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Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán: Themes of a Tzutuhil Maya's Life Story

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Abstract

For the past twenty-nine years, Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán (a pseudonym) has been keeping a diary about his life, town (San José, a pseudonym), and country (Guatemala). During this time, I have been translating and editing his story, and, to date, we have published *Son of Tecún Umán* ([1981] 1990), *Campesino* (1985), and *Ignacio* (1992). The last volume in this series, *Joseño*, will be published in 2001. This paper identifies and discusses prominent themes in Ignacio's story, using examples from each of these books to illustrate the themes, and it offers insight into what it has meant to be a Tzutuhil Maya Indian living in the mid-western highlands for nearly three decades.

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Introduction

For the past twenty-nine years, I have been translating and editing the life story of Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán, a Tzutuhil Maya Indian who lives on the shore of beautiful Lake Atitlán, Guatemala. In 1972, at my behest, Ignacio wrote his autobiography and began to keep a diary of what he considered to be the significant events of his life, town, and country. Ignacio's story is unique, if for no other reason, being that he is the only anthropological subject who has kept a diary for more than a quarter of a century.¹ To date, his life story is recorded in four volumes, three published and one in press.

These volumes are important because they offer personal insights into what has taken place among the present-day Maya of Guatemala during the last two and one-half decades. Ignacio's account is also significant because a number of general themes emerge from it that help us better understand a different people in a different situation. The purpose of this article is to present excerpts of episodes that illustrate these themes. The themes and their accompanying episodes serve as an abridged version of all four volumes of Ignacio's life history. They are the story of his life, family, town, and country.

Background to Ignacio's Story

I met Ignacio in 1970 when I began my first anthropological fieldwork in San José (a pseudonym) as part of a team of researchers studying development and modernization in the 14 towns surrounding Lake Atitlán. Ignacio lived across a rocky, unpaved street from the house where I lived. When I asked him to be my research assistant to help collect a random sample of interview schedules, he agreed.

During my third season in Guatemala, I decided to approach Ignacio about keeping a journal of his life. Initially, I had two main goals in mind: first, I wanted to give Ignacio something to do for which I could pay him a reasonable wage, and second, I wanted to stay in touch with what was happening in the area while I would be away, finishing my doctoral thesis and teaching at a university.

I asked him to write about his family, town, work, religious activities, and even his dreams. My instructions were to keep accurate dates and times of important events. Following Walter Dyk (1938), I encouraged Ignacio to record both mundane and sensational events, and following Leo Simmons (1942), I also encouraged Ignacio to first write an autobiography and then to keep a diary.

By the fall of 1974, Ignacio had given me the first draft of his story in Spanish. And by the summer of 1975, I had completed the first English version. There were, however, some voids and confusion. In 1975 and 1976, I again traveled to Lake Atitlán to ask Ignacio questions about his story. Some questions I asked in San José; others I asked in the quiet and privacy of my rented house in Panajachel.

In translating and editing the books, I stayed as close as possible to Ignacio's own words to retain his patterns of speech. In most cases, grammatical and stylistic concerns dictated a free translation. For instance, I often insured that subjects and verbs agreed in number and that verbs in paragraphs were consistent in tense. In some cases, I deleted episodes that were trivial; in other cases, I asked Ignacio to clarify or expand on a section of an episode. When I did so, you will find my questions in italics.

After receiving official notice that the manuscript had been accepted by the University of Arizona Press and that the title would be *Son of Tecún Umán: A Maya Indian Tells His Life Story*, I returned to Panajachel in August of 1980 to consult with Ignacio for the last time before the book went to press. Despite the volatile political situation in Guatemala, Ignacio and I were able to spend two weeks discussing the pros and cons of anonymity. We concluded that it would be in his best interest, as the Press recommended, to change all the names of people and places in the general area except Lake Atitlán, Sololá, and Panajachel. We also discussed the local usage of Spanish words such as *misterio*, which is an older word used to express going to the church to worship God, which is now equivalent to *rosario*, or rosary. In addition, we worked on new episodes that we would include in a second volume.

Because of the delicate political situation in 1980, I did not take the launch to visit San José on this trip. After I sent a telegram to Ignacio, he came to see me in Panajachel. When I met him near the pier, armed plainclothesmen were searching the passengers disembarking from the launch. Ignacio told me about a military curfew enforced in San José and about a kidnapping that had taken place a week after my arrival in Panajachel.²

During a sabbatical in 1982, I translated and edited plenty of pertinent material for the second volume. By this time, problems of insurgency and counterinsurgency had become acute in Guatemala, and Ignacio's diary reflected this reality. Because of similar disturbances in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras, Central America had become the focus of international attention. Thus, I spent most of my sabbatical working to make the sequel as current as possible.

