

"Heaven and Earth Don't Belong to the Companies" - An interview with Lenca activist Pascuala Vásquez on the legacy of Berta Cáceres and the defense of indigenous territories and culture in Honduras

By Pascuala Vásquez and Beverly Bell, 05/02/2017

<https://nacla.org/news/2017/05/08/heaven-and-earth-don%27t-belong-companies>

"Berta didn't die. She multiplied," is an oft-heard chant in Honduras. The significance of the life of Berta Cáceres, warrior for indigenous peoples and the sanctity of Mother Earth, continues growing. So, too, does the significance of her assassination in March 2016, as more evidence emerges about [the role of the U.S.](#) and Honduran governments, and the internationally financed [dam company DESA](#), in the crime.



Pascuala Vásquez in front of shrine to Berta Cáceres (Photo by Beverly Bell)

Also multiplying around the world is hope and action inspired by [Cáceres' message](#) that the world needs radical, structural transformation. As she said regarding the fight against capitalism, racism, and patriarchy [when she received a Goldman Environmental Prize](#) in 2015, "Wake up! Wake up, humanity! There is no time left."

The organization Cáceres founded 24 years ago, the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), continues multiplying, too. About a dozen new Lenca communities have recently joined the 200-plus communities already united in protecting their territories, waters, communities, and rights from the government and multinational corporations.

Cáceres' family and [Gustavo Castro Soto](#) are now compiling evidence for their joint trial against the Honduran government. Castro, director of Friends of the Earth-Mexico, was on a brief visit from Chiapas when he was wounded twice and almost killed in the assault in Cáceres' home. He then spent a month [illegally detained](#) in Honduras, where he was tortured. The sole witness to Cáceres' death, Castro told us, "If I hadn't been there that night, it would have been the perfect assassination." As it is, the trial threatens to blow the lid off of impunity the Honduran and U.S. states and transnational capital.

The Honduran government has blocked the plaintiffs' efforts for a fair and transparent trial, denying them access to information, disappearing six months of evidence they had filed with the court, and refusing the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' offer to help. While eight men have been arrested as suspects – including one in Castro's home town in Mexico - the intellectual authors of the crime continue to walk freely.

The Berta Cáceres Human Rights Act, introduced into the U.S. Congress this past March, calls for the U.S. to cut off security assistance to the government of Honduras until it makes improvements in human rights. (If your congressperson isn't yet on board, please [urge him or her to sponsor](#) the bill.)

Below, Pascuala Vásquez tells more about the Lenca fight, and offers insights into a little publicized part of COPINH and Cáceres' work: reliance on Lenca culture and spirituality to keep the movement strong and the Earth whole. A 75-year-old farmer and organizer, Vásquez is also COPINH's spiritual leader, head of COPINH's Lenca Cultural Committee, and member of the Council of Elders.

Beverly Bell: You've been part of COPINH for many years, correct?

Pascuala Vásquez: I've been struggling with COPINH since the very beginning. We started with pressuring the government so the children could learn to read and write. There weren't schools; everyone had to travel far to study a bit.

COPINH's first victory was to successfully negotiate with the government so that mayors of our townships weren't just imposed by the government, but so we [indigenous community members] could have assemblies and elect them democratically.

Then we got community titles to our lands. And then we kicked out the lumber companies, lots of them, who were stealing our wood.

This was all in the beginning. Now they say that because they killed Berta, COPINH will stop existing, we'll give up. No, we'll continue. We have to.

I see a lot of attention [to our work] these days. There are delegations from other countries coming all the time. They're helping us pressure the court [for a fair trial in the double attack] and pressure the state.

The struggle isn't dead. We're very alive. We have more compañeros and compañeras who are willing to move forward. We won't get discouraged. The struggle isn't dead. We're very alive. We have more compañeros and compañeras who are willing to move forward. We won't get discouraged.

They [the government] are making us angrier, they're lighting up this fire. So let's light it up! We have to move forward. We need justice.

