

# 1 A History of the Achi People of Rabinal

THE END OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY saw the Achi<sup>1</sup> triumphant over their neighbors and rivals, the K'iche' and the Pokomchis, whom they had expelled from the Rabinal basin in Verapaz, toward the more mountainous areas to the north. The Achi still celebrate this victory as part of the annual Christian festival of the patron San Pablo.

The Rabinal basin is located in the modern province of Baja Verapaz, which is cut from west to east by the Sierra del Chuacus, which rises more than 8,202 feet above sea level. The Rabinal valley, which lies to the north of the Chuacus range, is 3,189 feet above sea level (the lowest point in the modern municipality is at 1,312 feet). Several streams and rivers descend these mountains and irrigate some of the numerous valleys before joining either the Motagua River to the south or, as the Rabinal River does, the Negro River system to the north. The area is cut from south to north by two small tributaries of the Negro River that today have been diverted to flow into the Chixoy dam on the northern border of the municipality. The main Rio Negro continues to flow east and then north under a variety of different names, serving as the national border with Mexico before eventually debouching in the Gulf of Mexico. The climate is relatively dry, with a mean temperature of 68–71° Fahrenheit and rainfall averaging only 29.5 inches a year (although this varies dramatically between the lower subtropical dry forest and the subtropical humid forest of the higher land).

The Rabinal basin has been eroding for centuries. The Achi persisted with their slash-and-burn method of agriculture as their new Spanish masters felled trees both for the timber industry and to create extensive cattle pastures. These practices damaged the thin topsoil, squeezed the land available for subsistence farming, and prompted inadequate fallowing, all of which contributed to the rapid destruction of the forest and accentuated the process of desertification, the erratic and decreasing rainfall, and associated problems.

## COLONIAL RABINAL

The K'iche' empire, in the heart of the western highlands, was conquered decisively in 1524 by Pedro de Alvarado. This defeat allowed

the Spanish military campaign to proceed to the east into the region inhabited by the Achi, Pokomchis, and Q'eqchi. The Rabinal basin, home of the Achi, was soon under military occupation and placed temporarily under the *encomienda* regime.<sup>2</sup> The area became an outpost for further military campaigns into the vast territory to the north (Bertrand 1987, 51), which was still considered *tierra de guerra* (war area) more than a decade later. The army was removed from the area in 1537, when, following an agreement signed by Bartolomé de las Casas, Bishop Marroquin, and Maldonado, the governor of Guatemala, the *encomiendas* were cancelled and the Dominican order was granted exclusive tutelage of the area baptized as the Verapaz (true peace), which comprised the modern provinces (*departamentos*) of Alta (upper) Verapaz and Baja (lower) Verapaz. The Dominicans controlled Verapaz for the next 300 years.

Bartolomé de las Casas (of the Dominican Order), together with the friars Rodrigo de Landa and Pedro Angulo, began to penetrate K'iche' territory and the area around Verapaz in 1537. They composed songs about the life of Christ in K'iché and taught them to four Indian merchants who became *cantores de trovas* (troubadours) (Friso 1981). These merchants took the Christian message to Indian villages, where the songs were accompanied by the *tum* (slit drum) and rattle. Soon thereafter, in 1540, King Charles V of Spain ordered the Franciscan provincial authorities of Mexico to send Indian musicians and singers trained in monasteries to help Las Casas with Guatemala's missionary work (Lehnhoff 1986, 77–78). These missionaries arrived in 1542, most probably from the Franciscan convent of Tlatelolco, and probably accompanied Father Luis de Cancer in his missionary entrance to Verapaz (*ibid.*, 69–71).<sup>3</sup>

Faced with the language barrier, the most suitable Christian educational tools were music, dance, and theater. *Tocotines* (*villancicos*, poems set to *son* music) were composed for the *autosacramentales* (a type of religious comedy) to the Virgin. Comedies, nativity scenes, *loas* or *alabanzas* (short dramatic poems and encomia with musical interludes), dance-dramas such the Dance of the Conquest and the Dance of the Conversion, and the processional music for the *cofradías* were composed for performance during the fiestas of the Catholic annual calendar. The discovery of late sixteenth-century musical codices in Huehuetenango in northwestern Guatemala illustrates the rich repertoire of polyphonic music sung and played in remote Indian towns during that time. The codices include diverse musical genres, from plainsong, antiphons, masses, and villancicos to instrumental dances composed by renowned European maestros. Sixteenth-century Indian chapel masters, such as Thomas Pascual and Francisco de León, also composed, copied, and compiled similar musical

collections. Many of these compositions were also found in the Archivo Histórico Arquidiocesano (Archdiocesan Historical Archive) in Guatemala City, which suggests the performance of a common repertoire in both the cathedral and its smaller parishes (Lehnhoff 1986, 78–82).

While introducing European music for religious services to the Indian population, the friars discovered a rich vernacular musical and dramatic tradition<sup>4</sup> and adapted it to the needs of evangelization. The theater of evangelization<sup>5</sup> created a rich cultural legacy that is still enjoyed today. Verapaz, and especially Rabinal, has a rich repertoire of music and dance-drama owing to the control and isolation imposed on the region by the Dominicans (Mace 1966, 1967).<sup>6</sup>

Pragmatism led the Dominicans to turn to the indigenous authorities (*caciques*) who were heads of noble Indian lineages, using them as their local representatives in the Catholic Church's spiritual, civil, and economic enterprises (Piel 1989, 34). Thanks to an initiative instigated by de las Casas in 1543, the Spanish Crown recognized, protected, and compensated Rabinal's *caciques*, restoring their power (Percheron 1981, 19). Evangelization and the political and economic reorganization of the indigenous settlements in Verapaz under Dominican tutelage were possible only because of the active participation of the *caciques*.