In July of 1982 I returned to Guatemala. Of all the trips I have made, this one was the most worrisome. At 9:30 p.m. the taxi picked me up at La Aurora International Airport for the ride across town to the Pan American Hotel in Zone 1. Although the streets were wet from the light rain that had been falling, it seemed strange that the main streets of the city were deserted so early and that the usual smell of diesel wasn't in the air. After an exquisite steak dinner at the hotel, I went to bed tired, but I could not go to sleep. I tossed and turned and finally dozed off about 2:30 a.m., but about two hours later a loud blast that rocked my room awoke me. A clandestine organization of the Left exploded a powerful bomb a few blocks away from my hotel. The group blew up the office of Servicios Aéreos de Honduras, Sociedad Anónima (SAHSA), to protest the presence of the Honduran army in El Salvador.

At daybreak I walked over to inspect the damage and take some pictures. Shattered glass covered the sidewalk, and the surrounding area was swarming with police and special investigators. On a nearby wall "Army out of El Salvador" was sprayed in black paint. As an extra precaution, I spent an additional day in the city to go to the U.S. Embassy to inform them who I was, where I was going, and when I expected to be back.

The next day, I boarded the Rutas Lima bus. Just before we reached Los Encuentros, the junction from the Pan-American Highway that led south to Sololá, we encountered a roadblock set up by the army. For the first time I was searched and asked for my documents. An army private toting an Israeli-made Galil assault rifle discovered my Swiss Army knife in the left pocket of my trousers and ordered me to give it to him. He was going to keep it until the corporal in charge heard us arguing and walked over and told him to give it back to me. When he did, I was relieved.

The next day I took the launch to San José for my first visit since 1976. There, Ignacio discreetly showed me where the army had been encamped right outside the town center, where a kidnapping had taken place in 1980, and where a woman I knew had been assassinated. Seeing where these events had taken place helped me to edit the details of the text with greater accuracy and to write the introduction, notes, and appendices with greater clarity and conviction.

Later that week Ignacio joined me in Panajachel. One night we worked late without realizing it. We walked across town to eat dinner at the Blue Bird Restaurant, the only restaurant that was dependably open because it catered to local

patrons, not the tourists who had quit coming to Guatemala because of the unrest. After dinner, as we walked back to my rented house, Ignacio cautioned me to be careful when an unlicensed, white pickup cruised by. Inside the vehicle were three strangers in civilian clothes but whose hair was cut short like the style of the members of the military. Ignacio said they were "*desconocidos* [unknowns]" who might be involved in kidnappings.

That summer, despite the troublesome circumstances, Ignacio and I were able to complete the work we needed to do on the next book. In 1985 we published the next volume under the title, *Campesino: The Diary of a Guatemalan Indian*.

Still, Ignacio continued to record the events of his life. I returned to Guatemala during the summer of 1987 and during my second sabbatical in the summer and fall of 1988. By 1991 there was ample information for a third volume, and in January of 1992 the University of Pennsylvania Press published the third book as *Ignacio: The Diary of a Maya Indian of Guatemala*.

I closed this book with an episode about the enemies of the socialist mayor of San Martín failing to remove him from office. There was, however, no real closure to Ignacio's life story, and he continued to record the events of his life as they unfolded. I went back to Guatemala in the summers of 1992, 1994, 1995, and 1998.³ By February of 2000, I had translated and edited the fourth and final volume, *Joseño: Another Mayan Voice Speaks from Guatemala*, which The University of New Mexico Press will publish in the fall of 2001. It covers the story of Ignacio's life and town from 1987 to 1999.

The Social and Cultural Context to Ignacio's Life Story

In this final volume of Ignacio's life story, I updated information that places Ignacio within his social and cultural context and describes how representative he is of his community (Sexton and Bizarro 2001). What follows is a comparison based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected over the last three decades.

Like numerous other Latin American Indians, Ignacio is partially assimilated to a Hispanic culture, but he is not necessarily representative of everyone in his community or culture in every respect in a statistical sense. Unlike central figures of other life histories, Ignacio is neither famous nor psychotic; he is an ordinary workingman. Abandoned at birth on 13 August 1941 by his parents, his childhood was hard. Despite his third-grade education, Ignacio is exceptionally perceptive, and he gives a keenly insightful account of his eventful life.

