

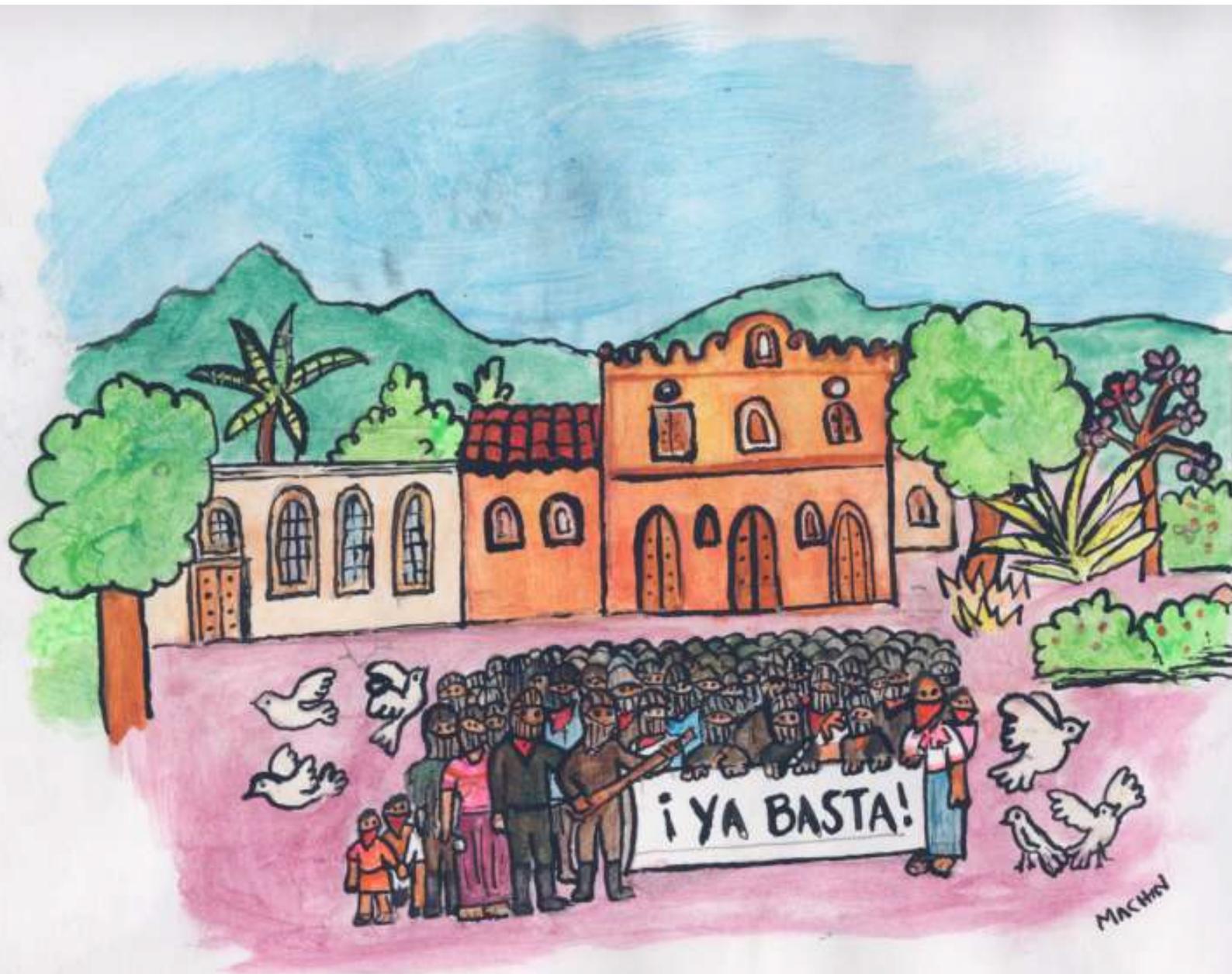
Ramona: Rebel Dreamweaver



by Juan Machin

After more than five hundred years of exploitation,
the women and men of corn said:

"ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!"



