

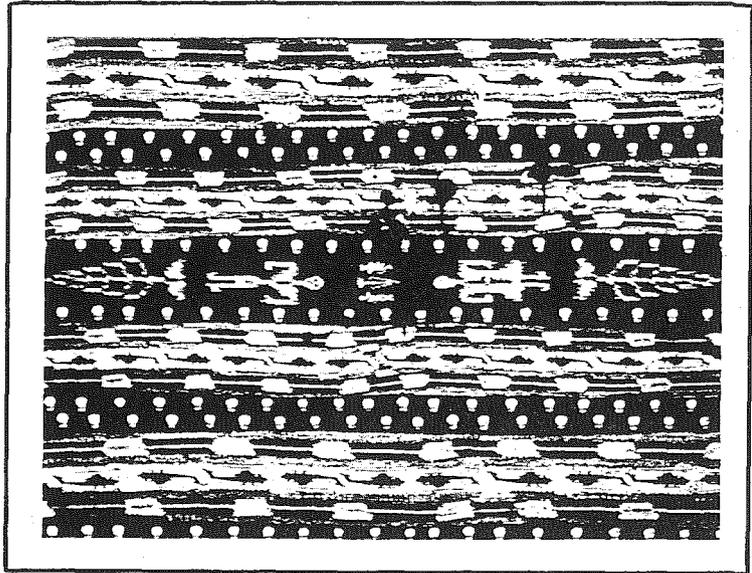
America. We are united with them in the Spirit of Life."

In spirit with my Brothers and Sisters,

K'uu yaa Tsa-wa

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*"Tejido de los Desaparecidos"*  
silkscreen. © 1984 Ester  
Hernandez



## Inauguration Day In Guatemala

*Bruce Curtis, who works with the organization Plenty (651 Santa Ray, Oakland, CA 94610, 415-465-1328) arrived in Guatemala in February this year as part of the Central America Peace March, which began in Panama in December, 1985. In this report, Bruce describes some of what he found in Guatemala the day the new civilian president Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo was inaugurated.*

I went to visit a Mayan friend, José Poaquil (not his real name) who lives in Guatemala City. José is a traditional Mayan who is careful to keep a low profile because of the heightened persecution which traditional Mayans have experienced in Guatemala since 1980. I asked José what he thought about the new civilian government. He said only time would tell, but that he was cautiously optimistic, a view I heard repeatedly during my stay in the country.

While the entire city was distracted by the inauguration ceremonies, José and I drove outside the city limits to visit a refugee camp. It was a camp mostly for Mayan peasants who had left their highland villages and come down to the city looking for safety and work. On the way we rode through a middle class suburb that bordered a large, flat empty tract of land that was being prepared for another suburban housing development. The lots were sectioned off and the street signs were in place. Suddenly, we noticed hundreds of people streaming onto this empty tract, and in their midst we could see held high the bright green flag of the newly-elected Christian Democratic Party. Later we would learn that it was a land invasion by homeless refugees who intended to build shacks and squat on this unused plot of ground. The land belongs to the government of Guatemala.

During the next several days about 18 similar invasions took place around Guatemala City. The landowners, banks, and newspapers called for the protection of private property. Eventually, the new president ordered the police to evict all the squatters. The press hailed the peacefulness of the evictions as a new chapter in the relationship between the government and the people in Guatemala, but a few days later at least one paper reported that 15 people who had participated in the invasions had disappeared without a trace.

Just beyond the tract of land being invaded by squatters was the refugee settlement. There were many hundreds of small, poorly-constructed shacks set out in orderly rows along a ridge and atop a wide plateau. José pointed out the different Indians in the encampment who had come here from many parts of the country. Most of the people were wearing very little of their traditional garments. During the preceding 5 years, the most intense period of the army's anti-guerrilla campaigns across rural Guatemala, it had become dangerous to be identified as an Indian. People left their traditional clothes behind when they abandoned their villages. Now, too, it is a lot cheaper to buy western, polyester shirts made in Taiwan and Korea than to purchase thread and weave *traje*.

We didn't stay long in the camp. José was worried that an informer would spot us and take down the license number of the car. On our way back to the city we stopped to visit another household which José helps to maintain. Here, eight Indian orphan children were living. We approached cautiously, parking around the corner and entering separately. There was a bedroom with three beds constructed of boards laid over cement blocks. The kitchen was used for storage because they didn't have a stove or refrigerator. The children were sent out to families in the neighborhood to eat.

The largest room contained three old sewing machines, a bundle of material and some newly-finished shirts and bags. José introduced me to an eight-year-old girl whose parents had been killed only a few months earlier. She called José father now. The women were widows. Their husbands had also been killed. Now they support themselves, what is left of their families, and these orphans by making clothes. These children are being raised in accordance with their culture. Many thousands of Mayan orphans have been placed by the government with Ladino families who tend to use them as servants.

José talked often about the great number of Indian families, and especially the children, who are fast losing their cultural and spiritual identity. I asked him how many Mayans he thought still practice in the old religious ways. He said maybe 30 or 40 percent. Under the military governments, Indians were forbidden to visit their sacred places or to publicly practice their religious ceremonies. Some nearby volcanos are considered sacred and people sometimes travel to them in secret, but if they are found out, they might be accused of being guerrillas. To worship at home is also dangerous. You might be denounced by an evangelical for practicing witchcraft if the odor of incense is detected in your house.

