Rigoberta Menchú, Acceptance Lecture for Nobel Prize, December 10, 1992

(Translation)

Rigoberta Menchú (b. 1959), an indigenous Guatemalan of the K’iche’ Maya ethnic group, received the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her work to promote human rights in Guatemala. In 1982 she became known internationally with the publication of the book My Name Is Rigoberta Menchú and This Is How My Conscience Was Born, which was transcribed from taped interviews and edited by anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos. In that account she describes how she lost both her parents, two brothers, a sister-in-law, and three nieces and nephews to the Guatemalan security forces. Despite the fact that some scholars and journalists have questioned some details in her life story, they have admitted that the larger narrative that she portrays about the brutality against the indigenous and peasant populations by the military and right-wing forces is accurate. Rigoberta Menchú has become a symbol of the struggle of indigenous people throughout Latin America to regain their land, culture, and autonomy.

Your Majesties, the King and Queen of Norway,

The Honorable Members of the Nobel Peace Committee,

Your Excellency, the Prime Minister,

Your Excellencies, Members of the Government and the Diplomatic Corps,

Dear Guatemalan countrymen and women,

Ladies and Gentlemen,
I feel a deep emotion and pride for the honor of having been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 1992. A deep personal feeling and pride for my country and its very ancient culture. For the values of the community and the people to which I belong, for the love of my country, of Mother Nature. Whoever understands this respects life and encourages the struggle that aims at such objectives.

I consider this Prize, not as a reward to me personally, but rather as one of the greatest conquests in the struggle for peace, for Human Rights and for the rights of the indigenous people, who, for 500 years, have been split, fragmented, as well as the victims of genocides, repression and discrimination.

Please allow me to convey to you all, what this Prize means to me.

In my opinion, the Nobel Peace Prize calls upon us to act in accordance with what it represents, and the great significance it has worldwide. In addition to being a priceless treasure, it is an instrument with which to fight for peace, for justice, for the rights of those who suffer the abysmal economical, social, cultural and political inequalities, typical of the order of the world in which we live, and where the transformation into a new world based on the values of the human being, is the expectation of the majority of those who live on this planet.

This Nobel Prize represents a standard bearer that encourages us to continue denouncing the violation of Human Rights, committed against the people in Guatemala, in America and in the world, and to perform a positive role in respect of the pressing task in my country, which is to achieve peace with social justice.

The Nobel Prize is a symbol of peace, and of the efforts to build up a real democracy. It will stimulate the civil sectors so that through a solid national unity, these may contribute to the process of negotiations that seek peace, reflecting the general feeling—although at times not
possible to express because of fear—of Guatemalan society: to establish political and legal
grounds that will give irreversible impulses to a solution to what initiated the internal armed
conflict.

There is no doubt whatsoever that it constitutes a sign of hope in the struggle of the
indigenous people in the entire continent.

It is also a tribute to the Central American people who are still searching for their
stability, for the structuring of their future, and the path for their development and integration,
based on civil democracy and mutual respect.

The importance of this Nobel Prize has been demonstrated by all the congratulations
received from everywhere, from heads of government—practically all the American presidents
—to the organizations of the indigenous people and of human rights, from all over the world. In
fact, what they see in this Nobel Peace Prize is not only a reward and a recognition of a single
person, but a starting point for the hard struggle towards the achievement of that revindication
which is yet to be fulfilled.

As a contrast, and paradoxically, it was actually in my own country where I met, on the
part of some people, the strongest objections, reserve and indifference, for the award of the
Nobel Peace Prize to this Quiché Indian. Perhaps because in Latin America, it is precisely in
Guatemala where the discrimination towards the indigenous, towards women, and the repression
of the longing for justice and peace, are more deeply rooted in certain social and political sectors.
Under present circumstances, in this disordered and complex world, the decision of the
Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize Committee to award this honorable distinction to me, reflects the
awareness of the fact that, in this way, courage and strength is given to the struggle of peace,
reconciliation and justice; to the struggle against racism, cultural discrimination, and hence contributes to the achievement of harmonious co-existence between our people.