We're fighting for the well-being of our children, and to defend the lands, the rivers, the mountains. That's been the obligation of COPINH since we started, and we're continuing. We're fighting for Mother Earth. That's where life resides. That's where health resides. If we don't defend all this, the new generations will be left with nothing. If we let dams be built, we're allowing projects that are against the people and Mother Earth.

God made the heaven and earth. Heaven and earth don't belong to the companies, who only want to destroy.

BB: Would you like to speak about the legacy of Berta Cáceres?

PV: Yes. About Berta: She's not dead. If the government set out to kill her, they didn't. We're in constant communication with her. She's fighting with us. We feel accompanied by her. We always ask for her strength to accompany us in spirit. She's with us to encourage us and give us light in what we should do. This fire hasn't been put out. The spirit of Bertita [Berta's nickname] is here.

That's the legacy and the path she left us, to bless Mother Earth. That's what we stand for.

If they think we'll go away, that's not going to happen. We're protesting at the presidential palace and National Congress.

BB: What is the relationship between the Lenca spirituality that you speak of and COPINH's struggle?

PV: To defend our territories, spirituality must come first. We start with prayer. We explain what we want and request guidance, and from there we move on. We ask God to defend us from danger and deliver peace. We don't want war. We don't want them sending people to destroy our communities and harm our women.

This is a call to stop the killing of women who are fighting. We need a change. We need peace. That's also why we speak to government and mayors, and conduct [community] assemblies, and fight.

The Earth is of the poor, the children and the people. Not the rich man. Why do they have such darkness in their hearts? We're sons and daughters of the same Mother Earth.

I've gone to Mexico, to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, to do ceremonies for the protection of rivers. We've made offerings to the rivers. We've done ceremonies in Rio Blanco [the community which has stopped construction of the most recent transnational dam], in the communities, in the rivers, in the mountains. We've done blessings and created altars.

BB: You are the head of the Lenca Cultural Committee of COPINH. Please tell us about the relationship between the Lenca culture and this struggle.

PV: The Lenca culture is the inheritance of our ancestors, based on relationship with our spirit guides, through ceremony and offerings. The spirits take care of the river.

In relation to our culture, I'll tell you a story about a man who had planted a corn field. This man's corn was destroyed by a landslide, and everything was lost. When he came the next day, he found the corn field again intact, with a child in the middle. The child told him he had to make an offering to the Earth. The children are the ones who take care of the Earth and they need to be offered things in return. We give them our offerings. We look to the four cardinal points. We make a hole in the Earth and put in [the sacred beverage] chichi, cacao, and corn. We have candles, and someone offers the prayers. That's the culture that was born from the experience with corn.

Anyone who doesn't make offerings or do ceremony for the earth, it's just a matter of time until something befalls him or her. If it's not a hurricane that wipes out corn fields, maybe it'll be a landslide. Houses are destroyed. We need to do ceremony for the houses, too, to allow the inhabitant to live there and live in harmony with the spirits.

Bertita left the road paved for us. She reinforced the Lenca culture, ensuring that there were many ceremonies, blessings of the rivers, of the communities.

This is the culture and the history our ancestors left us. The earth is our inheritance, if we commit to preserving the Lenca culture and doing blessings with everything that's required. Bertita was always encouraging this.

Translated by Raúl Valdivia.

Beverly Bell (bevbell@gmail.com) is coordinator of Other Worlds, an economic and social justice collaborative, and associate fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies. For 18 years preceding Cáceres' death, Bell collaborated closely with the global justice leader and with her group. Since Cáceres' assassination, Bell has lived and worked out of COPINH headquarters in Honduras.

[Wide Angle interview \(26 minutes\) with Grahame Russell \(Rights Action\)](#)

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- The assassination of Berta Cáceres, impunity and corruption;
- The U.S. and Canadian backed military coup, 2009;
- U.S. and Canadian business interests with the repressive and corrupt post-military coup regimes;
- Why so many Hondurans flee north to the U.S., year after year?

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