

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Witnesses to Political Violence in Guatemala: The Suppression of a Rural Development Movement. By Shelton H. Davis and Julie Hodson.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6c43v8d0>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 7(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Ortiz, Roxanne Dunbar

**Publication Date**

1983-06-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Given the magnitude of the issues involved, Messerschmidt's study can do little but reinforce Matthiessen's assertion that a formal investigation into the FBI handling of Peltier's case is thoroughly in order. *Whatever* actually happened in this strange netherworld of cloak-and-dagger intrigue deserves to be considered in the fullest glare of public scrutiny. We can hardly afford to allow it to be swept under the rug. This is said in full awareness that things may not be nearly as bad as they seem on the surface. On the other hand, they may be even worse. Jim Messerschmidt is to be commended for having brought this out comprehensively and compellingly.

Ward Churchill  
University of Colorado

**Witnesses to Political Violence in Guatemala: The Suppression of a Rural Development Movement.** By Shelton H. Davis and Julie Hodson. Boston: Impact Audit Report No. 2. Oxfam America, 1982. 54 pp. \$5.00 MS. Format

Many books, articles and reports have appeared in several languages during the past five years on the recent history and present situation in Guatemala. In the English language alone the list is lengthy. One of the first that called attention to the critical social and economic situation producing extreme government violence was Roger Plant's *Guatemala: Unnatural Disaster* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1978), unfortunately now out of print. During 1982 two extensively documented books appeared: Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit* (Doubleday), and Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala* (University of Texas). Using U.S. government documents acquired under Freedom of Information legislation, both books provide evidence and analysis of the 1954 CIA-organized coup against the only democratically elected government in Guatemala's history and the installation of a series of military regimes.

Reports appeared on human rights violations in Guatemala from Amnesty International, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and Americas Watch, among others, in 1982. The North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) published *Guatemala* in 1974 and two issues of the *NACLA Report on the*

*Americas* on Guatemala in early 1983 (17:1 January-February and 17:2 March-April), edited by George Black, with Milton Jamail and Norma Stolt Chinchilla. *Indigenous World/El Mundo Indígena* reprinted documents from the opposition organizations concerning Indian participation, as well as interviews and life histories of Indian activists. In December 1982 at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, two special sessions were held on Indians in the Guatemalan Revolution and a task force on Guatemala was established by the Association. The sessions were organized by the Guatemala Scholar's Network, a rare entity of activist scholars of which the author of this review is a member, as well as Shelton Davis, the co-author of the Oxfam Report under review.

Readers interested in Indian affairs and Indian readers may be somewhat dismayed with much of the literature coming out on Guatemala, particularly prior to 1982, in that often Indians are hardly mentioned, though they make up 55 to 85 percent (the low and high estimates that circulate) of the total Guatemalan population and nearly 100 percent of the western highlands population of Guatemala. These are the descendents of the illustrious and famed Mayan nation, the second largest bloc of Indian population in the Americas, the first being the Andean nations of the Quechua and Aymara. For readers looking to clarify the situation and role of Indians in Guatemala today and their involvement in the revolutionary movement, *Witnesses to Political Violence* is the best source of information. For reliability of facts and objective analysis, this report is also beyond fault.

The methodology used in compiling the report is the key to its success. Given the indisputable, high level of violence that prevails in Guatemala, particularly in the Indian-populated rural regions, it has been practically impossible to document its results, other than by body counts so high they cannot be comprehended by the human mind nor interpreted in a meaningful way. Oxfam America is a part of the London-based world-wide Oxfam network, a humanitarian international organization which provides both emergency aid and longer-term community development programs, mainly in the Third World. It devised an ingenious methodology for going beyond the sterile statistics of deaths, though such statistics are included in chronological order in an appendix.

In January 1982 Oxfam began a questionnaire survey of North

American development, relief, religious and research organizations that had programs in rural areas in Guatemala. "The purpose of the survey was to find out what had happened to the rural development movement in Indian areas of Guatemala and how the political violence was affecting Indian agriculture, religion, family and community life." (p. 1) A list of 250 individuals and organizations was compiled with the goal of obtaining a composite picture of what is taking place in Guatemala. 115 of the 250 responded. Those responding had spent an average of five years in Guatemala, their organizations an average of sixteen, and 89 percent had worked with Indians or mixed Indian and Ladino populations, mostly in the western and central highlands.

