

# Chiapas and Guerrero through an uncensored lens

[Brenda Norrell](#) / Indian Country Today

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Zapatista comandantes speak at the Indigenous Congress in Michoacan, Mexico in 2001. They were protected by the ~~white monkeys,~~ wearing white overalls who linked arms and formed a circle around them as they moved through the crowds on the Zapatista caravan for indigenous rights through the towns of central Mexico. The Zapatistas, indigenous rights, music and the arts were the central focus of films from the Chiapas Media Project which showed in Flagstaff in March. (Brenda Norrell / Indian Country Today)

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. - When the videos made by indigenous in Chiapas and Guerrero stopped rolling, in the audience at Northern Arizona University, Navajo, Hopi and Dakota said the time has come for indigenous to tell their own stories with video.

"The time has arrived to exchange machetes and machine guns for video cameras," said world-renowned Navajo painter Shonto Begay, among hundreds in the audience for screenings of the Chiapas Media Project.

"The lens tells the truth as opposed to what the government continues to fabricate," Begay said.

Shy and petite Mayan women in Chiapas and Tlapaneco corn and bean farmers in Guerrero tell the stories rising from the blood of the struggle for autonomy and dignity in Mexico.

The three videos screened, among 20 videos produced by the project, told the stories of emerging self-government in Chiapas, the music of the heart of traditional Mayans and the creation of indigenous Community Police in Guerrero halting murders, assaults and rapes.

Alex Halkin, coordinator of the Chiapas Media Project, said videomakers

are now producing a documentary about two indigenous women gang-raped by the Mexican military in Guerrero. "What is important is that we are documenting it," Halkin said. "It happens every day, every week, every month." Young indigenous women are raped in front of their families by the military.

Halkin told hundreds of students, activists and professors in the university library March 4, that the Zapatistas have been the most documented indigenous people in the world, in print, film and audio. There is, however, an enormous difference in the story when told by the people themselves.

"The communities never portray themselves as victims. They portray themselves as survivors."

The videos in Chiapas and Guerrero emerge, not from an independent videomaker's vision, but from the collective vision of the indigenous community.

Halkin, a documentary-maker who arrived in Chiapas in 1995 and sought grant funding for the media project, is a facilitator.

"I can't tell these people's stories, I don't speak their language."

In Chiapas, Halkin's work is nearly complete, with a video production center established in San Cristobal de la Casas, five regional media centers and satellite Internet on the way. The new work is focused in Guerrero.

"Guerrero is more violent than Chiapas," Halkin said of the oppressive and unrestrained military, judicial police and drug trafficking. Guerrero is the number one exporter of heroine.

Indigenous are the victims of constant homicides, assaults and rapes. When the Tlapaneco and Mixteco began to organize in the Costa Chica and Montana regions, they were robbed, beaten, raped and murdered. The video, "Reclaiming Justice," tells how the Community Police organized to take back their communities. They put offenders to work building adobe blocks to rehabilitate them back into the community. The Mexican government, however, considers the indigenous Community Police illegal. "The government has tried to shut them down," Halkin said.

The Chiapas video "Caracoles, New Paths of Resistance," celebrates the birth of the Zapatistas' new self-governance, filmed in Oventik in August 2003. It shares the message of "building a new world with accomplices all over the world." With traditional music and scenes of an indigenous women's basketball game, the Mayan-made video includes the announcement that alcohol will be banned and vehicles searched for drugs, weapons and contraband in the new Zapatista self-government.

In the video, Zapatista comandantes urge fighting without surrender in the struggle for dignity and justice.

Comandante Fidelia spoke of respect for women. "This is going to be compulsory."

Comandante Tacho told of the suffering of the people. While prices rise, coffee and corn farmers are paid less and mocked for their work. Controlled by high interest rates, he said, "They have held us captive with cruelty."

The video ends with a plea for the hearts of the people and a reminder that the eyes of the world are watching.

"Son de Tierra, Song of the Earth," video shares the traditional guitar, harp and gourd rattle. The elders' make a plea to keep traditional music alive. It is told in the Tzotzil and Tzeltal languages. Since the emergence of the Zapatistas, the musicians have given up drinking alcohol during performances. Describing their music as the music of the heart, they say it honors the Creator, celebrates family and makes people happy.

"It's been a long time coming," said Din•/Dakota activist and musician Hunter Red Day after the video screenings. Red Day said the connection between indigenous movements in the United States, Canada and Latin countries have been ongoing in the struggle. "Not many people know that the underground people have been collaborating between Big Mountain and Chiapas."

Lillian Hill, Hopi from Kykotsmovi, said the videos sound out the strong voices of indigenous women. "Seeing indigenous women in Chiapas having that voice is very powerful," Hill said.

Roberto Nutlouis, Navajo from Pinon and cofounder of Navajo and Hopi youths Black Mesa Water Coalition, said it was empowering to see people with so little means in Chiapas and Guerrero making such an impact. Nutlouis said even though the government's attempts to oppress the people, indigenous people are rising up in self-determination and self-governance.

Halkin said when she arrived in Chiapas, she was impressed with how the Zapatistas had used the Internet to get their message out to the world.

Currently, the Chiapas Media Project is establishing satellite Internet access for villagers. "The Internet is going to be incredibly useful." While the Zapatistas establish autonomous communities in Chiapas, the world is also responding with orders for Zapatista coffee and other products.

One college student asked Halkin if it is difficult to balance maintaining traditional culture with the introduction of the Internet. Halkin said, "They tell me that they take what they like and get rid of what they don't."

Currently in Mexico, Zapatistas have given up hope of working with the government or President Vicente Fox. Halkin said the Mexican Congress deflated the indigenous rights bill and removed key language about indigenous land ownership.

"The Mexican government has done a fabulous job of communicating misinformation." This is also true in the United States where Zapatistas are described as terrorists, instead of indigenous people fighting for survival. Halkin said the low intensity war in Chiapas is ongoing with paramilitary recklessly killing whoever they please.

Meanwhile, following a recent film festival coast in the United States, she said there is little awareness of indigenous issues in the United States and Canada. "It was very disheartening. They have no clue what is going on."

Halkin, on her way to Australia, said indigenous in Mexico want to tour Indian lands in the United States and Canada, but the door has not opened. They continue to search for the links.

Indigenous will gather in Santiago, Chile in June for a world summit of indigenous filmmakers. Halkin said even though most indigenous cannot afford to attend, their videos will be there.

"They should be able to tell their own stories, they shouldn't be dependent on the mass media or the independent media to tell their stories."