On the morning of the first of January 1994,
the Mayan men and women led by Ramona
took over the city of San Cristobal, Chiapas, Mexico.



But who was Ramona?

Ramona was an indigenous Tzotzil woman of corn, dark as the color of the earth, with a red huipil blouse and obsidian eyes hidden behind a black ski mask, small in stature but giant in dignity. Ramona was elected in a huge assembly as representative of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation because of her work organizing and defending the weavers.

From an embroidery weaver,
Ramona became a rebel weaver of dreams,



the voice of the voiceless,
the secret weapon and the heart
of the Zapatista National Liberation Army...

The first day of January, 1994 dawned not only with the rising of the sun, but also with the light emanating from the dark faces covered by ski masks...



It dawned like this because the women and men of corn had decided to change Mexico or to die trying: they became soldiers so that one day soldiers would not be necessary; professionals of hope, hoping that everything would change, one fine day...



Men and women who left everything behind so that there would be democracy, freedom, justice and a dignified life for everyone, so that they could get up every morning without words that silence and without so much suffering...

Twelve days after the EZLN uprising,
Mexican civil society held a huge march
to demand a ceasefire
from President Carlos Salinas



and the start of a dialogue
for peace with justice and dignity.

President Salinas declared a ceasefire and a few days later offered to pardon the Zapatistas.

Subcomandante Marcos, EZLN spokesman, replied:

What do we have to ask forgiveness for?

What are they going to “pardon” us for?

For not dying of hunger?

For not accepting our misery in silence?

For not humbly accepting the huge historic burden of disdain and abandonment?

For having risen up in arms when we found all other paths closed?

For having shown the country and the rest of the whole world that human dignity still exists and is in the hearts of the most impoverished citizens?

For calling the Mexican people to fight by all means necessary, for what rightfully belongs to them?

For fighting for freedom, democracy and justice?

Who should ask for forgiveness
and who should grant it?"

Days later, the dialogue to seek peace with dignity began in the Cathedral of San Cristobal, under the protection of Bishop Samuel Ruiz. The Zapatistas explained that they had come down from the mountains carrying their backpacks, their dead and their history, in order to find the real country. The homeland that had forgotten about the last corner of the country; the most isolated, poorest, dirtiest, worst corner of the country.



And they said: "We have come to ask the country... Why did you leave us there so many years?... Why is it necessary to kill and die for you to listen to Ramona say such terrible things as indigenous women want to live and to educate themselves, that they want hospitals, medicine, schools, food, justice, dignity?"

At that time, Subcomandante Marcos, in a letter to a child, explained what the Zapatistas wanted.



"In our dreams we have seen another world, an honest world, a world decidedly more fair than the one in which we now live. We saw that in this world there was no need for armies; peace, justice and liberty were so common that no one talked about them as far-off concepts, but as things such as bread, birds, air, water, like book and voice.

This true world was not a dream from the past, it was not something that came to us from our ancestors. It came from ahead, the next step we were going to take.



And so we started to walk ahead to attain that dream, make it come and sit at our tables, light our homes, grow in our cornfields, fill the hearts of our children, wipe our sweat, clean our history. And it was for everyone. That is what we want. Nothing more, but nothing less."

For that dream, Ramona had initiated the Women's Revolutionary Law that incorporates women and their demands in the struggle: "I understand that it is better to die fighting than starve. If necessary, if the cause is just, if it is for the sake of my people, then I am ready to die for it, because we have not found another way to achieve justice."



Ramona fell seriously ill and many people in many parts of the world organized to pressure the government to allow her to be taken to the hospital in Mexico City. Ramona received a kidney donated by her brother and managed to steal 10 more years of life from death.