Chapter One of the report describes the methodology in some detail and provides a model of research in itself. The second chapter is made up of personal accounts by three North American development workers, three missionaries and a researcher—a composite picture of daily terror. Chapter Three provides an analysis of the respondents' views of the causes of the violence, noting that the majority confirm Amnesty's conclusion that political violence is being carried out by the Guatemalan Army and related paramilitary groups. They note that the particular targets of violence are the leaders of the rural cooperatives. Chapter Four provides analysis of the tragic consequences of government violence on Indian life: destruction of all aspects of the rural communities, including food production, commerce, health care, education, family relations and religion. Some one million Indians have been made refugees from their home villages and as many as 100,000 have fled across the border to Mexico, many making their way to the United States, in particular to Los Angeles. The death rate of Indians at the hands of the military is 1000 each month. Chapter Five describes the relationship of Indian people to the army and to the revolutionary movement and concludes that Indians are massively involved at every level of participation in the revolutionary ("guerrilla") movement.

The final chapter, "U.S. Policy and the Future of Guatemala," is a fine summary and conclusion. Three major conclusions are reached. First, the Guatemala military is more interested in wiping out the rural development movement that emerged in the highlands in recent years than in quelling guerrilla insurgency

as such. Second, government violence has brought social and economic chaos and is destroying the centuries-old fabric of Indian life. Third, Indians have joined the revolutionary movement, not out of physical or ideological coercion, but as a means of survival and community self-defense. The authors state unequivocally, in conclusion:

From the persons surveyed in this study, there is no indication that the guerrillas terrorize and massacre civilian populations as is frequently claimed by the Guatemalan government and reported in the press.

Opposition to U.S. military aid was unanimous among the respondents. The Carter administration in 1977 cut off military assistance to the government of Guatemala based on its human rights violations. However, the Reagan Administration has continuously pushed to reinstate aid and some documentation exists to show that the heavy military equipment and training being provided to Guatemala by Israel and Taiwan is coming indirectly from the United States. The United States is providing "development" assistance at the level of tens of millions of dollars each year and has pushed the World Bank to also provide such aid, much of which is being used militarily.

Several informative appendices are included in the report: Appendix 1 analyzes the respondents and the questionnaire; Appendix 2 is a statistical profile of rural poverty in Guatemala; Appendix 3 gives a chronology of political violence from 1976 through 1982; and Appendix 4 analyzes the impact of violence on U.S. aid programs in Guatemala.

The majority of the Guatemalan military actually carrying out the campaigns of terror are young Guatemalan Indian conscripts. Respondents provide detailed descriptions of how the military simply steals young boys on the road or in their villages (pp. 30-33). "Boys, particularly Indians and poor Ladinos, are just picked up and taken to a temporary base, examined and then conscripted . . . if the individual protests, he is beaten into submission," states one respondent. The young Indians are then trained in search and destroy techniques and are often used against their own families and villagers, required to torture victims and murder children, even babies.

Also, the majority of the liberation fighters in the four political-military organizations attempting to overthrow the Guatemalan

military regime are Indians, as are political leaders and commanders. The most recent argument of the Guatemalan regime has been to assert that "inter-tribal warfare" is occurring and the military is simply trying to bring peace and that "urban guerrillas" have "stirred up" the Indians. These, of course, are familiar arguments to North American Indians and hold little weight with anyone who has gained elementary knowledge of the present Guatemalan reality.

The Oxfam Report on Guatemala provides the base of information needed to make intelligent judgments about what is going on in Guatemala, particularly the role of the Indian people who are fighting against genocide for their very survival and for their liberation. The report is highly recommended for scholars, students and all readers.

Though the Report appears in bookstores, it is often out of stock due to its popularity. It may be ordered directly from Oxfam America at 115 Broadway, Boston 02116. It is the second in a series of Impact Audit reports, the other two being *El Salvador Land Reform, 1980-81* and *Haitian and Salvadoran Refugees v U.S. Immigration Policies*, each priced \$5.00, both of which are extremely important for understanding the processes of change in the Caribbean region and the deteriorating policies of the United States government in the region. Who is benefiting other than a few wealthy families is not clear; who is suffering is clear: Indians, Blacks and Mestizos who are living in poorer conditions than even the poorest of us in the United States can imagine.

The major effect of the impact report on Guatemala for the reader may well be to question what is our responsibility and what ultimate liberation of millions of Indians in Central America will mean. Perhaps this is the question the Reagan Administration really has in mind, rather than fear of "communism" on the doorstep.

Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz  
California State University, Hayward

**Longarm and the Snake Dancers.** By Tabor Evans. New York: Jove Publications, Inc., 1983. 185 pp. \$2.25 Paper.

"Longarm," the nickname of a U.S. marshal, derives from the term "the long arm of the law." Longarm has ridden through