The *caciques* were placed under the control of the provincial civil authorities—the Spanish *alcaldes mayores* (principal mayors) and *corregidores* (magistrates), who were in turn responsible to the Spanish Crown—and took responsibility for collecting royal tribute every six months; they were also the principal organizers of labor for the *repartimiento* system (Sherman 1979).<sup>7</sup> Rabinalense Achi constructed local roads and convents; they were occasionally taken to the colonial capital, Antigua, to help build the city. Later they were forced to work on local Dominican *haciendas* (estates) as well as their tropical plantations (Piel 1989, 126).

The *cofradías* enabled *caciques* to retain their authority after the abolition of their traditional base. These religious sodalities, dedicated to the devotion of a particular incarnation of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or popular saint, were introduced by the Dominicans, probably soon after they assumed control of the Verapaz. There were only three Indian *cofradías* in Rabinal before the mid-seventeenth century: the Virgen del Rosario, Divino or Santísimo Sacramento, and Santa Cruz (Percheron 1979, 61–62), all of which still exist.

*Cofradías* were part of a medieval sense of life as drama (Acroyd 1998), and their fiestas assisted in the diffusion of Christianity by attracting people to the new Indian towns, where they participated in the celebrations of the Catholic calendar.<sup>8</sup> The *cofradía* became the medium through which Indians were introduced to the mercantile economy. Royal donations of

land to raise cattle and crops were intended to generate sufficient income to meet the costs of the local church, its priest, saints' festivities, and community tribute taxes. The last indicates the link between religious and civil authority that has been an integral part of the institution since its inception. This was achieved through linking *cofradía* positions of authority (*cargos*) with membership of the *cabildo* (town council). The main beneficiaries were the elite Indian families, who controlled both in combination with the Dominicans, who were responsible for administration and accounts (Percheron 1979, 81–86). But the exploitation and abuse of the labor force and the draining of community resources were not solely a Spanish affair. The *caciques*, who benefited from the control of the town's labor force, the sale of community land to Spanish ranchers, and their manipulation of *cofradía* resources, became private entrepreneurs. They also transformed themselves from heads of local lineages into an elite group of families that ruled Rabinal under the Dominican protection.

Thus the *cabildo* and the *cofradías* provided the institutional support for the *caciques'* continued political, religious, and economic dominance (Bertrand 1987, 111–13). *Caciques* preserved their power as *gobernadores* (governors) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries within the new Spanish municipal organization of the Indian towns, even though governors had to be elected by *cabildo* members and their election ratified by Church and Crown (Percheron 1981, 20–21). The *cacique gobernadores* and other civil authorities were members of the same group of elite families who held *cofradía cargos* (*ibid.*, 68–69).

Under the administration of Dominican priests, Rabinal's *cofradías* became important economic enterprises. The *cofradías'* wealth and entrepreneurial success peaked between 1776 and 1796, by which time there were twenty Indian *cofradías*<sup>9</sup> and two Ladino *hermandades*<sup>10</sup> (brotherhoods), despite the religious authorities' efforts to reduce their number in order to retain control of their wealth (Percheron 1979, 66–67). During this period the *cofradías* supported a rich and luxurious cult in the parish church and could afford to pay for its music and other expenses. A music school was established in 1783. The *cofradías* paid for the teacher, who taught *sol-fa*, directed the choir, and played organ; the permanent orchestra, with various instruments such as violins, basses, clarinets, flutes, oboes, and trumpets; the church's small organ and a large double-bellow organ; and a collection of musical scores imported from Mexico (*cofradía* books, in the parish archive of Rabinal).<sup>11</sup> During the nineteenth century the church orchestra developed into an ensemble of string and brass instruments, remnants of which persisted into the first half of the twentieth century. The *marimba* is conspicuous by its absence from Rabinal's *cofradía* records; unlike other parts of Guatemala and

even other parts of Verapaz, the marimba entered Rabinal by a secular route (see Chapter 4).

In sum, the Dominican Order's businesslike character influenced the economic life of Verapaz profoundly. If it is true that the Dominican haciendas were among the most exploitive of Indian labor, it is also true that they brought the Indian economy into the modern era and served as a model for the wealthy *cofradías*, which functioned as solid businesses capable of maintaining the sumptuous religious cult and sustaining a privileged Indian class. This, combined with the Dominicans' exclusive control over Verapaz, prevented the advance of Ladino settlers until the eighteenth century.

### THE PROCESS OF LADINOIZATION

The concept of ladinoizing indigenous communities developed from Enlightenment ideas prevalent at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> These gave impetus to the colonial government's liberal social policies, directed at transforming Indians into Spanish-speaking, westernized Guatemalans. The ladinoization of Indian towns that took place between 1775 and 1850 was not only an ideological posture; it also included policies that were deliberately destructive to Indian cultures and ways of life. For example, the colonial government insisted on the establishment of schools in Indian towns in order to encourage literacy in Spanish.<sup>13</sup> The only education the indigenous population had received previously was instruction in Christian doctrine and liturgy from the Dominicans in their native languages (Bertrand 1987, 145–46). In 1824 the newly independent Guatemalan state signaled its support for this policy by passing a law recommending that municipal and parish authorities implement measures to extinguish Indian languages, thus dissolving their cultures (Piel 1989, 294). However, this and later attempts to eradicate Indian languages were rendered ineffective through cash constraints coupled with local indifference to the education of Indian children.

