

The Sulphurs of Santiaguito

Reflections on the Guatemalan Civil War

Michael Schmidt

2003

Smoky cloud rolled down from shrouded crown of the volcano Santiaguito, chilling my skin, as yellow-rimmed fissures hissed stinking sulphur across the rutted track. Far below, on the slopes, Mayan peasants in fuchsia blouses, looking for all the world like giant frangipanis, hacked at the mud with hoes. A dented pick-up truck had just dropped myself and my companion high up in the mountains of Guatemala.

An ethereal peace seeped through the scene — Santiaguito was dormant after all, its last bout of bad behaviour having been the 1902 leveling of the nearby mountain city of Quezaltenango — but as so much with this troubled land, all was not as it seemed.

It was early 1996, at the bitter end of a drawn-out 36-year civil war, the longest in Latin America's gore-spattered history, and somewhere someone was always dying. The newspapers were full of luridly illustrated ways to die — none of them related to the war. Some guy had been decapitated and there sat his head, life-size and on the front page, with bits of grass stuck in his hair and his eyelids glued shut by a sash of dried blood. Or two lovers who had committed suicide by means of a shotgun. A full-colour photograph showed the ruins of their skulls collapsed together, their brains splattering the wall behind. A passenger jet had just gone down off Cuba and the TV footage showed sailors wielding boat-hooks, gaffing the bloated corpses like tuna and dumping them on the deck of a trawler. The fact that two of them were Polish MPs be damned.

It was easy to die in Guatemala in those days — but just as easy to live as if you weren't in the right place at the wrong time. And so I floated like Neptune in a huge square stone-lined pool, topped up by a piping hot spring gushing from the black breast of the volcano, fringed with ferns, at Fuentes Georginas, a rare gem set in the rainforest.

Stone lips drooled cooling jets of water down into lower pools where flagged pathways wound around tree-ferns into the forest. Whenever I tired of the heat in my bones, I could slither up a rock like a iguana and steam into the cool air while sipping a Cuba Libre: rum & coke.

I could have overnighted in one of the whitewashed, tile-roofed cabins clinging to the volcano-side. But instead we returned that evening to the *hospedaje* where we stayed, down a side street in Quezaltenango, built inward-facing around those cool courtyards that Central Americans favour — perhaps in reflection of their own aversion to the grim reality outside.

When we arrived, my companion's German boyfriend told us that his hike into the same mountains that day to visit another, more indigenous and promisingly colourful Mayan settlement had met with disaster.

"We got there and the whole village was just smoking ruins," he said, aghast. "There were all these soldiers walking around and we kinda nervously asked them what happened. They told us 'There was a sickness here — so we burnt it out'."

The notoriously vicious Guatemalan army — nicknamed the "spotted ones" because of their camouflage — had in the 1980s adopted the practice of targeting Mayan communities suspected of supporting the guerrilla insurgency. On occasion, they had been known to round everyone up, women and children included, corral them in the church, throw in a few grenades and burn the entire town to the ground. In this twisted scorched earth policy, every goat, dog and chicken was slaughtered. In that decade alone, some 200,000 people were killed and 400 Mayan villages obliterated. In February 1996, this war-by-proxy, fought against innocents, was still on.

I'd recently discovered that my paternal great-great-grandmother was Mayan and had been married to the Belgian consul to Guatemala. Which was why I had decided to venture into the war-zone — and partly why this tale of butchery hit a raw nerve. I'd naively expected my trip to be an emotional journey of reconnection. But the bonds I found that still bind me to Guatemala were not the kind familial ones I had expected. Rather they were like the vicious twist of barbed wire that binds the wrists of the condemned.

In one of those rooms with five rows of plastic seats and a video machine that passed as movie theatres throughout much of Guatemala, I saw a movie called *La Hija del Puma* (The Sister of the Puma). It dramatised just such a massacre and was being clandestinely circulated by architecture students from the university in Guatemala City.

Barely a month previously, under a weeping sky, I had picked my way through a thorn thicket on a muddy hillside in Shobashobane, KwaZulu-Natal to find the maggoty body of a man hacked to death on Christmas Day for the crime of living in an ANC village surrounded by IFP villages. There was another woman, face-down, the back of her scalp already chewed off by mangy dogs. And Kipha Nyawose, the ANC leader, had had the dubious honour of being disembowelled (to release the spirit) while at the same time having his penis cut off in insult. The stench of their corpses still permeated my sinuses and I left the movie theatre in tears, choking out to the fifty-something American hippie: "I've just come from there! I know what they mean." Her glazed incomprehension infuriated me and I stormed out.