Between 1971 and 1975 members of our field school collected random samples of *Joseños* and Maya Indians in thirteen other towns (919 household heads). These data clearly showed that Ignacio is both alike and different from his countrymen with regard to socioeconomic and psychological characteristics. Like his Indian countrymen, Ignacio speaks a Mayan language and shares a cultural tradition that is mixed with both Mayan and Spanish elements. Like numerous other countrymen, he is socially and economically oppressed compared to richer Ladinos and Spaniards in Guatemala and compared to citizens of more economically developed countries.

Compared to the average *Joseño* of his generation, Ignacio has been more exposed to the outside world through formal education, travel, and military service. Although he served in the Guatemalan army from 1961 to 1962 (Sexton [1981] 1990:35–46), his unit was put on alert just once, when students from the University of San Carlos were demonstrating in Retalhuleu against a state of siege. Fortunately, his unit was not involved in any violence during this period.

Ignacio writes and speaks Spanish fluently, and he has taught himself to type. Also, compared to his peers, he has been more exposed to radio, films, and television and to newspapers, magazines, and books. His superior literacy and greater political knowledge are because of his greater exposure.

As a young man, Ignacio seemed somewhat more oriented toward change than most other *Joseños*. He appeared dissatisfied with his life condition and had high occupational aspirations for himself and his children. Ignacio would have preferred to have been a teacher rather than a farmer and a labor contractor. Although he still grows corn, beans, squash, and coffee, he has not taken crews to the coast to work on the cotton farms since 1984 because the guerrillas made it dangerous for him and his crews and because the *finqueros* exploited the laborers. Despite the low pay and poor working conditions, he and his crews saved enough from their wages to buy their own modest tracts of coffee land at home. Ignacio wanted his eldest son to become a pharmacist, but he was realistic and understood that he would have to settle for a less prestigious job such as a chauffeur. In fact, his eldest son became a farmer, like Ignacio, but two of his siblings are among the few children of *Sanjoseños* to earn their teaching credentials. Ignacio's wife, who did not have the opportunity to attend school and who felt deprived because she did not learn Spanish, also encouraged their children. Whenever it was possible financially, Ignacio believed in putting off his rewards to a later date, which helps to explain the considerable patience he exercised in producing six books, including this one. It also explains why he completed the technical training necessary to become a baker and why he encouraged his sons to apprentice as operators of foot looms.

Like other *Joseños*, Ignacio has elements of a traditional worldview. He believes that a person's life is relatively fixed at birth, that it is better to accept things as they happen because one cannot shape one's future, and that whether one has good or bad luck depends on one's heritage. But this fatalism appears to be the result of realistically assessing his limited environment rather than resistance to change.

Ignacio believes that one should perform ceremonies before harvesting and planting, that there are spirits who may taunt people during the night, and that some people, particularly shamans, can change into their animal form, or *nagual*. Thus elements of Ignacio's nonmaterial culture are changing more slowly than aspects of his material culture. In the latter stages of his life, Ignacio's deep religious convictions are reflected in his role as a *principal*.

Ignacio learned Tzutuhil Maya as his first language. Although he has completed only the third grade of elementary education, he is obviously highly intelligent, and he has learned Spanish as a second language. During the turbulent era from 1970s through the 1990s, none of Ignacio's family was killed by right-wing forces, and, according to Ignacio, neither he nor his fellow townspeople joined the Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA, Organization of the People in Arms) which was active in his region of Lake Atitlán. They viewed both the guerrillas and the army as being led primarily by Ladinos who were using the Indians as pawns to advance their own political agendas. Like his fellow *Joseños*, Ignacio is deeply religious, mixing both traditional Mayan and Catholic beliefs and practices. Although he has had extensive social interaction with Ladinos and North Americans, he still is proud of his Mayan heritage. He married his wife, Josefa, in 1962, and they have eight children and three grandchildren. Finally, Ignacio continues to live the life of a rural campesino, like most other Maya Indians. As a *principal*, he is an informal leader in the religious, social, and political activities of his town.

Ignacio may not be representative of all Maya Indians in the sense of an "everyman." While present-day Maya Indians share a general Mayan cultural heritage, including learning a Mayan language as their first tongue and sharing traditional values and beliefs, and while they generally have suffered from social, economic, and political repression, there is a wide range of variation within and between towns with regard to particular behaviors and beliefs (Sexton 1978, 2000; Sexton and Woods 1977, 1982; Sherman 1997).

