

Guatemalan singers have story to tell

OHSWEKEN — On New Year's Eve, the Children of the Land of Corn came to Ohsweken. The Land of Corn is what the Indian people of Guatemala call their country. It is land of eight million people just south of Mexico. There are several other countries in this region which we call Central America.

The Children of the Land of Corn are younger members of Grupo Ixim W'anima. This group of singers and musicians play typical Guatemalan music, both traditional and modern. Their instruments, which are typical to the region, are real eye openers. They include la tortuga, an empty turtle's shell, el tambor, a drum and all sorts of bamboo and clay whistles and flutes. They also had two marimbas, which are large wooden xylophones. Up to three players can be accommodated by each marimba.

These instruments could provide a wide range of music but Grupo Ixim W'anima stuck strictly to Guatemalan music. In spite of the serious themes of their songs, the music was very upbeat and made you want to tap your toe.

For example, the first song, Pa'Donde va Maria, asks the question Where is Maria Going? It recounts the painful flight of Guatemalan people from their homes into the surrounding mountains. More than 140 indigenous communities have been destroyed, their buildings burned to the ground, in recent years.

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Our Town

George
Beaver



Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced. People like little Maria. She is a refugee because the rich and powerful want her people's land. Thousands like her have left the country and are living in Mexico. Others are existing in the slums of cities or in the remote mountains.

Guatemala should not be confused with Nicaragua, where U.S.-backed Contras are fighting the duly-elected government. Guatemala and Nicaragua do not even border on each other. San Salvador and Honduras are between them.

Guatemala, too, has felt the heavy hand of the U.S. In 1954, a coup backed by the Central Intelligence Agency is said to have overthrown the government of Hacoabo Arbenz, ending a 10-year period of democratic rule. It was the only democratic rule Guatemala has had since the arrival of Europeans almost 500 years ago.

For some 30 years the Guatemalan army has been in power. Its record as a violator of human rights is staggering. One of the statistics is 100,000 political assassinations since 1954. Another is an estimated 40,000 people who have simply disappeared. A large number of these were native people.

On this cold Canadian winter evening, the Children of the Land of Corn danced barefooted as they would have in Guatemala, where it is very warm. Their dark eyes and bright, flashing smiles showed an indomitable spirit. They are the descendants of the Maya Indians who built magnificent cities with great pyramids and palaces 3,000 years ago. At the same time, they developed writing.

Before beginning their part of the program, one of them read in the Jacalteco Indian language, from the ancient, sacred book of the Mayans. Jacalteco is one of the 22 indigenous languages of Guatemala. The sacred book of the Maya is called The Popol Vuh. There is a copy, translated into English, in the Brantford Public Library.