

Unheard Voices: Pipil/Nahuate Nation Past and Present

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by Marina A. Henriquez

I feel the need to write this article because I must give voice to my indigenous ancestors who died for our freedom and land, and our right for self-determination in El Salvador.

On January 17-23, 2007, two Salvadoran American Columbia University students, an undergraduate and a graduate, and I participated in the 75th “*International Forum on Genocide and Truth*” hosted by the José Feliciano Ama Foundation (FAMA). The forum took place in Izalco, and commemorated the January 1932 genocide of indigenous people of El Salvador. My paper was entitled, “A View of Native Peoples from the Salvadoran Diaspora.”



Izalco Volcano



Forum

But first, I would like to explain how I became involved with the sovereignty issue of my own homeland, El Salvador. I must acknowledge and give thanks to our ancestors who are still present in our daily lives, a connection, which remains unbroken, and to my life’s partner, a professor of international and public affairs and then director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race (CSER) at Columbia University. He, when in 2004 a friend and faculty member from New York University asked if CSER would co-sponsor a forum on the indigenous people of El Salvador, readily agreed because he had begun a campaign to introduce native studies into the CSER curriculum in keeping with one of the demands of the 1996 Columbia student strike, which had established the CSER. In addition, he knew of my personal interest in the subject as a Pipil/Nahuate.

My family was very proud that I was invited to that international conference, and they readily shared their historical memories and those of our ancestors about this tragic instance of ethnic cleansing, the removal of indigenous peoples from their lands, the attempt to extinguish our right to speak our native language, Pipil/Nahuate, the determination to erase all our sacred traditions, and ultimately, to deny us a separate identity.

My mother recalled how her parents talked about the mass killings of innocent indigenous people, the campesinos, and she said, nothing was done to stop the genocide. Only the few who swore that they were not communists had a chance to escape the murderous military.

My dad, who was born in 1933, remembered that the militia was everywhere and always tried to intimidate the peasants, and anyone who looked indigenous felt threatened. My dad who is indigenous has gone through hard times. He constantly felt looked down upon as a man of color and as a native in his own country. My father, in an interview conducted by my student, Blanca Martinez, and me, explained how he had few opportunities for getting a well-paying job to maintain his family, and it was unfortunate that he began drinking alcohol at the age of ten and became an alcoholic. So he learned to fix industrial machines used in the sugar-cane refineries, and thus became an engineer by trade. He also fixed cars. His love for machinery was transferred to his sons, José and Dário. One joined the Navy to repair planes, and the other became an aviation mechanic.

As an administrator at Columbia's School of Social Work and a Salvadoran Native American woman, I felt it a great privilege to participate in the conference. Permission from the indigenous community to attend and participate in this sacred indigenous and historical event was absolutely necessary. I felt a deep sense of commitment and responsibility towards my people, the Pipil/Nahuate nation. My Columbia University companions and I learned a great deal from listening to the testimonies of the native elders, academics, activists, and lawyers who contributed to the dialogue on genocide.

The Columbia University students had no idea what to expect. Blanca had gone to El Salvador before in 2005, but had never visited Izalco in the Sonsonate region, rich with Native American history. As for Anthony, it was his first time to connect with his ancestral roots. Below I append his personal reflection regarding this trip.

The forum was held at the sacred grounds where the genocide took place. There on January 19 at 4 A.M. in the morning, “Danza Azteca,” an indigenous dance group from San Francisco, California, blessed the event. The men prepared the life fire that would continue burning until the end of the event. They chanted and danced while the women prepared and ordained the altar with flowers and tribal poles. On the altar was the portrait of the great Cacique, Jose Feliciano Ama, placed on the same tree where he was lynched by the military and Ladinos in front of his people for defending them from the colonizers and European-Spanish rule.



Danza Azteca



Altar of Cacique Juan Feliciano Ama



1932-1995 Genocide Memory Plaque

That first day was devoted an appreciation of the indigenous patrimony of art, culture, spirituality, politics, and technology. The second day, discussion focused on the 1932 indigenous nation, international human rights, and the peace treaty of 1992. The days that followed discussed the establishment of a truth and status commission for the clarification of the “the truth” of the massacre.