With deep pain, on one side, but with satisfaction on the other, I have to inform you that the Nobel Peace Prize 1992 will have to remain temporarily in Mexico City, in watchful waiting for peace in Guatemala. Because there are no political conditions in my country that would indicate or make me foresee a prompt and just solution. The satisfaction and gratitude are due to the fact that Mexico, our brother neighbor country, that has been so dedicated and interested, that has made such great efforts in respect of the negotiations that are being conducted to achieve peace, that has received and admitted so many refugees and exiled Guatemalans, has given us a place in the Museo del Templo Mayor (the cradle of the ancient Aztecs) so that the Nobel Prize may remain there, until peaceful and safe conditions are established in Guatemala to place it here, in the land of the Quetzal.

When evaluating the overall significance of the award of the Peace Prize, I would like to say some words on behalf of all those whose voice cannot be heard or who have been repressed for having spoken their opinions, of all those who have been marginalized, who have been discriminated, who live in poverty, in need, of all those who are the victims of repression and violation of human rights. Those who, nevertheless, have endured through centuries, who have not lost their conscience, determination, and hope.

Please allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to say some words about my country and the civilization of the Mayas. The Maya people developed and spread geographically through some 300,000 square km; they occupied parts of the south of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, as well as Honduras and El Salvador; they developed a very rich civilization in the area of political organization, as well as in social and economic fields; they were great scientists in the fields of
mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, architecture and engineering; they were great artists in the
fields of sculpture, painting, weaving and carving.

The Mayas discovered the zero value in mathematics, at about the same time that it was
discovered in India and later passed on to the Arabs. Their astronomic forecasts based on
mathematical calculations and scientific observations were amazing, and still are. They prepared
a calendar more accurate than the Gregorian, and in the field of medicine they performed
intracranial surgical operations.

One of the Maya books, which escaped destruction by the conquistadores, known as The
Codex of Dresden, contains the results of an investigation on eclipses as well a table of 69 dates,
in which solar eclipse occur in a lapse of 33 years.

Today, it is important to emphasize the deep respect that the Maya civilization had
towards life and nature in general.

Who can predict what other great scientific conquests and developments these people
could have achieved, if they had not been conquered by blood and fire, and subjected to an
ethnocide that affected nearly 50 million people in the course of 500 years.

I would describe the meaning of this Nobel Peace Prize, in the first place as a tribute to
the Indian people who have been sacrificed and have disappeared because they aimed at a more
dignified and just life with fraternity and understanding among human beings. To those who are
no longer alive to keep up the hope for a change in the situation in respect of poverty and
marginalization of the Indians, of those who have been banished, of the helpless in Guatemala as
well as in the entire American continent.

This growing concern is comforting, even though it comes 500 years later, to the
suffering, the discrimination, the oppression and the exploitation that our peoples have been
exposed to, but who, thanks to their own cosmovision—and concept of life, have managed to withstand and finally see some promising prospects. How those roots, that were to be eradicated, now begin to grow with strength, hope and visions of the future!

It also represents a sign of the growing international interest for, and understanding of the original rights of the people, of the future of more than 60 million Indians that live in our Americas, and their outcry because of the 500 years of oppression that they have endured. For the genocide beyond comparison that they have had to suffer throughout this epoch, and from which other countries and the elite of the Americas have profited and taken advantage. Let there be freedom for the Indians, wherever they may be in the American continent or elsewhere in the world, because while they are alive, a glow of hope will be alive as well as a true concept of life.

The expressions of great happiness by the Indian organizations in the entire continent and the worldwide congratulations received for the award of the Nobel Peace Prize, clearly indicate the great importance of this decision. It is the recognition of the European debt to the American indigenous people; it is an appeal to the conscience of Humanity so that those conditions of marginalization that condemned them to colonialism and exploitation may be eradicated; it is a cry for life, peace, justice, equality and fraternity between human beings.