The secular ideas of the Enlightenment also had a negative effect on the power of the Catholic Church. After independence in 1821, anticlerical politics led to the suppression of religious houses and the confiscation of the real estate they controlled. The Dominicans lost their last property in Verapaz in 1829 and the parishes were left abandoned (Bertrand 1987, 231). What was left of the *cofradías*' property (capital, land, cattle), which had been under their administration, reverted to state control, although it remained the legal property of Indian communities (Piel 1989, 246). Rabinal was unaffected by this, for the simple reason that its community lands had already been sold and its *cofradías*' property plundered by its municipal authorities, working in collusion with the

Dominicans, thus accelerating the transfer of land into private hands (Archivo Histórico Arquidiocesano, Visitas pastorales, vol. 41; Bertrand 1987, 132–94). This occurred between 1786 and 1809, when the bishop's pastoral visits to the towns were suspended.

The loss of land and property impoverished the *cofradías* and undermined the position of the indigenous elite, who had manipulated their assets to bolster their own authority. As a last-ditch attempt to hold on to their power, the indigenous elite transformed voluntary offerings to the *cofradías* into obligatory contributions; they also attempted to forcibly recruit the population into serving this institution, augmenting the number of cargos and thus increasing the cost of fiestas. This situation provoked rebellion among the indigenous population, who in the early 1800s denounced their own Indians' authorities (AGCA: A1, file 183, record 3747; Percheron 1979, 93–94). The contemporary *cofradías* and their numerous cargos, studied by anthropologists, are not the product of colonial *cofradías* but of the necessity to replenish funds and reorganize themselves during the early nineteenth century (Chance and Taylor 1985, 1–26).

More damaging to the indigenous way of life was the idea that Ladinos would be a civilizing influence on Indians. This was intended to help them integrate into Western society and, as the humanist liberals of the first half of the nineteenth century put it, “restore their dignity.”<sup>14</sup> Ladinos were encouraged to settle in Indian towns<sup>15</sup> through the free transfer of Crown property (including *cofradía* lands) and Indian community lands. Land records show that a considerable proportion of the growing Indian population was pushed northward into the mountains, while incoming Ladinos controlled the best agricultural land on the valley floor (Bertrand 1987, 179–82). The resulting spatial separation undermined the ideologues' justification for the Ladino influx. Nevertheless, this means of ladinoization, which gained legal status through the *composiciones de tierras* (land re-registrations),<sup>16</sup> intensified following the Liberal decrees of 1825 (Piel 1989, 225, 309).

At the same time, the threatening dynamism of Rabinal's small Ladino population—which had increased from 128 to 451 between 1769 and 1816 (Bertrand 1987, 274, table 7)<sup>17</sup>—resulted in the Ladinos' acquisition of municipal power, gradually replacing the Indian *cabildo* with Ladino authorities (*ibid.*, 232). This is the origin of bi-ethnic local government by a Ladino mayor and judge, with minor indigenous authorities beneath them. Until the twentieth century, participation in the *cofradías* remained the means of acquiring (extremely localized) authority in the indigenous community: Only those men who had held one of the lower six cargos in the *cofradías* could serve as *regidores* (magistrates) and *alcaldes segundos* (deputy mayors) in the *cabildo*, and they could only

become *cofradía principales* once they had served the municipality (Percheron 1979, 68).<sup>18</sup> In ideological terms, the basic race conflict between Indian and Ladino stems from this period and intensified as the nineteenth century progressed.

With the emerging local power of Ladinos and the lack of Church interest once dispossessed of their wealth, *cofradías* became the stronghold of indigenous power and the bulwark of identity and indigenous separatism (Warren 1992, 48–64; McCreery 1994, 137, 288). One manifestation of this was local *cofradías*' efforts to preserve their musical tradition. The high turnover of parish priests following the Church's political and economic defeat, and the consequent deterioration of church property, was halted during the ten-year incumbency of Father Pedro Avella (1842–52) (Archivo Histórico Arquidiocesano, Vicaría de Verapaz, 1844–54, 68, vol. 7).<sup>19</sup> Major church organ repairs are recorded, as are frequent adjustments and changes of strings and reeds of the orchestral instruments.

But to reduce local political conflicts to an opposition between Indians and Ladinos (see Warren 1992) is simplistic, as this ignores the local political dynamics that gave birth to the new configuration of civil and religious hierarchy within the cargo system. Although the political power of the Indian elite was subordinated to the emerging power of Ladinos, an interethnic alliance was formed to exercise control over the rest of the population. The persistence of this arrangement today is seen in the alliance between Rabinal municipality's most conservative groups, such as the *cofrades* of the village of Xococ and the Ladinos of Rabinal town. From this perspective one can understand the role played by the *cofradías* in sustaining Ladino power, and the reactionary attitudes of some of the representatives of local Catholicism during the period known as *la violencia* (1981–83).

## LAND AND LABOR

The creation of enormous private properties in Alta Verapaz and along the Pacific Coast dedicated to export cash crops dates to the beginning of Barrios's dictatorship in 1873. In 1877 Barrios decreed that all Indian communities' remaining *ejidal* land<sup>20</sup> be "liberated" and sold. Next, uncultivated lands were offered free of charge to national and international investors, provided that they were used (Piel 1989, 317–19). This is the origin of the large *fincas* (plantations) that still benefit from the seasonal labor and permanent migration of *colonos* (settlers) from Indian communities. Indian labor was obtained through the *mandamiento* (state-controlled forced labor) system (McCreery 1994, 220–23). By this time, government attitudes toward Indians had changed: According to

neo-liberals, who had emerged as a political force following the coffee boom of the 1880s, Indians were an inferior race destined for work (ibid., 172–75).