Despite this variation, I followed Leighton and Leighton (1939) and identified major themes that affected Ignacio, his family, and his fellow countrymen who lived throughout the last three decades of social and political turbulence. Instead of using one major theme applicable to the main character (Ignacio), I identified a number of themes running throughout the story that were also applicable to the entire cultural region. For the purposes of this article, I have selected six of these themes. They are: (1) alcohol and civil violence, (2) community solidarity, (3) political violence and turmoil, (4) resistance to repression, (5) campesinos caught between two fires⁴, and (6) cultural revitalization. These themes are important not only because they help us understand a different people living in a different culture, but also because they describe the life story of a Maya Indian in his own voice, "discussing the indigenous knowledge, perceptions, and cultural traditions of the people of the region" (Scupin 1992:409). In essence they present an insider's view, a native ethnography (Bernard and Salinas 1989:12, 14), rather than just the objective voice of an outside ethnographer. The themes that I list are not exhaustive because the reader of the complete account of Ignacio's life can identify other relevant themes such as grinding poverty, preoccupation with work, obsession with time and prophetic dreams, the quest for spiritual rewards, and the celebration of life and the mourning of death.

What follows are episodes that I chose from each of the four volumes of Ignacio's story that illustrate each of salient themes that I have emphasized above.⁵ I have listed the themes as general headings. Under the general headings, I have included subtitles, or mini-themes, that illustrate the major themes.

General Themes from Ignacio's Life Story

Alcohol and Civil Violence

Felipe Fights with a Shaman: A Dire Prophecy 8 August 1970

When we ran out of liquor, Felipe and I went to a nearby bar to buy more. As we entered the bar, we noticed a shaman named Agustín Sumosa from San Benito la Laguna. He was with two *Joseños* [people of San José], Candelaria Coché Méndez, and Carlos Bizarro Yojcom. Without doubt they were buying *aguardiente* [rum] for ceremonies.

Felipe began to argue with the shaman. I don't really know why or how it started. Perhaps Felipe was harboring disillusionment with all shamans since he had lost an eye despite the ceremony performed by Señor Gregorio Sánchez Tuc for protection of all of us dancers during the fiesta of San Juan. In any case, Felipe and the shaman from San Benito began to fight violently. One of Felipe's blows broke the collarbone of the poor shaman, and he cried out in pain. He had reason to cry because the blow was a severe one. The two *Joseños* for whom he was going to perform a ceremony of

some kind began to cry too, since they pitied their hapless friend.

Señor Agustín, the injured shaman, groaned to his enemy Felipe:

Today you struck me for the first time, but you will never strike me again because it is certain that you are going to die. To the justice of the peace of San José, I will not go. Instead, I am going to take my case to *El Dueño del Mundo* [God of the World, Earth]. For sure you are going to die [because I am going to perform a ceremony that will put a death curse on you].

Community Solidarity

The February Earthquakes

4-6 February 1976

As soon as he left, I laid down again on my bed, but I could not get to sleep. I was just turning on a light when suddenly a monstrous earthquake hit! I managed to get out of bed. My wife got out of bed, but we could not reach the children. It was terrible! We were not able to walk, and then the lights went out! We remained in complete darkness in the dead of night. At last I was able to reach my horrified children and get them out of the house onto the patio. It was 3:02 a.m. Wednesday.

Immediately we heard a great bustle of people from the other houses. Like us, my neighbors were very frightened. Some were crying, others were on their knees praying for God's mercy. We spent the rest of this dreadful night outside our house in the patio. Otherwise, if another quake hit, we might be crushed if the house collapsed and the heavy roof fell on us.

Finally, it was dawn, and we gave thanks to God for having given us anew the light of day! As the sun came out and provided light, we calmed down somewhat. By day, one is able to control himself better. When I turned on the radio, I heard that 23,000 have died and 80,000 are wounded and 1,000,000 are homeless. How pitiful was this news! We were in deep agony because we still felt the many tremors, and at any time another strong one could hit again.

Today [Friday, 13 February] officers of Catholic Action sent a contribution of \$175 for relief of earthquake victims throughout Sololá, not just San José. The officials entrusted this money to Father Jorge H. Rodríguez of the parish of San Martín la Laguna [who also serves the church in San José because there still is no resident priest]. He will send the money to the bishop of the diocese of Sololá who will take charge of the distributions to the people in need. I think this is a very good thing!

Political Violence and Turmoil

Señora María Luisa Is Murdered

18-19 August 1981

I said, "Let's hurry up and go because it is late. Soldiers or guerrillas could come. We are late! Let's go, let's go!" And each person left for his house. Then I accompanied the treasurer through the center of the town to his house for safety, because he was carrying money that belonged to the cooperative. After seeing my companion home, I went directly to my house.

