

## HIST222

### Unit 6 Assessment: “Primary Source Analysis: Rigoberta Menchú Tum” Answer Guide

1. When thinking about a primary source, it is essential to consider the historical context in which that primary source existed. In this case, the interview in 1992 occurred on the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s discovery of the New World. The anniversary served to highlight the plight of indigenous people half a millennium after the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. The other major event was the Guatemalan civil war, which took place from 1960 to 1996. During the civil war, the Guatemalan government fought against indigenous people, who resorted to guerilla warfare in response to massacres by the Guatemalan military. These two events are important historical influences upon Menchú at the time of her interview; note especially how the mention of Columbus and his legacy frames her discussion of the problems facing native peoples of Latin America.
2. Rigoberta Menchú’s family was killed by the Guatemalan military. Her father was burned alive by the army after he participated in the peaceful takeover of the Spanish Embassy. Her mother was kidnapped by the military and ultimately tortured and killed as well. The loss of her family motivated her lifelong quest to protect the basic human rights of people in Guatemala. Her outspoken criticism of the government forced her into exile in 1981.
3. Menchú does not believe that people should celebrate Columbus’s discovery of the New World. She describes the celebration as an expression of continued European occupation and dominance of indigenous history; furthermore, she characterizes the celebration as presumptuous because Latin American governments should be ashamed of how they have treated indigenous people over the past 500 years. Despite her objections, she does acknowledge that the event is an opportunity for native peoples to take advantage of international attention. Specifically, she mentions the United Nations’ designation of 1993 as the International Year of Indigenous Peoples as one way the 500th anniversary helped make the international community more aware of indigenous people.
4. Menchú tells her interviewer, Anders Riis-Hansen, that the majority of the population of Guatemala (65%) is indigenous and very diverse. In addition to Spanish, Menchú notes that there are 23 different languages in Guatemala. Unfortunately, we also learn that at that time, female illiteracy was extraordinarily high; according to Menchú, 99 percent of indigenous women had not gone to school.
5. Menchú describes Guatemalan actions at a summit of Central American presidents in San Jose, Portugal, as exposing the racism of the Guatemalan government. Menchú presented a report of the development of Guatemala, but the Guatemalan delegation had threatened to leave the summit if she did so. She attributed the delegation’s

reaction to racism because, as she said, they were ashamed to have a poor, self-taught, indigenous woman presenting at the summit.

6. Menchú says that in contrast to El Salvador and Nicaragua, which had achieved some peace by 1992, the civil war in Guatemala continued because so many indigenous people were victims of government violence. She says that not only were 80 percent of the victims indigenous, their demands continued to be unmet, which she claims made peace impossible.

7. Menchú repeatedly refers to the international community as writing a “blank check” for the government of Guatemala to continue the civil war. By “blank check,” Menchú does not mean that the international community literally provided Guatemala with unlimited funding; rather she uses the term figuratively to suggest that the failure of the international community to take action against Guatemala effectively granted the government license to continue committing atrocities against civilians. She demands that international institutions impose concrete sanctions, like those applied to Iraq or Cuba, against Guatemala. She also points to deep economic inequality, supported by international economic institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), as root causes of the conflict.

8. Menchú says that the Nobel Prize discussion has broken the silence surrounding Guatemala. As a result, the indigenous people have gained a voice in government which allows them to speak out against the atrocities committed during the civil war. She does repeat, however, that the gap between the rich and poor must be eliminated, or peace will never come to Guatemala.

9. Menchú defines *impunity* loosely as a lack of initiative by the leader of Guatemala (at the time Jorge Antonio Serrano Elías) to hold people responsible for the atrocities they committed. Menchú associates impunity with the military’s willingness to repress and kill peasants without consequence throughout the course of the civil war. She also holds the international community responsible for contributing to the rule of impunity in Guatemala.

10. Menchú connects Guatemala’s conflict to the rest of the world in several explicit ways. First, she identifies Guatemala as one part of a larger divide between the First and Third Worlds. She argues that there is not peace throughout the Americas because the First World has taken the riches of the Third World, leading to violence, corruption, and repression. Second, in her discussion of impunity, Menchú says that she condemns impunity wherever it occurs in the world. Finally, in mentioning economic sanctions that were placed on other nations, Menchú challenges the rest of the world to take action on Guatemala by pointing to the hypocrisy of imposing sanctions for violence in some countries but not others.