As the Rabinal area lacked large tracts of national land suitable for export agriculture, the cultivation of commercial crops was small-scale and secondary to subsistence agriculture (Bertrand 1987, 247). Although Rabinal was only marginally integrated into the new national economic model, its Indian population was obliged by the *habilitación* system (which replaced the *mandamiento* system and reached its peak between 1915 and 1925) to provide the essential labor force on plantations in other regions.

The local Ladino population profited from the *habilitación* system: Indians were contracted by force, given part of their wages in advance, and then taken to the *fincas* to work off their debt over several weeks. The system was usually combined with the alcohol business. Large amounts of the wages earned or advanced to Indians ended up in the hands of Ladinos, who opened alcohol shops in the main towns where Indians were contracted (Bunzel 1952; Guiteras 1986; Hernández 1974; Pozas 1977; Taylor 1979; Navarrete Pellicer 1988; McCreery 1994). Most of the working population was reduced to debt servitude. The system also generated new patterns of drinking, serious alcohol dependency, and related problems in the Indian population. The state, however, benefited. Income from alcohol taxes during the 1890s was “the second highest source of revenue after import–export duties” (McCreery 1994, 177).

Owing to the coffee boom, Indians had both money and work at the beginning of the twentieth century, but the work was still obligatory and the proliferation of alcohol shops in Indian towns soon separated workers from their earnings. This situation, coupled with the scarcity of land in Indian hands, resulted in the systematic expulsion of younger generations to the plantations, either temporarily, as seasonal work, or permanently, as *colonos*.

Debt servitude was abolished in the 1930s by the dictator Ubico and replaced by new labor laws that applied to all working-class people, both Indian and Ladino. Under Ubico’s 1934 Vagrancy Law, all male peasants who produced “inadequate” amounts of food for subsistence were liable to work for 150 days a year (McCreery 1994, 317). Peasants between the ages of eighteen and fifty-five were obliged to carry an identity card and a booklet (*libreta*) in which employers marked the number of days served. The system guaranteed the labor force for the plantations and the national road-building program. To enforce the law, police and military were given the power to control and draft any peasant who had not fulfilled his obligation.<sup>21</sup> Rabinalenses recall how military commissioners<sup>22</sup> hunted men



across the fields and into the mountains, regardless of whether or not their libretas showed that they had worked the obligatory number of days, to force them into road gangs.

This was the state of affairs prior to the “revolutionary” period of Arévalo and Arbenz (1944–54). The rule of these democratically elected presidents marked the emergence of a social and political movement that agitated for better life conditions for all Guatemalans.

## POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT SINCE 1954

When Dominican fathers returned to Rabinal parish in 1972, the municipal mayor, an indigenous leader of local Catholicism, and the town’s *cofradías principales* welcomed them with the warning that the priests were “servants of the town” and that under no circumstances were they to get involved in “political matters.”<sup>23</sup> The warning stemmed from Rabinalense *costumbristas*’ (traditional local Catholics) awareness of Catholic Action catechists’ community organization work in neighboring El Quiché, which they saw as a threat to their own power and authority. They also felt threatened by catechists’ campaigns against the *cofradías*, their fiestas and alcohol consumption (Arias 1990).

The Catholic Action movement attempted to reform the hierarchical power structures based on subordinated participation in the *cofradía cargo* system (see Chapter 2). They fought for more direct and egalitarian forms of participation in the community for the younger generation of landless semi-proletarian peasants. These peasants had virtually no hope of bettering their economic situation and therefore little chance of gaining access to the cargos that carried the possibility of achieving prestige and influential political positions. In Rabinal, Catholic Action grew exponentially between 1972 and 1981; Dominicans in Rabinal today calculate that at the beginning of the 1980s there were around 200 catechists and delegates of “the Word” working in Rabinal’s villages.

The admonition of the Dominicans upon their arrival in Rabinal indicates the continuing political influence of the old *costumbrista principales* and their domination of local government decisions at the beginning of the 1970s. But, in contrast to El Quiché (Falla 1980; Diócesis del Quiché 1994), the struggles between local Catholics and Catholic Action had not resulted in irreconcilable antagonism in Rabinal. Under the respected and moderate guidance of Father Melchor Fraj, both Dominicans and Catholic Action catechists promoted the values and customs of traditional Maya culture, remaining on the margins and giving room to the *cofradía* organizations and their fiestas. Father Fernando Suazo reintroduced the liturgy and songs of praise in Achi,

accompanied by choirs and a marimba ensemble. This development upset the town's Ladinos.

Protestants and the ultra-right-wing Apostolic Catholics<sup>24</sup> were the most aggressive force in the struggle against the power of Rabinal's costumbristas and *cofradía* fiestas. As in other parts of Guatemala, in Rabinal Protestants had flourished in the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake, when they offered programs to help the civilian population in the wake of the devastation. Local Catholics and evangelicals (both Catholic and Protestant), by contrast, interpret both natural disaster and political violence as God's punishment for lack of faith.<sup>25</sup> However, so far as evangelicals are concerned, local Catholicism is part of the problem because its pagan practices are remote from biblical texts. For evangelicals, denouncing the idolatrous *cofradía* cult is a sign of faith.

The number of Protestant converts increased exponentially during the political violence (1981–83) because it was believed that Protestants had a friendlier relationship with the army. There was some truth in this, particularly after the coup that brought General Efraín Ríos Montt to the presidency in 1982.<sup>26</sup> Ríos Montt's conversion to evangelical Protestantism gave a messianic character to military repression. Using the Dominican Order's radio and television stations to broadcast his message and expressing his ideology through the religious morality familiar to the masses, Ríos Montt launched his campaign of moral reform, which he promised would end the problems of poverty and civil insurrection (Stoll 1990, 180–217). In the process, Ríos Montt turned the evangelical churches into the army's allies and accomplices. His evangelism unleashed a process of massive conversion, as a desperate population sought to evade identification with the guerrilla by seeking refuge in the evangelical churches associated with the military.<sup>27</sup> In Rabinal, even local Catholic ritual specialists joined the stampede. Many musicians abandoned their instruments (and their income) to demonstrate the authenticity of their conversion.

