

Book Release - The Rio Negro Massacres by Jesus Tecu Osorio

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"The Rio Negro Massacres", by Jesus Tecu Osorio: A massacre survivor and eye-witness's account of the Rio Negro massacres in Guatemala. The Rio Negro Massacres includes reproductions of extraordinary original drawings done by the author, depicting various memories and events of the repression of the past.

Rights Action is proud to announce that "The Rio Negro Massacres" is now on sale from our offices in Washington DC & Toronto.

BELOW, you will find:

- BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: about author
- BOOK REVIEW: "The Rio Negro Massacres", by Marguerite Pigeon
- PRICE & ORDERING COPIES
- SPEAKING TOUR: Massacre survivor and author Jesus Tecu Osorio is on a speaking tour in the north-east USA and the Toronto-Montreal-Ottawa region of Ontario and Quebec.

Please re-distribute this information far and wide.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Jesus Tecu Osorio is a Mayan-Achi man living with wife and children in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. He is a survivor of, and eye-witness to the March 13, 1982, massacre of 177 women and children in the village of Rio Negro. This and 4 other Rio Negro massacres were committed by the Guatemalan Army and paramilitaries, all backed by USA, in part because Rio Negro villagers opposed forced resettlement to make way for Chixoy Dam Hydro-Electric Project, funded by World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. Jesus lost his parents and all but one sibling to the massacres. Since 1993, Jesus has worked unendingly to seek justice for the crimes and genocide of the past, and to heal and re-build his torn region of Guatemala.

Jesus is:

- Co-founder of ADIVIMA, a local human rights group at forefront of exhuming mass graves, building monuments to commemorate the lives of the victims of the genocide.
- Co-founder of Rabinal Legal Clinic, offering legal support to Achi population that has never received legal support.
- Co-founder of Rabinal Community Museum, documenting the genocide in Rabinal and Achi history and culture.
- Founder of the "New Hope Foundation/March 13" providing primary school and scholarships for Achi and impoverished youth, and building a bi-lingual and multi-cultural Middle School.
- Participant in legal case of genocide, in Guatemalan courts, against military generals of the early 1980s.
- Leader in struggle for reparations from World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank for damage and death due to Chixoy Dam Project.
- Author of auto-biographical testimony of years of repression, enslavement, survival and protagonism to build a just and fair country.

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THE RIO NEGRO MASSACRES, by Jesus Tecu Osorio
-- A book review, by Marguerite Pigeon

It is strange, sometimes, to stop and wonder at the miracle of words on a page. How the very squiggles making up something as simple as this sentence can come together, form meanings, and take us through time, space, and the realm of ideas.

Jesus Tecu Osorio did not learn to read and write as a child, and printed words, like many gifts, long evaded him. Perhaps this is why his first book, *The Rio Negro Massacres*, manages to renew one's faith in the miracle of words. Told in a style and voice that is true to his experience—one both chaotic and hopeful—it is a testament to a man's journey from racism, poverty, repression and obscurity towards justice.

The book recounts a series of brutal massacres that took place among Jesus's people, the indigenous Maya Achi, of Guatemala, in the early 1980's. As an eye witness and survivor of those murders, which claimed the lives of over 440 of his community members, Jesus takes pains to name names throughout, often including long lists of both victims and perpetrators. In fact, the entire text is thick with details—times of day, recorded bits of conversation Jesus believes were crucial to how events unfolded, even the kinds of food people ate.

By the last page, the reader is left with the impression that Jesus approached the writing of his book much as he did the crucial testimony he gave in several landmark criminal justice cases in Guatemala during the 1990's—with the full weight of his people's legacy hanging on his every word.

And it is only by understanding it in this context can a reader bear the searing pain that accumulates through those details. From the grinding poverty of his childhood, to the conflicted allegiances and often cruel actions of his own people, imposed by those circumstances of racism, exploitation and repression, to pages-long, nauseating descriptions of the mass murders themselves, Jesus does not flinch. As a reader, you have no choice but to bear witness too.

Reading *The Rio Negro Massacres*, it is an uncomfortable journey, but nothing compared to what Jesus himself lived through. A child of nine at the time his family was massacred, Jesus was taken to live for two years as a near-slave to one of the very men who carried out the crime.

Later still, reunited with his one living sister, he labored for years simply to eat, before finally returning to his re-located village where, slowly, along with others, he undertook the reconstruction of his community and the memory of what really happened—a job that continues to put his life in danger to this day.

Yet, reading the book, it is clear that fear has never completely overcome Jesus's hopefulness. For example, recalling the day, in 1998, when, despite extremely plausible death threats, he testified against three men who'd murdered villagers in Rio Negro, Jesus writes: "I began my testimony about the massacres and I told the members of the Court of the cowardliness of the patrollers and the military. There was a moment in which I couldn't bear the pain of the story. I cried bitterly in front of the judges. I felt satisfied after my testimony because I had released everything against the murderer of my little brother."

Some readers may have trouble, at times, interpreting the larger context of the Rio Negro murders based on Jesus's account. The facts of Guatemala's political history —stemming from colonial oppression, down to the overthrow by the U.S. government and C.I.A. of a government attempting vital democratic and land reforms in the 1950's, and up to the 1970's, by which time a regime of military terror (ultimately responsible for killing over 200,000) was in full power thanks to U.S. backing —are not to be found in these pages.

Nor are many details of the disastrous funding and construction, by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, of the Chixoy dam in Jesus' home community of Rio Negro, a mega-project that the bank itself has deemed a failure. This project, done in conjunction with the military regimes of the 1970s and 80s, resulted in the murder of 444 inhabitants of Jesus' village and the forced removal of the survivors, to make way for the Chixoy Dam project.

But these are not Jesus's words, and he leaves those explanations to others whose experience permits them to express them. His words are about what he saw, heard, did, and felt. They are sometimes scattered, like the remains of the people of his village, and the Mayan artifacts that were stolen during the 1980s from their sacred sites.

His words are often simple, like the life his people led for a millennia before the arrival of European invaders, and before the imposition of the "cold war" and the Chixoy Dam "development" project.

Above all, the words in The Rio Negro Massacres are active, strung together in service of an on-going battle to bring to light one of the 20th century's darkest and most shameful periods.

Considering the odds, in my opinion, that makes them nothing short of miraculous.

*** Marguerite Pigeon is a Canadian writer and activist, who has worked in the past with Rights Action in Honduras. [grete27@aol.com]

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TO ORDER COPIES OF THE BOOK:

US\$15 per copy, + shipping.
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SPEAKING TOUR

Jesus Tecu Osorio is currently on a speaking tour in the north-east USA and the Toronto-Montreal-Ottawa region of Ontario and Quebec. For more information about that tour, contact Grahame, info@rightsaction.org, 416-654-2074

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