When I arrived home, my family was already asleep. It was certain that the two pieces of bread had not satisfied my hunger, but since it was the middle of the night, my family had already eaten. Then I noticed that my señora had left me some *tamalitos* [little tamales], good and hot and folded in three napkins. She had also left fish. I said, "Ah, I'm still going to eat." I went to the fire where there was hot coffee, and I began to eat.

Suddenly someone knocked three times. "*Púchica!*" it scared me. I quit eating and remained still. About two minutes later, thinking they had left, I began to eat again.

Again there were three knocks on my door, and a strange voice said, "Ignacio."

"But who is this?" I said to myself. "Who is saying my name? Who can it be? *Púchica*, should I try to eat again?" Man, it was a scare they gave me! "Are they going to tear down my door? Who knows? Is it some bully?" But nothing happened.

After about two minutes I opened the door, and since there is a streetlight near, I could see that there was no one there, neither above nor below the street. There was just total silence. Then I shut the door and continued eating. Since I was frightened while I was eating, I had to rest a little before going to sleep to avoid indigestion. I grabbed a book and began to read a little.

After about 15 to 20 minutes of reading the book, I fell fast asleep because it was late and I was very sleepy. It must have been about 12:00 midnight or 12:15 when I fell asleep.

What ended my sleep was the bang of arms. I heard the noise of the machine gun--ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta.

"*Púchica!* My God! What is happening!" I said as I was waking up. "Get up, hombre! Hombre, get up! Something is happening in the town!" But no one answered me, neither my children nor my señora. They were fast asleep. Then I heard a very loud shot, "Bong!" It was the *tiro de gracia* [finishing shot].

"Ah, Christ, someone died. Is it the army or the guerrillas? Which of the two groups? My God!" I said. The most I slept was about 20 minutes or a half hour. It is true that I did not have a watch, but I turned on the radio and they gave the hour, which was 12:45 a.m. I turned out the light and thought about many things. They could arrive at my house, and they could find us culpable if they saw my light on because we were late at the cooperative. I knelt before the image of Jesucristo and put myself in the hands of God for anything that might happen. I stayed in bed, but I did not sleep.

Ten minutes after the burst of machine gun fire, a launch left for San Martín making a lot of noise, but we did not hear or realize when it had come. But the launch belongs to the father-in-law of the military commissioner in San Martín because it is the only one with such a [distinctive] sound.

About a half hour later I heard people passing to wake Castillo, a brother of the woman [who was shot]. I thought that perhaps there might have been an illness. I did not know that they had killed her.

Then I put on my clothes. "I am going to investigate," I said to myself. But later I said that I did not want problems. And someone might be able to say that we were late at the cooperative. So I decided not to go out. I stayed in my house, although I did not sleep at all.

At 4:30 a.m. we heard the death knell [of the Catholic Church].

"*Púchica*, someone died," said my señora.

"Yes, I wanted to tell you, but you did not get up." The bells continued--bong, bong. And the president of Catholic Action began to say with a loudspeaker, "All Catholics, come console the husband of the señora who last night was killed by whichever group, whose body today is going to Sololá."

Well, then I put on my clothing and got up. But I did not go to console the husband. I went to the pier. When I arrived to investigate, I saw the blood and all. There were a lot of bullet holes--they were countless, perhaps a hundred. The authorities were resting at a house that was on the other side of the road, and they were still examining the projectiles. It was grave, it was grave. Her two legs were destroyed. I did not see it happen, but the official news says that she was shot 17 times. They say that there were two groups. One waited in front of the door in the street while the other entered from inside the *sitio* [homesite]. When she ran into the street, they machine-gunned her. There were still bloodstains in the street where she fell. They also say that the men who came to kill her brought a guide dressed in the clothing of San Luis with typical trousers, no shoes, and a black *chupa* [tight-fitting waistcoat], purely of San Luis. But it is suspected that he was a *Joseño*, a commissioner.

Resistance to Repression

Warnings by the Military Commissioners 12-17 August 1985

On 14 August we went to work a half-day, making bread. In the afternoon, again we had to return to the soccer field to receive classes from the military. On this day there were no jefes. They said that they were bad, but that is not true. The [military] officials who arrived on this day were very humane, and they didn't mistreat anyone. They said that no one is able to accuse another person of subversion or anything else. First they have to investigate the case of the person to be sure that he is collaborating with the subversives. The official said:

Many come to accuse another person just because they are envious about a business deal or a problem with a woman or a piece of land or perhaps one person has more money than another, and then the person is accused of being a subversive. This is what you must not do. In San José nothing should happen as it has in other towns.