But back in Quezaltenango, I walked the other side of the invisible line that tourists cross in war-zones, purchasing Mayan carpets woven in lustrous burgundy and oxblood, eating American-style pizzas and watching a Spanish-dubbed Sigorney Weaver go shit-kicking in *Aliens: el Regresso* at the local bug-house.

Known by the Mayans as Xela, the city is a big centre for Spanish-language studies and the bars, cafes and restaurants were crowded with students, mostly Americans, apparently oblivious to the fact that their government had largely funded the genocide.

The conflict had also drawn certain species of war whores: scruffy journalists trying to look like James Woods in Salvador; funereal strong-men of indeterminate criminal affiliation in black chinos and shiny waistcoats, probably concealing switchblades; weary aid workers trying to work in besieged Mayan towns; lazy UN observers of a ceasefire which had not yet happened; chatty Catholic priests on sabbatical; edgy CIA agents who never spoke at all; and fat pederasts with a nose for the cocaine trail.

War tourism leaves a taste in my mouth as metallic as old blood. None but the most mercenary can seriously indulge in such tastes. But having myself travelled to Guatemala from a tour of Zapatista-held Chiapas (on a spine-hammering 300km bus trip that cost only six quetzales), perhaps I wasn't so innocent either.

Wierd conversations were not in short supply. Like trying to explain to an earnest young girl from a progressive Dutch Reformed university in the American Midwest that in South Africa, her "Dutch Deformed" faith lay at the root of the calvary of apartheid. So, how does one live as a foreigner in the midst of such unrelenting, yet undeclared pain?

I distracted myself by paying a visit to one of the marimba schools for which the city was famous. And I went to the creepy and dusty "natural" history museum which seemed to boast more than its fair share of freaks: six-legged goats and such.

In the earthquake-wrecked old capital of Antigua Guatemala, another bus journey eastwards down the spine of the mountains, I watched a Japanese tourist and a Mayan flute-seller perform an impromptu flautist's duel in the main square. There was a chill in the air and the shadows were lengthening from the ruined cornices of Conquistador-era churches, but the square was full of off-duty civil servants, Mayans — like a mother and her tiny girl-child dressed in matching cobalt traditional wraps — who sold crafts to coach-loads of day-trippers up from Guatemala City. The lanky Japanese youth selected a pan pipe from those on offer and began to play. The Mayan joined in with gusto, the two sounding for all the world like a Panic version of that song about the contest between the devil and the fiddler. The jaunty notes drifted over the gloomy square, providing an otherworldly sound-track to the shadowed landscape.

While I ate a hearty breakfast of chili con carne in a cozy family-run restaurant, looking out through the wrought-iron railings and bougainvillea at the cobbled streets, a milkman allegedly tried to assassinate new President Alvaro Arzu by ramming him with a truck while he was out horse-riding. The milkman may have only been drunk, but was shot dead anyway.

Just before I arrived, two British girls had been executed at a roadside. Neither robbed nor raped. Just shot in the head and left for the political vultures to swap blame for the atrocity.

This was after all the country where their version of Archbishop Tutu was later bludgeoned to death with concrete blocks in his own driveway. But as this maelstrom happened around me, I was sitting at the Sunset Bar on the beach at Panajachel, a tiny town, several hours by bus to the south-south-east of Xela, a Guatemalan version of Goa that was nick-named Gringotenango because of its population of faded gringo drop-outs.

Built on a spit of alluvial land stretching into Lake Atitlan, a cold and very deep volcanic caldera which sported millionaires' mansions on one shore and the palm-frond huts of dugout-paddling fishermen on the other.

The blonde barmaid turned out to be a cousin of Icelandic elven siren Björk and played me some of the latter's rare and unreleased blues cuts, then, knowing I was African treated me to Juluka's Scatterlings of Africa. As I nursed my cold Gallo beer alone with her at the bar, I reflected that I was in some ways also a scatterling of Central America, even though trawling through phone-books had failed to turn up any trace of my diluted bloodline. But I had found another blood-tie: that which unites nations which have suffered under the shadow of death-squads; that which unites those who have walked through the slaughterhouses of their handiwork. Now, in 2003, I've just read that General Rios Montt, the CIA-backed "Pinochet of Guatemala", whose regime spearheaded the genocide in the 1980s, has just had his legal restriction on making a play for the Guatemalan presidency revoked.

An earthquake takes place in my heart and the stench of death is in my nostrils once again. Suddenly I'm back on the sulphurous slopes of Santiaguito, knowing this time that unheard and unseen, beyond the mists, people are dying.

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Michael Schmidt travelled to Chiapas for the San Andres peace accords with the Zapatistas in early 1996 as a delegate for the now-defunct Durban Anarchist Federation, then headed south to witness the closing phases of the Guatemalan Civil War. Here are his recollections of Guatemala, written in 2003.

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