The peculiarities of the vision of the Indian people are expressed according to the way in which they are related to each other. First, between human beings, through communication. Second, with the earth, as with our mother, because she gives us our lives and is not mere merchandise. Third, with nature, because we are an integral part of it, and not its owners.

To us Mother Earth is not only a source of economic riches that give us the maize, which is our life, but she also provides so many other things that the privileged ones of today strive for.
The Earth is the root and the source of our culture. She keeps our memories, she receives our ancestors and she, therefore, demands that we honor her and return to her, with tenderness and respect, those goods that she gives us. We have to take care of her so that our children and grandchildren may continue to benefit from her. If the world does not learn now to show respect to nature, what kind of future will the new generations have?

From these basic features derive behavior, rights and obligations in the American continent, for the indigenous people as well as for the non-indigenous, whether they be racially mixed, blacks, whites or Asian. The whole society has an obligation to show mutual respect, to learn from each other and to share material and scientific achievements, in the most convenient way. The indigenous peoples never had, and still do not have, the place that they should have occupied in the progress and benefits of science and technology, although they represented an important basis for this development.

If the indigenous civilization and the European civilizations could have made exchanges in a peaceful and harmonious manner, without destruction, exploitation, discrimination and poverty, they could, no doubt, have achieved greater and more valuable conquests for Humanity.

Let us not forget that when the Europeans came to America, there were flourishing and strong civilizations there. One cannot talk about a “discovery of America,” because one discovers that which one does not known about, or that which is hidden. But America and its native civilizations had discovered themselves long before the fall of the Roman Empire and Medieval Europe. The significance of its cultures forms part of the heritage of humanity and continues to astonish the learned.

I think it is necessary that the indigenous peoples, of which I am a member, should contribute their science and knowledge to human development, because we have enormous
potential and we could combine our very ancient heritage with the achievements of European civilization as well as with civilizations in other parts of the world.

But this contribution, that to our understanding is a recovery of the natural and cultural heritage, must take place based on a rational and consensual basis in respect of the right to make use of knowledge and natural resources, with guarantees for equality between government and society.

We the indigenous are willing to combine tradition with modernism, but not at any cost. We will not tolerate or permit that our future be planned as possible guardians of ethno-touristic projects on a continental level.

At a time when the commemoration of the Fifth Centenary of the arrival of Columbus in America has repercussions all over the world, the revival of hope for the oppressed indigenous peoples demands that we reassert our existence to the world and the value of our cultural identity. It demands that we endeavor to actively participate in the decisions that concern our destiny, in the building-up of our countries/nations. Should we, in spite of all, not be taken into consideration, there are factors that guarantee our future: struggle and endurance; courage; the decision to maintain our traditions that have been exposed to so many perils and sufferings; solidarity towards our struggle on the part of numerous countries, governments, organizations and citizens of the world.

That is why I dream of the day when the relationship between the indigenous peoples and other peoples is strengthened; when they can combine their potentialities and their capabilities and contribute to make life on this planet less unequal, a better distribution of the scientific and cultural treasures accumulated by Humanity, flourishing in peace and justice.
Today, in the 47th period of sessions of the General Assembly, the United Nations (UN) will proclaim 1993 as the *International Year of the World's Indigenous People*, in the presence of well-known chiefs of the organizations of the Indian people and of the coordination of the Continental Movement of Indigenous, Blacks and Popular Resistance. They will all formally participate in the opening of the working sessions in order to make 1993 a year of specific actions to truly place the indigenous peoples within their national contexts and to make them part of mutual international agreements.

The achievement of the *International Year of the World's Indigenous People* and the progress represented by the preparation of the project for the *Universal Declaration*, are the result of the participation of numerous Indian brothers, nongovernmental organizations and the successful efforts of the experts in the Working Group, in addition to the comprehensiveness shown by many countries in the United Nations.

We hope that the formulation of the project in respect of the Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous People will examine and go deeply into the existing difficulty reality that we, the Indo-Americans, experience.