All the patrolmen were grateful.

On 15 August 1985 we only worked a half-day again because they told us that in the afternoon there would be classes again. However, because of heavy rain, we only received a half-hour of class. Many were not in agreement with these things, but one has to obey because if one does not it is expensive--one pays with one's life.

We didn't work on 16 August 1985. We lost this day. After lunch we went to a new soccer field at 3:00 p.m. We sang the hymn of the patrolman. Moreover, we received classes on how to handle and shoot the Mauser (7.62mm) rifle. There was a lot of nervousness among the personnel of the patrolmen, especially those who had not had military service. At times it was very funny. Many were not happy with these orders, but we were unable to do anything about it.

On 17 August, Saturday, all of us patrolmen had to be present in the soccer field very early to form military squads. It is certain that when we arrived, they formed [assigned] us and took us to the place where one is able to shoot. Then they took us, five in each group, and each person shot three times [those who had not had military service]. Those of us who had served in the military were separated out as reserves to take care of those who hadn't.

We were last. But we were only given one shot each. Some didn't shoot any because we ran out of ammunition. [I shot once.] We didn't finish until noon.

When we finished all of these things, the military officials were grateful for the participation of all the patrolmen. But there is one thing. The patrolmen murmured about losing time because we are poor and aren't accustomed to losing it. The murmuring that the patrolmen did was in Tzutuhil, and the officials are Ladinos who don't understand the bad words that the Indians speak. When the officials asked what it was that they were saying, others said that they were happy and saluted the military. But these were lies. The people actually spoke badly of them.

What kinds of things were the patrolmen saying?

They said: son-of-a-bitch, mother-fucker, go to hell, but they said these words in Tzutuhil, and when the jefes asked what they were saying, the others answered, "They are very happy."

Campesinos Caught Between Two Fires

Guerrillas Burn Buses and Murder Drivers and Their Assistants 5 February 1982

The news on the radio said that in the afternoon the guerrillas arrived between Panajachel and San Jorge and between Sololá and Los Encuentros, and that they burned two Rebuli buses and killed three drivers and two assistants. My companions of the Partido Institucional Democrático [PID, Institutional Democratic Party] and I were planning to make a trip on Saturday to receive a short course in politics. But when my companions heard the news, they became very scared and did not want to go. Nevertheless, Erasmo Ignacio [Ignacio's son], my friends Benjamín and Felipe, and I decided to go.

At 6:00 a.m. on Saturday we boarded the launch, but when we arrived in San Martín the people were talking about what happened yesterday. [At first] I thought they were just telling lies. However, when we arrived in Panajachel, everyone was frightened. There was no activity in the town.

An owner of a cantina told me to be careful because the guerrillas were nearby. I replied to this señor how we had heard this on the news yesterday but that we thought it was a lie. Then the señor told me that yesterday the most unfortunate things happened. Above [on the ascent to Sololá just before the Catarata Fall] they killed Don Missael and his helper. I asked him how this happened, and he told me that the guerrillas took out the driver and shot him in front of his wife and children. Then they asked his assistant for the money, but he said he did not want to give it to them. After killing the driver, they poured gasoline on the bus and set it afire. Then they grabbed the helper by the hands and feet and threw him into the fire alive--in front of all the passengers. This is what the man said, and it scared me.

But finally we boarded a [small shuttle] bus for Sololá. When we passed the place where they had killed the two men, the bus was still there burning. I am sure that many people did not get to take their belongings because there were many burnt items like suitcases, trousers and shirts, and other things. Without doubt, a lot of people were not able to take down their bags because the situation was serious. The wind of the fire blew away pieces of clothing. It was a grave burning, and it was frightening just to look at it. One could smell the foul odor of burnt flesh.

The driver, who was a witness to the killing of Don Missael, the driver of the Rebuli bus, confirmed the news. He said that he was ascending to Sololá in his [small] bus and Don Missael was descending in the [larger] Rebuli bus, which had begun the trip in Guatemala [City]. One group of guerrillas stopped Don Missael, and another group stopped him before the two buses met. They made him get down from his vehicle.

