

Global Uprising

**Confronting the Tyrannies
of the 21st Century**

**Stories from
a New Generation
of Activists**



NEVA WELTON AND LINDA WOLF

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA WOLF



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Por Vida

In Solidarity with the U'wa People

| ABBY REYES |

It's been two years now. In March 1999, my partner Terence Unity Freitas and two Native American colleagues were kidnapped and assassinated by left-wing guerrillas in northeastern Colombia while exiting U'wa indigenous land coveted by US oil giant Occidental Petroleum (Oxy). For almost a decade, the U'wa community has worked to protect their lives, culture, and ancestral territory from the next wave of imperialist colonization — that of energy resource exploitation by transnational corporations and the Colombian government. Terence, with indigenous rights workers Lahe'ena'e Gay and Ingrid Washinawatok, worked with the community's leadership to support and strengthen that struggle.

Just this afternoon, I finally opened Terence's boxes of photographs that he took during earlier trips to U'wa territory. An electric blue butterfly flutters gracefully out of the box. A waterfall taller than the sky plunges into a deep green pool, surrounded by misty forest. A young U'wa woman weaves the satchel that I now carry. An 87-year-old man rigs his bird trap with a smirk. Terence, led by children, sashes through the mud and up a tree. A pair of parrots, zealously green. White egret. Scarlet ibis. Seeing life teeming and



Beth Blosser

▲
Abby Reyes



▲
*U'wa woman
and child.*

TERENCE UNITY FREITA

thriving, vital, through the glimpses of these photos, I begin to breathe deeply again. The fear and burden of opening these boxes — building over these two years as Terence's close buddies and I continue to work in solidarity with the U'wa community — dissipates with the flap of a butterfly's wings.

There are other photos that offer silent testimony to an ecosystem jolted out of equilibrium. Bright yellow plastic buoys linked together across a stagnant pool of oil-soaked creek bed. Oil in the rocky wash. Armed soldiers jockeying out the side of a jeep. An Oxy helicopter trailing Terence's walkabout. An oil pipeline, carrying the blood of our mother pulsing through its artificial artery, winding to a port at the ocean's shore, where 60 percent of the oil travels straight to US refineries.

U'wa men and women, who have been chosen by their elders to represent the community to the outside world, speak from the depths about their spiritual mandate to protect the equilibrium of the Earth by protecting their own land *kajka-ika* — the heart of the world. Every summer, this mandate is instilled and strengthened throughout the community during purification through fasting and a recitation of their oral history that takes two weeks to sing.

Most knowledge is stored in song. At one recent meeting, Armando, the U'wa community's secretary of education, drew for us a map of seven headwaters in U'wa territory that are effected by Occidental's new oil project. Stuck, Armando sang and sang to recall the name of one of the rivers into which Oxy is dumping displaced mountainside. The U'wa are of that land and those waters. When the

U'wa people are displaced from that home, a millennium of knowledge about maintaining peace and equilibrium there are displaced, too. Displaced mountain clouds the clear flow of river.

In another series of photos, taken in 1998, Terence and two U'wa men stand upon sacred boulders overlooking the planned drill site. The site, called Gibraltar 1, is home to a couple of different U'wa communities and ritual grounds. It is also home to a number of non-U'wa campesinos, who are as opposed to the prospective oil exploitation as the U'wa themselves.

In late 1999, the Colombian government declared Gibraltar 1 to be outside of U'wa territory. Within weeks thereafter, it swiftly bypassed all pretense of community consultation — an internationally and constitutionally guaranteed right of indigenous Colombians — and issued Oxy its license to drill. But before the government moved to kick the U'wa out of Gibraltar 1, the U'wa bought their ancestral land back from the *campesinos*. Through this unencumbered, legally titled purchase, the U'wa (in effect) bought parcels of the drill site itself — the land granted to Oxy on the basis of it being outside of U'wa territory. The Colombian courts are still trying to figure this one out.

In a move to ease the requirements to begin drilling, the Colombian government illegally changed the zoning of the U'wa land. A few days later, U'wa leaders presented the government with archival evidence of colonial titles for that land from 1661. These 14 “Royal Land Deeds,” issued by the King of Spain, recognize preexisting rights of indigenous people in Colombia — claims that later Colombian laws uphold. When met with this documentation, the Colombian national ministers sat in silence. They had no reply. Their reply came implicitly two weeks later, when Colombia poured

substantial military resources into protection as Occidental moved its equipment into place for drilling.

Absent from Terence's boxes are photos documenting the massive nonviolent mobilizations that the U'wa maintained for the months leading up to the start of the drilling. Terence didn't live long enough to see it. Swelling to over 4,000 people at its peak, the U'wa — along with farmers unions, students, clergy, other indigenous groups, and even local Oxy workers — mobilized for months at a time to occupy the drill site, block access roads, block national ministries in Bogotá and the Pan-American highway.

In Colombia, the U'wa struggle has become one of several symbols of resistance to the development model that pins its hopes on megaprojects like oil exploitation to provide economic panaceas. They are taking a stand for their vision of ecological and people-centered development. But the political climate of escalating armed violence has muted almost any international echo of this stand, despite a great show of solidarity through direct action and advocacy in the US and Europe.

Shortly after Terence, Ingrid, and Lahe' were assassinated, conservative members of the US Congress used the murders as a rallying cry for the US to quit its support of the peace talks in Colombia. Instead, our Congress has moved to shape and help implement the Colombian government's new military offensive. On March 30, 2000, U'wa leader Roberto Perez and I sat waiting for a delayed advocacy meeting with one US Congressional ally. In his office, we watched the TV monitor of the House floor count the votes leading to Plan Colombia's approval. Under the banner of the drug war, Plan Colombia ties extensive military aid directly to Colombia's willingness to open its petroleum resources to foreign corporations.

As such, Plan Colombia amplifies a movement that is swiftly changing the face of the agrarian landscape and provides perfect circumstances for an oil company to once again use the chaos of war to settle in as indigenous communities, such as the U'wa, are wiped off the map.

There is one image of Terence sitting cross-legged in the shade of a thatched porch awning, leaning up against the wall of a wooden house. The photo is taken from the side. The jungle teems with heat in the high sun beyond him, blackening his silhouette. He is 24. He is hunched slightly over a notebook. I imagine him pensive. I imagine him tired and full — full of stories to tell and life to give. As I look, I realize that this is the photo we used at his memorial service to accompany the text of a letter he wrote to a friend about working with the U'wa. In the letter, he first conveys despair about the civil war and cynicism about whether our work for peace will be able to make a dent. Then he goes on to describe a menarche ceremony, in which his U'wa companions allowed him to take part:

Sometimes one would end and begin the song that the other was finishing.... Every once in a while, there would be silence, when the medicine people had all stopped their songs. Silence of voices but not of sound. The reverberation of hours and hours of singing stays in the house, in the wood, in the earthen floor. Then the singing starts again.... That is the reason we are doing this work, so that people can listen to singing.



COURTESY OF ABBY REYES

▲ Terence Unity Freitas

It's been two years now. Terence's song, we know now, was a sweet, brief harmony to the Earth's timeless rhythms. Like an electric blue flap of the butterfly's wings. Gone in an instant and forever imprinted on the memory, beckoning the breath to breathe deeper.

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