Our people will have a year dedicated to the problems that afflict them and, in this respect, are now getting ready to carry out different activities with the purpose of presenting proposals and putting pressure on action plans. All this will be conducted in the most reasonable way and with the most convincing and justified arguments for the elimination of racism, oppression, discrimination and the exploitation of those who have been dragged into poverty and oblivion. Also for “the condemned of the earth,” the award of the Nobel Peace Prize represents a recognition, an encouragement and an objective for the future.
I wish that a conscious sense of peace and a feeling of human solidarity would develop in all peoples, which would open new relationships of respect and equality for the next millennium, to be ruled by fraternity and not by cruel conflicts.

Opinion is being formed everywhere today, that in spite of wars and violence, calls upon the entire human race to protect its historical values and to form unity in diversity. And this calls upon us all to reflect upon the incorporation of important elements of change and transformation in all aspects of life on earth, in the search for specific and definite solutions to the deep ethical crisis that afflicts Humanity. This will, no doubt have decisive influence on the structure of the future.

There is a possibility that some centers of political and economic power, some statesmen and intellectuals, have not yet managed to see the advantages of the active participation of the indigenous peoples in all the fields of human activity. However, the movement initiated by different political and intellectual "Amerindians" will finally convince them that, from an objective point of view, we are a constituent part of the historical alternatives that are being discussed at the international level.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to say some candid words about my country. The attention that this Nobel Peace Prize has focused on Guatemala, should imply that the violation of the human rights is no longer ignored internationally. It will also honor all those who died in the struggle for social equality and justice in my country.

It is known throughout the world that the Guatemalan people, as a result of their struggle, succeeded in achieving, in October 1944, a period of democracy where institutionality and human rights were the main philosophies. At that time, Guatemala was an exception in the American continent, because of its struggle for complete national sovereignty. However, in 1954,
a conspiracy that associated the traditional national power centers, inheritors of colonialism, with powerful foreign interests, overthrew the democratic regime as a result of an armed invasion, thereby re-imposing the old system of oppression which has characterized the history of my country.

The economic, social and political subjection that derived from the Cold War, was what initiated the internal armed conflict. The repression against the organizations of the people, the democratic parties and the intellectuals, started in Guatemala long before the war started. Let us not forget that.

In the attempt to crush rebellion, dictatorships have committed the greatest atrocities. They have leveled villages, and murdered thousands of peasants particularly Indians, hundreds of trade union workers and students, outstanding intellectuals and politicians, priests and nuns. Through this systematic persecution in the name of the safety of the nation, one million peasants were removed by force from their lands; 100,000 had to seek refuge in the neighboring countries. In Guatemala, there are today almost 100,000 orphans and more than 40,000 widows. The practice of "disappeared" politicians was invented in Guatemala, as a government policy.

As you know, I am myself a survivor of a massacred family.

The country collapsed into a crisis never seen before and the changes in the world forced and encouraged the military forces to permit a political opening that consisted in the preparation of a new constitution, in an expansion of the political field, and in the transfer of the government to civil sectors. We have had this new regime for eight years and in certain fields there have been some openings of importance.

However, in spite of these openings, repression and violation of human rights persists in the middle of an economic crisis, that is becoming more and more acute, to the extent that 84%
of the population is today considered as poor, and some 60% are considered as very poor. Impunity and terror continue to prevent people from freely expressing their needs and vital demands. The internal armed conflict still exists.

The political life in my country has lately centered around the search for a political solution to the global crisis and the armed conflict that has existed in Guatemala since 1962. This process was initiated by the Agreement signed in this City of Oslo, between the Comisión Nacional de Reconciliación with government mandate, and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) as a necessary step to introduce to Guatemala the spirit of the Agreement of Esquipulas.

As a result of this Agreement and conversations between the URNG and different sectors of Guatemalan society, direct negotiations were initiated under the government of President Serrano, between the government and the guerrillas, as a result of which three agreements have already been signed. However, the subject of human rights has taken a long time, because this subject constitutes the core of the Guatemalan problems, and around this core important differences have arisen. Nevertheless, there has been considerable progress.

