



An Indigenous Rebel with a Cause
Lucia Ixchú, Festivales Solidarios
Guatemala

There's a special feeling of harmony and balance that permeates the small city of Totonicapán, Guatemala. Nestled into a green valley below the Cuxniquel, Campanabaj, and Cerro de Coxóm mountains, Totonicapán is home to one of the most important populations of the K'iche' Maya people in the country. It's a place that for centuries has shown that humans and the natural world can coexist, in harmony with one another.

It's here that Lucia Ixchú grew up. She's indigenous — as are her parents, and their parents before them — and she is proud of her heritage. But she didn't always feel like she fit into the common stereotypes about indigenous people, especially indigenous women. In fact, growing up Lucia was a bit of a rebel.

Her first act of rebellion came when she was just four years old. When it came to after-school activities, the gender roles in her small community school were quite strict. Boys took karate classes, while the girls would learn to play instruments, dance, and cook. No one questioned this until Lucia came along and decided to flip the gender roles upside down. When she was told that she couldn't attend karate lessons, she went up to her music teacher after class and told him — simply and directly — that she wanted to do karate, as well. He respected her choice. Looking back, she sees that this was the moment she became an activist. "From that age, from that moment, I discovered that my opinion mattered, that my opinion had value and that it should be respected," she says.

Not only was Lucia the only girl in her school to participate in a boys' sport that year, she was the first girl to ever do so. She remembers walking proudly along with the boys, all of them decked out in karate suits and belts, in the community parade that same year. It was her first act of rebellion, and a sign of things to come for Lucia.

Lucia thanks her mother and father for teaching her how to think outside of the box and fight for what she believes in from an early age. They supported her creativity, gave her an education, and instilled in her a lifelong passion for art and sports. But she also thanks something else for her political awakening—rock music.

Rock came into her life when she was 11. She liked the traditional music of her indigenous community, but she loved rock 'n roll even more. She could hear it on the radio from time to time when the signal from larger cities flitted onto her radio at home. She listened to the Beatles, Rage Against the Machine, and the Spanish folk metal group Mägo de Oz. She was especially inspired by Mägo de Oz. In 2003, these Madrid rockers released the first album of a trilogy, "Gaia." The album, which is named after the Latin name for planet earth, became like a handbook for Lucia.

"In my own personal development, I always talk about music, and especially rock music, because that was the first thing in my life that politicized me," she says. "These groups spoke to me about the importance of protecting mother earth; about sexual diversity, about the importance of loving everyone equally; and about a whole heap of things that impacted me at that age.

For Lucia, music provided a way to break down the stereotypes about indigenous Mayan women. She says it helped her to "decolonize" her mind from Western thinking and begin to understand that being an indigenous woman itself required an act of rebellion against a system inherently structured against her. She gained a newfound appreciation for the land, as well — a land that her community had owned and protected against invasion from other countries for centuries.

Music would continue to be important to Lucia as she grew older, but now it took on political importance. She finished high school and went to college to study architecture. During her studies she became involved with student activist groups and indigenous land protectors. And on October 4, 2012, she and a number of other students joined a national protest against a rise in electricity prices, which was adversely affecting poor, indigenous Mayans, like the ones in her community. They took to the streets peacefully and called on the private energy monopoly to lower the prices, but the movement was broken up by armed police. Six people were killed, and many others arrested.

Less than three weeks later, the people protested the violent repression they had suffered, by spraying the presidential palace in Guatemala City with red paint. The government cracked down again and this time five more student activists were arrested.

Among the students arrested were friends of Lucia's, fellow activists like herself. It was another moment that marked her young life and inspired her to take action. She knew that if she wanted to see her friends freed, she would have to create awareness of what was happening— and make it a loud statement. And what better way than music?

She'd already organized a number of cultural events in her community, around issues involving the marginalization and criminalization of indigenous communities, and she knew a number of musicians from her time at school. After the October 4 massacre, she began to make her cultural activities more politically focused, and to tell both her story and the stories of others through art and music. She reached out to her musician friends, and one by one, they began to volunteer their voices, and their instruments, to the campaign to free the student activists.

Along with two friends, Lucia started Festivales Solidarios (Solidarity Festivals) as a way to counteract the repression they felt, as well as some of the broader challenges facing Guatemala's indigenous communities. Through music, spoken word, poetry, and art they managed to build up the momentum to free their friends.

But Festivales Solidarios wasn't just a one-time event. Every time an activist or a student or a journalist faces prison simply for speaking out, Lucia, her sister Andrea, and the rest of the team at Festivales Solidarios bring together artists and musicians to amplify everyone's voices together.

And their action soon morphed into something even bigger — a movement that uses art and music to create change and is bringing awareness to a variety of forms of repression and inequality that persist across the country. In 2019, the group created The Panal Project, which focuses on finding new ways to tell human rights stories, and strategic use of various media and digital platforms to address issues of territory, historical memory, and political imprisonment. In particular, this project promotes the use of public spaces to encourage and engage in dialogue on human rights among people gathered in parks, streets, and other public spaces.

Increasingly, the group is also speaking up and rebelling for mother earth - Gaia. "In our indigenous language we call her 'Heart of the Land,'" Lucia says. "That's how we, as indigenous peoples, see the earth. She is our heart, and we are part of her."

Guatemala used to be known for its "eternal spring," but now the climate is becoming more unpredictable. International corporations are desecrating their communal lands, bringing in extractive industries that pollute the water and the air — disrupting the precious balance of the ecosystem. and threatening plant and insect species to the point of extinction.

Despite having received threats to her personal safety, Lucia continues to host the festivals. The government, she says, has never been supportive of the festivals, or of the indigenous community, but she's not afraid. She believes in the causes they champion protection of the land, civil liberties, and fundamental human rights. And that gives her courage. "I don't have any fear, because I know that what I am fighting for is the right thing," she says. "The only thing I fear is intolerance."

Today Lucia is 29, working as both an architect and a journalist. "So far, the government has turned a blind eye to the massive loss of biodiversity in Guatemala's forests, brought on by rising temperatures, pollution, and human activities like mining," she says. In her lifetime alone, temperatures in the forests surrounding Totonicapán have increased by

two degrees Celsius. The nights have gotten colder and the days warmer. Now people have to ration their precious water - with strict regulations on its use.

For Lucia, the best way to resist these environmental changes is through music and art that brings forth a new and hopeful message — one that puts the needs of the community and the natural environment above those of people with greed and power. “We are supporting a future in which people can live better, where kids have the right to breathe clean air and drink clean water, where they can know clean rivers and mountains full of trees,” she says. “Everything we are doing is for nature, and for our collective future.”

What I treasure most in life is being able to dream. During my most difficult moments and complex situations, I have been able to dream of a more beautiful future.

Rigoberta Menchu

Call to Action: Join with others in your community to fight for a cleaner, safer, sustainable environment. Inspire others to join you through the use of art and music. Support Festivales Solidarios in the work they are doing: <https://twitter.com/festivalesgt?s=20>

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