"I was trembling," he said, "but they took only my money, the day's earnings--\$64." In front of him they machine-gunned Don Missael. Then the guerrillas asked Missael's helper for the money [he had collected from the passengers], but he said, "I am not going to give it to you." He was afraid of the owner of the money [his boss]. The bus was now burning. They threw gasoline on it, and it was very hot and flaming. They grabbed the helper by his hands and feet and threw him

onto the fire alive, and it flared up. This man [our bus driver] told us that they did not recover the remains of the helper's body. It was totally consumed by the fire. However, they did not burn Don Missael's body. This man told us that the guerrillas obliged him to return [to Panajachel] if he did not want to die. He said that he did not eat or sleep after what he had seen. He asked his boss to let him off work until Tuesday, but his boss said that, if he did not wish to work, he would hire someone else to be the driver.

When we arrived in Sololá, they told us the same thing had happened on the road to Los Encuentros--the guerrillas had burned another bus. Also, they said that they had killed the driver and his helper. They said that the guerrillas wanted to burn a third bus, but after they threw gasoline on it, it did not catch fire. When they saw it was not going to burn, they broke the windows with [machine-gun] bullets. We saw this bus towed by another vehicle. When we arrived in Panajachel, it was in front of the police station for a while.

It was totally sad when we were in Sololá. There was no activity. All the people were scared, including the señor who was going to give us a short course. Our trip to Sololá was hardly important. [There was no short course.]

We could not return to San José on the same day because there was no launch. Thus, we wanted to return via Los Encuentros, but they told us that there was still a confrontation between the guerrillas and the soldiers. In front of us arrived a vehicle of the *bomberos* [firemen; rescuers] with 16 bodies stacked in it like firewood. We saw them unload three of the bodies of people who had died in the confrontation in Los Encuentros. A lot of the indigenous people, who were with the dead bodies of their kin, were crying. It scared all of us very much. We wanted to return through San Diego, but the news said that in every direction there were guerrillas. We had to bear staying in Panajachel, but it was a pity that not one of us carried bedclothes. Only the boy, Erasmo Ignacio, carried a sack.

Because the news said that no one was able to walk after 6:00 p.m., we went to eat dinner at 4:00 p.m. By 7:00 p.m. the residents had already deserted the streets. There were a lot of police, soldiers, and detectives (judicial police). It was a pain to walk. We did not go anywhere because of the great fear. When night fell, I did not hear a single car pass in the street.

During this night we suffered a lot because we did not have bedclothes and we tried to sleep on the sand. Later it got very cold. I put my son Erasmo Ignacio inside the sack he carried, but it was still too cold. Then I asked the conductor of the launch, who is a very good person named Nicolás, to let us go inside. Only when we were inside did we feel a little relieved. We slept a little, but it was not like sleeping at home. The pilot of the launch told us to take special care because the guerrillas had said that they have marked the launches for burning within a few days. It scared us!

The Violence in Santiago Atitlán⁶

14 to 22 October 1990

This is what is taking place in our pueblo of Santiago Atitlán, land of the ancient King Tepepul. There is much more violence in this year of 1990 than there was in previous years. Day after day there are more massacres of the *naturales* [Indians] of our beautiful Tzutuhil town. It seems, however, that the two sides are claiming victims and many more than in October of this year. Almost on a daily basis, the Tzutuhiles are killed by the bullets.

Truthfully, I did not witness this. I learned of it through the news on the radio and from the talk of the people living around the lake, both of which condemned the massacre of the six tradesmen who were returning from Cerro de Oro with a truckload of avocados. At the said location, they were all shot, and their bodies were strewn over the road. It is said that one of the assassins, seeing that one of the victims still lived, pulled out a sharp machete and split open his chest and neck. It was said these killers were thieves, although no concrete evidence supported this. What was known for sure was that the six victims were *naturales* and residents of Santiago Atitlán, Sololá. The truck driver was a Ladino. He was able to save his life, although he received many blows. He said he was told to drive the truck to the town, and he did as he was told. It was clear that in our Tzutuhil town of Santiago Atitlán there was no longer any respect for human rights.

Propriety and Cultural Revitalization

Receiving the Image of the Saint in the Cofradía

When the image of San Juan Bautista arrived at the new *cofradía*, that is to say, in my house, the *principales* and the rest of the group sat down. Then came the most sacred part when I, the new *alcalde*, welcomed the *principales*, paying the homage to them that they deserved. Thus I said:

In memory of our deceased fathers, whose bodies are now the dust of the earth but whose spirits are with us. They are with us watching and listening. They are with us here in spirit through the medium of the air and through the medium of the aroma of myrrh and copal.⁷

Now you *principales* are the cement and the foundation of our race and our traditions, the fighters, defenders, and conservators of our Mayan *costumbres*. You are the ones who take care of our culture, from our birth and growth until we reach the age where we are your followers and successors, if the creator and maker, Heart of Heaven and Earth, wills it. Now, on this day, we are receiving the patron saint, [with] you *principales* of white hair and white beards [that you have] as a gift of God and of the patron saint, San Juan Bautista.⁸ We, your children, are disposed to conserve and continue what you have sown and what you have cultivated. We can neither forget nor abandon our *costumbres*, our traditions, which is what forms the bastion of our Mayan culture.