The process of negotiations aims at reaching agreements in order to establish the basis for a real democracy in Guatemala and for an end to the war. As far as I understand, with the goodwill of the parties concerned and the active participation of the civil sectors, adapting to a great national unity, the phase of purposes and intentions could be left behind so that Guatemala could be pulled out of the crossroads that seem to have become eternal.

Dialogues and political negotiations are, no doubt, adequate means to solve these problems, in order to respond in a specific way to the vital and urgent needs for life and for the implementation of democracy for the Guatemalan people. However, I am convinced that if the
diverse social sectors which integrate Guatemalan society find bases of unity, respecting their
natural differences, they would together find a solution to those problems and therefore resolve
the causes which initiated the war which prevails in Guatemala.

Other civil sectors as well as the international community must demand that the
negotiations between the Government and the URNG surpass the period in which they are
finding themselves in discussing human rights and move ahead as soon as possible to a verifiable
agreement with the United Nations. It is necessary to point out, here in Oslo, that the issue of
human rights in Guatemala constitutes, at present, the most urgent problem that has to be solved.
My statement is neither incidental nor unjustified.

As has been ascertained by international institutions, such as The United Nations
Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, and many
other humanitarian organizations, Guatemala is one of the countries in America with the largest
number of violations of these rights, and the largest number of cases of impunity where security
forces are generally involved. It is imperative that the repression and persecution of the people
and the Indians be stopped. The compulsory mobilization and integration of young people into
the Patrols of Civil Self Defense, which principally affects the Indian people, must also be
stopped.

Democracy in Guatemala must be built-up as soon as possible. It is necessary that human
rights agreements be fully complied with, i.e. an end to racism; guaranteed freedom to organize
and to move within all sectors of the country. In short, it is imperative to open all fields to the
multi-ethnic civil society with all its rights, to demilitarize the country and establish the basis for
its development, so that it can be pulled out of today's underdevelopment and poverty.
Among the most bitter dramas that a great percentage of the population has to endure, is the forced exodus. Which means, to be forced by military units and persecution to abandon their villages, their Mother Earth, where their ancestors rest, their environment, the nature that gave them life and the growth of their communities, all of which constituted a coherent system of social organization and functional democracy.

The case of the displaced and of refugees in Guatemala is heartbreaking; some of them are condemned to live in exile in other countries, but the great majority live in exile in their own country. They are forced to wander from place to place, to live in ravines and inhospitable places, some not recognized as Guatemalan citizens, but all of them are condemned to poverty and hunger. There cannot be a true democracy as long as this problem is not satisfactorily solved and these people are reinstated on their lands and in their villages.

In the new Guatemalan society, there must be a fundamental reorganization in the matter of land ownership, to allow for the development of the agricultural potential, as well as for the return of the land to the legitimate owners. This process of reorganization must be carried out with the greatest respect for nature, in order to protect her and return to her, her strength and capability to generate life.

No less characteristic of a democracy is social justice. This demands a solution to the frightening statistics on infant mortality, of malnutrition, lack of education, analphabetism, wages insufficient to sustain life. These problems have a growing and painful impact on the Guatemalan population and imply no prospects and no hope.

Among the features that characterize society today, is that of the role of women, although female emancipation has not, in fact, been fully achieved so far by any country in the world.
The historical development in Guatemala reflects now the need and the irreversibility of the active contribution of women to the configuration of the new Guatemalan social order, of which, I humbly believe, the Indian women already are a clear testimony. This Nobel Peace Prize is a recognition to those who have been, and still are in most parts of the world, the most exploited of the exploited; the most discriminated of the discriminated, the most marginalized of the marginalized, but still those who produce life and riches.

Democracy, development and modernization of a country are impossible and incongruous without the solution of these problems.

In Guatemala, it is just as important to recognize the Identity and the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples, that have been ignored and despised not only during the colonial period, but also during the Republic. It is not possible to conceive a democratic Guatemala, free and independent, without the indigenous identity shaping its character into all aspects of national existence.