Yet Ríos Montt has a positive reputation in Rabinal: In a neat exercise in ideological manipulation, he purged the municipality's paramilitaries. These predominantly Ladino groups, charged with the selective elimination of community leaders, had taken to terrorizing the community by committing random killings in the street. Ríos Montt's continuing popularity never ceases to amaze those who know of the atrocities committed by his underlings, including the massacres in Rabinal municipality and elsewhere in 1982–83 (EAFG 1995). Yet, despite its brutality, Ríos Montt's government had an appearance of "justice or authority for all," an idea with strong symbolic meaning for both Indians and Ladinos.

The most important of Rabinal's five evangelical churches is the Church of the Nazareno, which is also the most powerful Protestant sect in the

provinces of Alta and Baja Verapaz. Next in importance are the Assembly of God and the Bethesda Church; the congregation of the latter includes both Indians and Ladinos and has chapels in both Rabinal town and its more populous villages. Most congregants are women, which is apparently typical of most religions; in some cases, the congregation is 80 percent female. In response to this phenomenon and to avoid domestic conflicts, some churches only accept married couples, excluding the many women widowed by the violence, who are already excluded by their widowhood from the costumbrista cargo system.

## POLITICIZATION AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

The legal bases for workers' basic rights and organizations were established during the democratic governments of Arévalo (1945–50) and Arbenz (1950–54). The Code of Work was promulgated in 1947; the Law of Agrarian Reform was instituted in 1952. Two years later, with U.S. support engineered by the CIA, Castillo Armas ousted the democratic regime in a coup d'état. Armas revoked the Agrarian Reform and began persecuting peasant leaders who had established local committees to implement land reform. Some Rabinalenses told me that Ladino employers promptly resumed their authoritarian low-wage regime with a vengeance.

Although Rabinal was largely unaffected by attempts at land reform, the hopes of its landless peasants had been focused on the coastal fincas, where large amounts of cultivable land were left idle (Barry 1987). There was no significant change in working-class employment conditions between 1950 and 1980, even though the national economy, with its heavy dependence on agro-exports, maintained a growth rate of 5 percent per annum (EAFG 1995, 51–56, 58).<sup>28</sup> Peasants' social and economic experiences on the fincas led to the creation of the *liga campesina* (Peasants' League) in the early to mid-1960s.

The exploited peasantry was not the only social sector unhappy with the dictatorship. Dissident young officers, who objected to increasing U.S. intervention in the army, formed the Armed Rebel Forces (FAR) in December 1962, mainly by recruiting poor Ladino workers. The participation of some indigenous Rabinalenses resulted in the army's brutal repression of the town in 1963; I was told there was a big massacre there in 1965. Several musicians told me that they had lost *marimbista* relatives at this time. Community organizations faltered with the loss of their leadership.

Rabinal experienced a brief social effervescence between 1976 and 1980. Various events had led to a rapid process of community organization. These included the arrival of international funds channelled through

both Catholic and Protestant churches, support from various NGOs (non-governmental organizations) for the formation of cooperatives, and the presence of organizations such as AID (Agencia de Desarrollo Internacional) and CIF (Centro de Integración Familiar).<sup>29</sup> CIF, which had an enormous budget and a large infrastructure, inaugurated development projects, especially in education and agricultural techniques. Agency support notwithstanding, these projects depended on the ability of local leaders to channel funds to their communities. Hamlets that achieved the right combination, such as Chichupac, flourished rapidly, while neighboring villages were completely ignored. The NGOs' lack of planning and inequitable distribution of endemically scarce funds resulted in divisions and conflicts between local communities. The army, which had established a post in Pichec in 1976 and another in Rabinal town shortly afterward, took advantage of these new enmities, exacerbating them further as part of their effort to divide and crush the population.<sup>30</sup> In order to justify its intervention in Rabinal in 1980, the army spread rumors that all members of both external organizations and local cooperatives were also members of the Peasant Union Committee (CUC) and thus guerrilla sympathizers.<sup>31</sup>

## LA VIOLENCIA

The period of intense political violence in Rabinal (1981–83), which was just one small part of the massive military repression of Guatemala's civilian population, is remembered as *la violencia* (the violence), "the time of silence," of "danger," and of "rape." It has had devastating repercussions, both short- and long-term, for Rabinal society.

Army repression in Rabinal began in 1980. The first massacre occurred on 4 March in Rio Negro (EAFG 1995, 139). For most Rabinalenses, however, the period of extreme violence began in 1981 with the army's scorched-earth policy, which was intended to eliminate the insurgents' voluntary and involuntary support base. The army destroyed crops and livestock and burned homes, obliterating communities' physical base and social organization. Popular destinations for internal refugees from Rabinal were the provinces of Alta Verapaz to the north and Escuintla to the south, both characterized by plantation economies and familiar to Rabinalenses through seasonal work there. Thousands of landless Rabinalenses chose to settle permanently in the small towns near the plantations.<sup>32</sup>