All the while at the conference site, there was a display of Izalco images from the late 19th and early 20th century. And a documentary, “*Ama – La Memoria Del Tiempo*,” by Daniel Flores y Ascencio was shown to the public.

From the conference proceedings, we learned that between 10,000 to 30,000 indigenous people were killed by the military because of government-instigated land reforms to prompt changes in their language, religion, dress, and family life. The Pipil/Nahuate lived a communal life, and spoke Pipil. They were great farmers with an advanced system of agriculture. They maintained rituals for harvest and other communal traditions. In Izalco, there were the ladinos, mestizos, and indigenous people who claimed their rights as people of the land. The Ladinos and Mestizos felt threatened by the indigenous peoples when they spoke their own language as a means of survival and as a part of the struggle for the right to keep their lands and culture.

Even today, I could feel the fear and intimidation that was still present in the community. The trauma of the historical genocide continued to sear the minds of the native peoples. Filming and recording of the conference was not allowed because of fear that those in power might retaliate against the organizers and participants. Some who should have been there did not attend because of that same fear. On the second day of the forum, a young indigenous man was killed by a gang; he needed a place to sleep that night and instead he faced his fate. His spirit was recognized at the forum. However, the forum continued and received much support from the U.S. within El Salvador.

As if to underscore the historical trauma, to this very day, the people who were massacred in 1932 have not received a proper burial ceremony.

At the forum, two young Native American men were ordained as the future of the Pipil/Nahuate nation, to continue the Cacique legacy, and I had the honor of meeting the grandniece of Jose Feliciano Ama. She is a school principal, which offers classes in the native tongue, Pipil/Nahuate, but resources are scarce and the government and

educational system are not supportive of or committed to the preservation of the Pipil/Nahuate nation in their own language and history.



Forum Site -Izalco Es El Nucleo Indigena



Pubic School students



Engaging students to learn Nahuate

Here is Anthony's reflection, a Columbia University undergraduate student:

Certain trips to certain people can not be described in words and when the story of that trip is slightly captured by words, then a beautiful revelation occurs--one sees the beauty of nature. A personal trip to one's homeland can only be described by intangible emotions and uncertain experiences. Those emotions and experiences allow for one to discover and reflect on who and what one stands for. In going to Izalco, El Salvador, I entered a world I only heard about from others and never experienced myself. No one can describe what one is going to feel upon arrival, but one attempts to grasp on to something to look forward to. The FAMA conference revealed a country torn by its internal hate of its roots. The indigenous people of El Salvador are an essential part of the country's history and to exclude them is ludicrous. The only draw back that limits the indigenous people derives from the lack of organization and internal support. However, the foundation that has been established serves as the fuel for change to occur and with the diversity of intellectuals, academics, and activists, FAMA has the base it needs to create change for its people.

In conclusion, I felt that several messages and ideas were and had been in discussion. The first was for the current government to recognize that this genocide took place in 1932 by the government and Ladinos to the Native American people in their own land. The second was for the people to receive an apology and compensation for this wrongful act by the government and Ladinos. The third was to correct and create a historical scholarship and time frame of the events that have been done to the Pipil/Nahuate people in textbooks. The fourth was to create reconciliation of self-determination for the sake and preservation of their inherent rights as Peoples of the Americans, pertaining to language, sacred rituals, customs, history, and education. The fifth is to preserve our people and communities because they are being extinct, and that the lands that were theirs should be in some way reserved for the Pipil/Nahuate communities as communal lands as our ancestors did, i.e. indigenous reservations. My vision would be to create a source of inclusion within the current nation-state system in order to preserve our history but first it must start at the very top within the governmental and educational systems. The creations of Pipil/Nahuate schools, and at the college level a Pipil/Nahuate studies field. I suggest something similar to the Native Hawaiian school system, Kamehameha, where students learn their language, history, dances, rituals, and learn to appreciate their own identity and ancestry. Having such an educational system, would allow for the country to feel the healing spiritual process of reconciliation between all the groups - Pipil/Nahuates, Ladinos and Mestizos. At the same time, it would allow a system of social conscientiousness and responsibility for the future of El Salvador.