President Ernesto Zedillo, in an act of cowardly betrayal, broke the truce on February 9, 1995 and launched an offensive against the Zapatistas.

Ramona, weak and convalescing, addressed the nation on February 19 with a firm and dignified voice:

"Our movement is indigenous. It started many years ago in order to tell the world that the peasants of Chiapas suffer hunger and disease. I myself am sick. Perhaps I will die soon. Many other children, women and men are also sick. We suffer from many illnesses, but we don't have access to doctors, medicine, or hospitals. We are hungry. Our basic diet is tortillas and salt. We eat beans when we have them. We have hardly any milk or meat. We lack access to many services that most Mexicans have. When we go to work, we are exploited. The artisans in the markets, they are exploited, the women who work as house servants in the cities, they are exploited, the women and men who work in the field, they are exploited.

At first we asked for democracy, justice and dignity; now we also ask for peace. We are ready for dialogue, so we want the army to return to their barracks; and we demand that the children, women and men who have taken refuge in the mountains be allowed to return back to their communities to continue working for a better future.

Again we ask the people of Mexico not to forget us, to not abandon us, to help us build the peace that we all desire. We also ask for the protection of Tatic Samuel who knows so well our suffering, and has fought for peace. I wish that all women would wake up and feel the need to organize within their hearts; with crossed arms we cannot build the free and fair Mexico that we all dream of: Democracy, Justice, Dignity and Peace..."

Once more, under pressure from national and international civil society, the government was obliged to suspend hostilities and on March 11, 1995, the Law for Dialogue, Reconciliation, and a Just Peace in Chiapas was approved, and a Commission on Concordance and Pacification was created.



A short time later,
the San Andrés Sacamch'én
de los Pobres peace talks began.



When Mexican authorities banned the Zapatistas from participating in the National Indigenous Congress in Mexico City, Ramona, frail and sick, was commissioned to represent them.

In October 1996, Ramona traveled to Mexico City and, before 100,000 people gathered in the Zocalo, said:

"Our Zapatista word is in itself very small, but its passage is great and it walks very far and enters into many hearts."

"Mexican brothers and sisters: I am Comandanta Ramona of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. I represent the first of many steps of the Zapatistas to Mexico City and every part of Mexico. We hope that you will walk with us. This is our word, Mexican brothers and sisters."

"We came here to join with you and together shout: Never again a Mexico without us!"



Like a golden seal, the tiny, ill indigenous woman named Ramona presented the national flag to Don Felix Serdán, a small, elderly farmer ... shaming the powerful who trembled before her presence, because she had launched a singular battle for peace on behalf of thousands like her, for pure dignity, saying, "Enough is enough!"



The last time Ramona was seen publicly was on September 16, 2005, when, despite her delicate health, she spoke a few words at the opening plenary session of the "Other Campaign" initiative that aimed to build a new Mexico by and for those from below.

"Very good evening compañeros and compañeras. My name is Comandanta Ramona. I am happy that so many people have come here. We offer our greetings, and say that we are all eager to get to work, and to work together. That is my word, thank you ..."

Subcomandante Marcos tells how Ramona,
"On that day of the plenary, gave us an embroidery she had made while she was recovering from the operation almost ten years ago and handed it to me and said she hoped that the Other Campaign was like the embroidery, that's what we have to do."

Comandanta Ramona died on January 6, 2006 and, as Marcos said, "The world has lost one of those women it requires. Mexico has lost one of the combative women it needs and we, we have lost a piece of our heart...Ramona dreamed and fought faithfully for a dignified life and that's what counts, to fight for life even though we must someday embrace death..."



From our dispossession and our broken bodies a new world will have to rise up. Will we see it? Does it matter if we see it? I think that it does not matter as much as knowing for certain that it will be born and that, in the long and painful birth of history, we contributed something and everything: life, body and soul. Love and pain, not only do they rhyme [in Spanish, "amor y dolor"] but they unite and march together."

- Subcomandante Marcos