More destructive was the introduction, in 1981, of the Civil Patrols (PAC)<sup>33</sup> which incorporated all men aged eighteen to fifty-five into paramilitary units under the indirect control of the army.<sup>34</sup> By forcing men to patrol the town block or village section in which they lived in

twenty-four-hour shifts at least once a week, the army gained direct control over the male population. The system prevented men from leaving their homes, whether to flee or to obtain work, while simultaneously turning them into sitting ducks: It was easy to “disappear” someone at any time during patrol duty. Violence soon became generalized. Patrols from Rabinal’s two largest villages, Xococ and Pichec, together with patrols from Vegas Santo Domingo and Ladino paramilitary agents escorted by the army, carried out massacres throughout the municipality. Of the estimated 5,000 Rabinalenses who lost their lives during this period, 2,009 were killed in massacres (EAFG 1995, 127).<sup>35</sup>

The army’s purpose in imposing this scheme was to make the population directly responsible for the surveillance and massacre of their neighbors. Traditional forms of conflict resolution were replaced by denunciations to the army; the problem was resolved “once and for all.” Historical or ethnic disagreements between villages, groups, and individuals, and even small unresolved family conflicts, became enormously relevant, leaving everyone vulnerable to betrayal. Some people welcomed the opportunity to strike their enemies; simple terror led others to cooperate with the army, betraying their neighbors in order to stay alive.<sup>36</sup> In pitting people against one another, the army transformed them into the vehicle of their own destruction.

Musicians, and especially marimbistas, were particularly vulnerable both within the community and without. Many Rabinalenses, especially those who had converted to the newer religious sects, envied musicians’ status in the community, which extended beyond the local Catholic sphere (see Chapter 9); they were even targeted by rival musicians. As far as the army was concerned, marimbistas were the most visible symbol of Catholic custom. The army was particularly incensed by anniversaries of the dead, as these celebrations honored people they had eliminated as suspected guerrillas. Belief in the dead, which is the core of local Catholicism, thus became a subversive ideology that (like Catholic Action’s liberation theology) needed to be eradicated. All indigenous gatherings with music were banned in 1981; the murder of musicians reinforced the message.

The direct participation of local men in the annihilation of their kith and kin ripped the social fabric apart, fragmenting groups and creating suspicion between relatives, friends, and work companions. Survivors living in Rabinal have to cope with both their own losses and their own forced complicity. The consequences of this forced participation—the atmosphere of fear, mistrust, and guilt—still reverberate in Rabinal. Feelings were particularly intense in 1995–96, when survivors celebrated the fourteenth anniversary of their relatives’ deaths (see Chapters 2 and 6).

## CONTEMPORARY RABINAL

Rabinal is one of eight municipalities of the Guatemalan departamento of Baja Verapaz and has an area of 124,539 acres.<sup>37</sup> Rabinal town is only 178 km northeast of Guatemala City by road, yet the lack of paving, particularly between the provincial capital, Salamá, and Rabinal, means that it takes five hours to travel by bus from the town to the city.<sup>38</sup>

According to the 1981 census, taken just before the military violence peaked, Rabinal had a population of 22,733. Considering Guatemala's high rate of population growth,<sup>39</sup> a statistical projection based on this census estimated that by 1992 the population of Rabinal would be 39,741; but the 1994 census count was only 24,063. The large discrepancy between projection and census reflects the political violence of the early 1980s, which led to the death of a quarter of Rabinal's inhabitants and the relocation of several thousand more. The birth rate among survivors also plummeted.

The 1994 census registered 82 percent of Rabinal municipality's population (nearly 20,000 people) as Achi speakers who referred to themselves as Achi people;<sup>40</sup> around 90 percent of Achi live in the municipality's sixty rural villages and hamlets, most of which lack electricity and direct access to water. Some 2,000 Achi live in town. Most Ladinos, including the municipal authorities, are located in Rabinal town, which accounts for 23 percent of the municipality's population (more than 5,000 people). Ladinos are also to be found in the municipality's two largest and wealthiest villages, Nimacabaj and Pichec, and in the exclusively Ladino village of Chirrum and the Ladino hamlet of Conculito.

Relations between the communities can be gauged from the fact that Ladinos refer to Indians pejoratively as *inditos* (little Indians). The Achi, by contrast, refer to all non-Indians as Ladinos, the implication being that they are foreigners.

Rabinalense Achi are peasants with poor land and little access to it. Their principal economic activities are subsistence agriculture based on maize cultivation combined with agricultural wage work on the fincas. They have a myth to explain the origins of the landscape, the illicit appropriation and impoverishment of their agricultural land, and the need to seek work on the coastal fincas. The story is that the small volcanic cones of Saqacho' and Chikak' miloj, situated between Rabinal town and Pichec, were large volcanoes until the creator of the mountains, Zipacná, heaved up the rich volcanic soil and took it to the coast. This is why the coastal plains are fertile and why people go there to work. When the volcanoes were in Rabinal, the land was fertile and there was no need for the people to leave in search of work.

The thief Zipacná represents the foreign Ladino plantation owners and those Ladinos who appropriated Rabinal's scarce fertile lands. Rabinal's thin topsoil and limited irrigation restrict year-round cultivation. It is estimated that only about 494.2 acres are available for irrigation (including the river plains), and most are monopolized by a small number of Ladino and Achi families. The majority of the population cultivates indigenous maize varieties in forestry land that is not considered appropriate for agriculture and therefore does not appear in land-use statistics. The forest keeps the thin soil moist and protects the crops from frost, resulting in small but relatively reliable yields.

Twelve landowners own 15 percent of all Rabinal's registered land; about 300 proprietors own another 50 percent; the remaining 35 percent is shared among more than 2,700 owners (EAFG 1995, 22). Achi properties are divided into small plots of a few *cuerdas* (1 cuerda equals 28.3 square feet); 68 percent of all Achi-owned properties are smaller than 3.7 acres and only 10 percent are more than 8.6 acres, which confirms the general process of fragmentation in Indian land ownership.

