids at a community dance, jumping around with kids on my shoulders and flipping them and picking them up in their chairs and laughing and twirling and dancing until I exhausted myself and had to lay down. She was frightened by the way I looked when I was exhausted. While other people laughed, she saw someone who was crazy, red-faced, breathing heavily and (apparently) with his eyes rolling back in his head. She was pregnant at the time, and a

short time later gave birth to a very sick child who is always feverish and crying, and whose red face may have led her to make the connection between the frightful sight of me and the frightful sight of her sick child. Believing that the fright I gave her had passed to her baby, she asked for a substantial amount of my hair to burn to get the fright, the susto, out of her baby,s system. She was convinced that if she did not do this the baby would die. So I buzzed my head and left the hair here in the accompaniers, office in the capital so my friend can pick it up next week and take it to this family to burn.

I do not expect anything to come of this, because I do not believe in susto. If the mother were the one scared sick, the psychologically calming effect of this ritual could have a curing effect on her. But the baby is too young to have adopted beliefs that can affect it that way. This is the third child this family has had, and they lost the first two because of pregnancy complications. They have not taken the child to a health clinic. I worry that even if they do burn my hair the baby will get sicker and die like its two siblings did. But what else can I do? Withhold my hair? What good will that do anybody? So off it goes.

This last experience in Guatemala has impressed upon me again the lesson that I have learned over and over here: there is an awesome responsibility that comes then you accept a visible or influential role in another culture. If you can cause so much trouble in a foreign country just by clowning around with some kids, how can you ever know enough to develop appropriate technologies, do health work, fund schools and scholarships, or orchestrate a military intervention without thousands of unknown consequences? Tourists, development workers, volunteers, soldiers, human rights activists, missionaries, researchers, and conservationists have an enormous impact on the places they go, and they need to be aware of it. This need to be aware does not necessarily translate into guilt. I am not at fault for the baby,s illness or the fact that the family has a certain set of beliefs that interpreted my antics in a certain way. But I need to remember always that if even my silly, meaningless actions can affect people in a serious way that my serious actions can have an even greater effect, for good or ill. And if I act in willful ignorance of the potential effects of my actions, then I will be guilty of gross irresponsibility. (I suppose that is true within a culture as well as across cultures, although since we are far more familiar with how other people within our own culture think, the effects of thoughtless action are not as obvious, although undoubtedly still there.)

That is why I became an accompanier, because it is a passive role that ideally does no more than enable threatened people to live their lives knowing that the "international community" is aware of their situation. But even that small role can have a huge impact, positive or negative, and as Guatemala,s political violence stops targeting returned refugee communities, accompaniment will have less of a positive impact there and the negative effects of having a privileged gringo living in a poverty-stricken rural village will weigh more heavily. This is why accompaniment is gradually being phased out or redirected to places and situations where the threat and the need for international observation is more urgent. It will continue in Aurora at some level until the cases are over, but we are already preparing for the eventual end.

I lost several people I loved while I was in Guatemala, and I would like to publicly recognize three of them who had a significant impact on my experience before they died. Before I came down here, Brother Mann, an old preacher friend of mine, challenged me to know that human rights work in Guatemala was the right thing for me to do. Gerardo, my young Guatemalan friend who passed away three months ago, showed me the power of a childlike attitude and its willingness to accept even the strangest people (tall, bearded, pale, with funny accents) as friends. And Granddaddy Rice, who passed away at ninety-seven years old last week, has always been a semi-mythical symbol of a man in my mind. I trace the developmental origins of my interests and activities to his decision in the early twentieth century to leave his church because it was getting too hierarchical. I thank them for being who they were.

And I thank you all for reading these many letters and for taking an active interest in my life and work here in Guatemala over the last year. Now, stop reading about me and go give some blood or write a letter to your senator or volunteer with some girl scouts or something.

God Bless,

David Rice

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**lynnejpurvis@hotmail.com**

Our culture's obsession with upward mobility is not sustainable. The old "movin' on up" mantra is social and ecological suicide. It paves the path for an elite few to walk all over the rest of us while they make their way to the top. It leaves the vast majority fighting for crumbs, trying to emulate their oppressors. It leaves an earth that nurtured human social development for hundreds of thousands of year in total devastation.

Rejecting the upwardly mobile society doesn't mean regressing into the past or accepting the misery and poverty that so many live with. It means looking down at the earth below our feet, and at the people around us, and learning how to go forward together...

For more info about these ideas or to get involved in local/global activities to build community and create social change, get in touch.

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