It will undoubtedly be something new, a completely new experience, with features that, at the moment, we cannot describe. But it will authentically respond to history and the characteristics of the real Guatemalan nationality. The true profile that has been distorted for such a long time.

This urgency of this vital need, are the issues that urge me, at this moment, from this rostrum, to urge national opinion and the international community, to show a more active interest in Guatemala.

Taking into consideration that in connection with my role as a Nobel Prize winner, in the process of negotiations for peace in Guatemala many possibilities have been handled, but now I think that this role is more likely to be the role of a promoter of peace, of national unity, for the
protection of the rights of the indigenous peoples. In such a way, that I may take initiatives in accordance with the needs, and thereby prevent the Peace Prize from becoming a piece of paper that has been pigeonholed.

I call upon all the social and ethnic sectors that constitute the people of Guatemala to participate actively in the efforts to find a peaceful solution to the armed conflict, to build-up a sound unity between the "ladinos," the blacks and the Indians, all of whom must create within their diverse groups, a "Guatemality."

Along these same lines, I invite the international community to contribute with specific actions so that the parties involved may overcome the differences that at this stage keep negotiations in a wait-and-see state, so that they will succeed, first of all, in signing an agreement on human rights. And then, to re-initiate the rounds of negotiation and identify those issues on which to compromise, to allow for the Peace Agreement to be signed and immediately ratified, because I have no doubt that this will bring about great relief in the prevailing situation in Guatemala.

My opinion is also that the UN should have a more direct participation, which would go further than playing the role of observer, and could help substantially to move the process ahead.

Ladies and gentlemen, the fact that I have given preference to the American continent, and in particular to my country, does not mean that I do not have an important place in my mind and in my heart for the concern of other peoples of the world and their constant struggle in the defense of peace, of the right to a life and all its inalienable rights. The majority of us who are gathered here today, constitute an example of the above, and along these lines I would humbly extend to you my gratitude.
Many things have changed in these last years. There have been great changes of worldwide character. The East-West confrontation has ceased to exist and the Cold War has come to an end. These changes, the exact forms of which cannot yet be predicted, have left gaps that the people of the world have known how to make use of in order to come forward, struggle and win national terrain and international recognition.

Today, we must fight for a better world, without poverty, without racism, with peace in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia, to where I address a plea for the liberation of Mrs. Aung San Sun Kyi, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize 1991; for a just and peaceful solution in the Balkans; for the end of the apartheid in South Africa; for the stability in Nicaragua, that the Peace Agreement in El Salvador be observed; for the re-establishment of democracy in Haiti; for the complete sovereignty of Panama; because all of these constitute the highest aims for justice in the international situation.

A world at peace that could provide consistency, interrelations and concordance in respect of the economic, social and cultural structures of the societies would indeed have deep roots and a robust influence.

We have in our mind the deepest felt demands of the entire human race, when we strive for peaceful co-existence and the preservation of the environment. The struggle we fight purifies and shapes the future.

Our history is a living history, that has throbbed, withstood and survived many centuries of sacrifice. Now it comes forward again with strength. The seeds, dormant for such a long time, break out today with some uncertainty, although they germinate in a world that is at present characterized by confusion and uncertainty.
There is no doubt that this process will be long and complex, but it is no Utopia and we, the Indians, we have new confidence in its implementation.

The peoples of Guatemala will mobilize and will be aware of their strength in building up a worthy future. They are preparing themselves to sow the future, to free themselves from atavisms, to rediscover their heritage. To build a country with a genuine national identity. To start a new life.

By combining all the shades and nuances of the "ladinos, " the "garífunas" and Indians in the Guatemalan ethnic mosaic, we must interlace a number of colors without introducing contradictions, without becoming grotesque nor antagonistic, but we must give them brightness and a superior quality, just the way our weavers weave a typical huipil blouse, brilliantly composed, a gift to Humanity.

Thank you very much.

Suggestions for Further Reading