Although the Achi family is a group of patrilineal descendants, the right to land is inherited bilaterally. In contrast to other Maya groups (see, e.g., Stoll 1993, 46–54; La Farge 1994, 45; Zur 1998, 127–29), Achi men and women have equal rights over the land, and both mothers and fathers maintain their land or their rights to it, which they pass on as separate properties. Women's access to land and the general scarcity of residential property means that residence, while preferably virilocal, is frequently uxorilocal (women's family residence) or neolocal (new residence). It is common for a landless man to live on his wife's family lands or, in the case of couples who are landless on both sides, to look for a new place to live, often in the town.

Rabinalense peasants produce mainly maize, which (together with beans) forms their basic diet. There are two local maize varieties: long-cycle and short-cycle. The former is cultivated in the mountains over an eight-month period and the latter is grown in the warmer valleys in around fifteen weeks. Some well-off peasants who have irrigated valley land invest in mountain land so that they can grow both kinds of maize and thus avoid having to buy maize for their families over the year; they also sell part of their maize crop on the local market. Peasants with small plots of land, whether in the mountains or in the valley, also sell part of their maize crop to afford other essentials, buying the maize they need later in the year from their plantation earnings (EAFG 1995, 24). All peasants with land are self-sufficient in beans; they also cultivate chili, fruit trees, and vegetables in the gardens around their houses, mainly for domestic consumption.

Maize yields increased notably as a result of the “green revolution” of the 1960s. This was a combined package of “improved” hybrid strains of maize, fertilizers, and pesticides into which most Indians initially bought piecemeal, starting with fertilizer. Among Chimaltecos the introduction of fertilizer tripled productivity between 1964 and 1979, reduced by half the amount of land needed to feed a family, and solved the land shortage problem (Watanabe 1994, 131–35). Yet Chimaltecos still go to the plantations, as do Rabinalenses. In fact, the introduction of fertilizers made dependence on wage work an ineluctable reality, especially as “the price of imported fertilisers jumped five fold during the 1970s” (SIECA 1984, in Barry 1987, 40). Several Rabinalenses grumbled to me about the ever-increasing cost of fertiliser and its apparently decreasing effectiveness.

“Improved” hybrid strains of maize, designed for immediate consumption, also increased yields. For those who adopted the new agro-technology—i.e., most peasants—production became oriented largely toward sale at harvest time because, unlike local maize (*maiz criollo*), the new hybrid maize is floury and decays rapidly; it is unsuitable for storage and useless as seed corn. Increased yields depend on the annual expenditure of hard-earned cash for new imported seed stocks.

Pesticides have also become a popular farming aid among plantation owners and subsistence farmers alike. For the latter, this too has to be paid for from wage work. All in all, the green revolution “has not improved the lot of the peasantry [because] the technical package of seeds, fertiliser, and pesticides is too expensive” for most small farmers (Barry 1987, 169). By 1984 60 percent of Guatemalans were unable to meet minimum nutritional requirements and the average calorific deficiency for the poorest half of the population was 39 percent (*ibid.*, 16, table 7).

Baja Verapaz is one of Guatemala’s poorest provinces and occupies fourth place on the index of extreme poverty—80 percent of its population live in extreme poverty (SEGEPLAN 1994, 122); the expulsion rate of its workforce is therefore very high. Watanabe (1994, 40) calculates that around two-thirds of Chimalteco families send one or more members to work on the fincas. The situation seems similar in Rabinal, although I lack concrete data. Direct observation and local testimony confirm that most men aged eighteen to fifty-five (and frequently women and children as well) work on the fincas for one to four months between the end of October and the end of March. Many return to celebrate the fiesta of the town’s patron saint in January, and then go back to the fincas.<sup>41</sup> A common destination is the cotton- and sugar-growing area around Gomera, Escuintla province in the south Pacific Coast, and the coffee plantations of Alta Verapaz.



In the first four decades of the twentieth century, the labor recruitment for the fincas was, with some variation, as obligatory and compulsive as the work systems of previous centuries. Older forced-labor systems had cynically depended on peasants' ability to feed themselves in their communities; the plantation economy depends on the survival of subsistence agriculture to sustain the labor force when it is not required on the fincas. As a government agronomist remarked, it is "a system made in the *cielo* (the heavens). The *indios* can grow corn in the mountains and then pick coffee and cotton during the other parts of the year. It is a system ordained by God" (Barry 1987, 10). This idea is so entrenched that questioning its validity is almost seditious. The reality is that the removal of Indian towns' community lands and the subsequent concentration of land in fewer hands, together with increasing soil infertility and the consequent reliance on ever more expensive fertilizers, have all accentuated peasants' reliance on paid work.<sup>42</sup> This is now vital for the survival of the subsistence sector rather than just one strand in peasants' survival strategy. Their dependence on finca work is such that any international movement in the price of Guatemalan agricultural products has immediate repercussions for their domestic economies. The Rabinalense subsistence economy is completely integrated into an agro-export economy dependent on the international market and controlled by just a handful of transnational companies.

In Rabinal one can broadly identify three socioeconomic strata according to access to the means of production. In the top stratum are the principal merchants and transport owners, all of whom are Ladinos who are also large landowners and control most of Rabinal's irrigated land and orchards. They produce cash crops and raise livestock for sale.