After drinking the *atol*, the *principales*, Catholic Actionists, *madres de familias* [mothers of families], and chorus said good-bye to the new *cofradía* and went to the church, and from the church they dispersed to their houses. That is to say, the fiesta was over.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The episodes above--which emphasize the general themes of alcohol and civil violence, community solidarity, political violence and turmoil, resistance to repression, campesinos caught between two armies, and propriety and cultural revitalization--provide an uncommonly rich description of some of the most important events that have happened to Ignacio, his family, his town, and his country in the last thirty years. The full texts provide a more compressive picture, and in them, the reader may identify themes other than the ones I have mentioned--themes that also illustrate their humanity. For example, it may be argued, that Ignacio's story also illustrates how the present-day Maya celebrate life and mourn death, how they seem to have an obsession with time and prophetic dreams, and how they are generally poor in material possessions but rich in spiritual beliefs and practices. In any case, in our pursuit for a better understanding of a different people living in a different culture, we are indeed fortunate to have such an articulate spokesperson as the Tzutuhil Maya elder, Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán.

NOTES

1. Other subjects have kept diaries, but I am unaware of anyone else who has kept such a personal, chronological record for this length of time. I wish to thank my wife, Marilyn, and my research assistants, Lorenzo Sotelo and Charles Wright, for reading and giving me comments on this abridged version. I also thank my research assistants who worked on the full versions. They are Teresa Kelleher, Mimi Hugh, Gwenn Gallenstein, Lisa Leap, Rose Marie Havel, David Ortiz, Victoria Spencer, Mauricio Rebolledo, Lisa Hardy, and Christina Getrich. [Return to reading](#).
2. For Ignacio's description of what happened in his town at this time, see *Campesino* 1985: 174-183. [Return to reading](#)
3. In *Campesino*, Ignacio recorded some folktales that were told during particular episodes of his life story. When I expressed special interests in these tales, he said there were a lot of them and that we should do an entire volume of them. We did. In May of 1992, we published *Mayan Folktales: Folklore from Lake Atitlán, Guatemala*, and it was republished in 1999. Also in 1999 we published a second book of folklore, *Heart of Heaven, Heart of Earth and Other Mayan Folktales*. [Return to reading](#)
4. Ly-qui-Chung (1970) pointed out that peasants of the Vietnam war were caught in the middle of two fires (armies). David Stoll (1993; 1999) discusses the same theme for the Ixil, and Richard Wilson (1995) mentions it for the Q'eqchi' Maya. [Return to reading](#)
5. Information from the subtitles, "Felipe Fights with a Shaman: A Dire Prophecy," and "The February Earthquakes," first appeared in *Son of Tecún Umán: A Maya Indian Tells His Life Story* ([1981] 1990: 65-66, 135, 140-141), Waveland Press, copyrighted by James D. Sexton. Information from the subtitle, "Señora María Luisa Is Murdered," first appeared in *Campesino: The Diary of a Guatemalan Indian* (1985:254-256), the University of Arizona Press, copyrighted by James D. Sexton. Information in the subtitles, "Warnings by the Military Commissioners," first appeared in *Ignacio*, the University of Pennsylvania Press, copyrighted by James D. Sexton. Information from the subtitle, "Guerrillas Burn Buses and Murder Drivers and Their Assistants," first appeared in *Campesino* (1985: 287-289). Information from the subtitles, "The Violence in Santiago Atitlán," and "Receiving the Image of the Saint in the Cofradía" are selected from *Joseño: Another Mayan Voice Speaks from Guatemala*, The University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, copyrighted by James D. Sexton and Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán. More information about these books and about Ignacio and me can be found at my web site, www.mayaguatate.com. [Return to reading](#)
6. This is the real name of the town in question. In the other episodes of Ignacio's story I have changed the names of all the towns except Panajachel and Sololá. [Return to reading](#)
7. The aroma of the incense calls their spirits to come and be with the person or persons burning it. [Return to reading](#)
8. Ignacio explained that to reach old age is a gift of god, and you can't buy white (grey, hairs). This may make those of us who have them feel better. [Return to reading](#)

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