The common denominator in the middle stratum, which comprises both Ladinos and Achi, is the ability to generate sufficient income to avoid working on the plantations. It is made up of small-scale merchants, teachers, and professionals (who are predominantly Ladinos), Achi and Ladino peasants with some irrigated lands and orchards who cultivate cash crops on a small scale, and Achi artisans who supplement their subsistence activities through crafts such as pottery and weaving. One large family of artisan potters in the town, who are also hereditary musicians (the Ordoñez family), used some of their earnings to buy better musical instruments and form a *conjunto* marimba (an ensemble consisting of marimba, bass, and drum set) with loudspeakers. With other Achi artisans and Ladino teachers, the Ordoñez family also invests in Rabinal's dance-drama culture.

The situation in Rabinal is very different from that of El Quiché (Falla 1980) and Huehuetenango (Brintnall 1979), where the children of indigenous small-scale merchants became agricultural entrepreneurs

and merchants who broke the Ladino business monopoly, diminishing Ladinos' power and to some extent replacing them. The indigenous entrepreneurs, who joined evangelical cults, also mounted a direct assault on the gerontocratic stronghold of local Catholicism (Arias 1990). When this movement reached Rabinal in the 1970s, confrontation failed to materialize, partly because the most traditional elements within local Catholicism have allied themselves with the municipality's Ladinos. They in turn have good social and economic connections with the Ladino communities of the neighboring municipalities of Cubulco and Salamá; they also receive unconditional support from the army, which still has a base on the outskirts of town.

While the top two social strata live mainly in the municipal town or the large villages of Pichec, Xococ, and Nimacabaj, the bottom stratum, which comprises the majority of the population, lives predominantly in the hamlets and consists almost exclusively of Achi families with little or no land (fewer than 3.7 acres). These families depend on paid work on the *fincas* or for wealthier Rabinalense peasants, for whom they sometimes work in exchange for a small plot on which they can produce some maize for domestic consumption.

Within the bottom stratum is a subgroup distinguishable by its extreme poverty. These families are direct victims of the violence; among them are survivors of the massacres in Rio Negro and Plan de Sanchez, who now live in Pacux<sup>43</sup> and in the Municipal Colony on the outskirts of Rabinal town. One of the survivors of the Rio Negro massacre, who lost every single relative and all his possessions and was forced to move to Pacux, told me that "violence has left us behind in this life." To him, the human and material losses he suffered are irreparable. This man and a considerable number of others in the same position remain in terrible misery.

The majority of Rabinal's musicians fall into the lowest and largest socioeconomic category of poor peasants. Their music gains them status and prestige as carriers of tradition and custom, rather than a regular income that could substitute for labor migration. Like most other peasants, musicians are agriculturists who work periodically on the coastal *fincas* year after year.

Health conditions in Rabinal municipality are deplorable. The town has a state health center with a doctor and a few nurses who are able to attend to only about 20 percent of the municipality's population; it barely covers the urban area itself.<sup>44</sup> The state is also responsible for organizing health technicians (who are generally community leaders) and voluntary health workers (including midwives). These workers, who receive minimal training, take health campaigns concerning such things as hygiene and the inoculation of children to rural areas, especially during epidemics; outbreaks of dengue fever and cholera occur at least once a year. Cholera is

the most dreaded disease and one of the main causes of death through dehydration. The incidence of respiratory diseases, such as tuberculosis, and gastrointestinal illnesses caused by parasites is also high. The number of cases of measles is also significant (SEGEPLAN 1994, 125). Malnutrition plays a significant role in death rates, especially of children: In 1986 in Baja Verapaz, 53 percent of children aged six to nine suffered from malnutrition (*ibid.*, 123), which is well above the average for this age group in Guatemala (37.4 percent).

The ineffable psychosocial consequences of the brutal repression experienced by many Rabinalenses are excluded from local health surveys. One of the town's former parish priests told me of his preoccupation with the marked increase in the number of suicides in recent years, which he attributed to the trauma left by the violence. By Rabinalense Christian standards, to take one's own life is equivalent to homicide because it goes against God's will. Collective desperation has shaken the ideological basis that gives coherence and meaning to life. The social demoralization of Rabinal's population, the high incidence of illness, and reduced access to health and hygiene education are all reflected in the frequent references to witchcraft and malicious envy as causes of illness (Chapter 9). People believe that they are exposed to malicious envy and witchcraft at the numerous celebrations for the dead and at *cofradía* festivities. This source of infection notwithstanding, most incidents of witchcraft-induced illness seem to be acute gastritis, amoebic dysentery, and, in one case, diphtheria, spread through the contaminated water used in the *atole* (maize-based beverage), and poisoning from home-brewed and distilled *cuxa* (a crudely distilled sugarcane alcohol) served at these events.

WHILE POOR, THEN, the Achi are not all the same but are differentiated in various aspects, including economically. Their recent history has meant that some of this differentiation is permeated with trauma (e.g., religious conversion, moral behavior such as betrayal, roles played during the violence). The tension between Indians and Ladinos is the product of a complex national and local history.

The history of the Achi of Rabinal reflects the belief, commonly held by Guatemala's ruling class and Ladinos generally, that one cannot be a genuine Guatemalan without becoming ladinoized. Admittedly, Article 3 of the Peace Accords, signed in 1996, goes some way to addressing this popular misconception, but it will be some time before attitudes change, if they ever do.

The situation in which the Achi now find themselves also reflects the contradictions inherent in the agribusinesses on which Guatemala depends for more than 50 percent of its export trade. On the one hand, these industries rely on a labor force that can feed itself outside harvest time.

On the other, these companies' insatiable hunger for land in which to expand their businesses make it increasingly difficult, and in some cases impossible, for their seasonal workers to support themselves for the rest of the year. Despite their contempt for "inditos," the last thing plantation owners want is a literate, ladinoized workforce. Thus the Achi, like other Maya ethnic groups, find themselves excoriated for what they are, while simultaneously being denied any genuine opportunity for personal or community advancement.