



Guatemala Cultural Orientation

Xela AID Partnerships in Self-Reliance Service Trips



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Introduction

Welcome to a Xela AID Partnerships in Self Reliance (Xela AID) trip to Guatemala! Whether you've been to Guatemala before or this is your first time, your experience will likely be meaningful and rewarding. This introduction provides some fundamentals in Guatemalan history and culture to help you acclimate and enhance your experience in this diverse country.

Geography

Guatemala is very geographically diverse, with both very high mountain ranges covering much of the western portion of the country (referred to as the highlands), as well as the lowland areas to the east. In the figure below, the brown-shaded areas show the highland mountain ranges, many of which are volcanic (figure from http://www.emersonkent.com/map_archive/guatemala_belize_2011.htm).



Guatemala's lowland areas are relatively warm year around. The northern lowlands, near Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and Belize, are a mosaic of dense tropical rain forests intermixed with deforested areas. The cleared areas are farmed either for commercial agriculture or household-scale slash-and-burn agriculture. Much of the northern lowlands of Guatemala are composed of porous limestone or other sedimentary bedrock that does not retain water well.

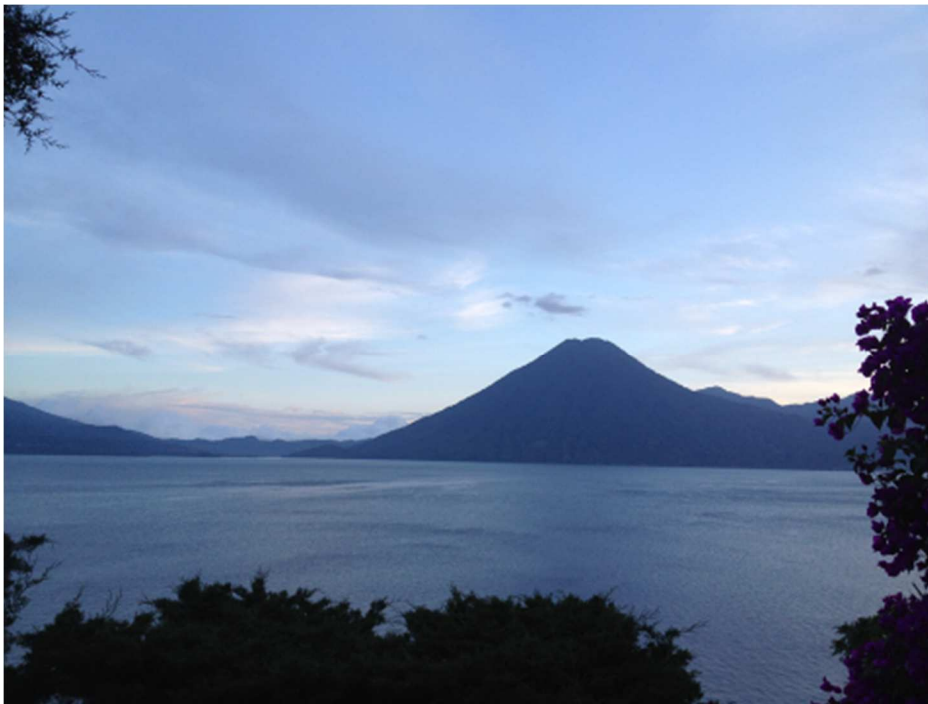
During prehispanic times, a number of large Maya city states in this area sculpted the terrain for water collection and management, as rainfall principally occurs seasonally, with long dry stretches in between. The highlands in the southwest portion of Guatemala are in many ways the exact opposite of the lowlands, with much cooler temperatures and more varied terrain. The highlands are principally volcanic terrain, and volcanoes are scattered throughout much of the area. Volcanic soil is highly fertile, with high agriculture potential. Historically the mountains were forested with pines and other conifers, but today the highlands are much patchier, with vast areas deforested for agriculture and other pursuits.

Driving through the highlands, you see much evidence of recent volcanic activity. Many of the peaks on the horizon will have the typical form of a volcano, much like the Volcán de Agua that you see the photograph of the colonial city of Antigua on the cover of this booklet. Some of the volcanoes are still quite active, and eruptions and earthquakes have led to modern destruction. The city of Antigua, for example, is the second colonial capital of Guatemala; the first was destroyed by an earthquake and subsequent landslide off the side of Volcán de Agua soon after it was constructed. When you're traveling around Guatemala, pay particular attention to road cuts in steep terrain, as they often reveal layers of volcanic ash deposits, like in the photograph on the next page. In the community of San Martín Chiquito, when people excavate the ground for construction, they usually encounter multiple layers of pumice or ash from volcanic eruptions immediately below the fertile black topsoil.



Perhaps one of the most beautiful places in Guatemala associated with volcanoes is Lake Atitlan, located in the highlands (see photo below). Lake Atitlan is a large lake, measuring approximately 5 km wide by 12 km long, that is over 1,000 feet deep! Three volcanoes are on its south shore and the lake occupies a caldera basin formed by an ancient catastrophic eruption. During heavy storms the lake level may rise dramatically. For example, during a recent hurricane, the lake rose tens of feet, and many of the docks normally used along the

lake were underwater and no longer functional. If you travel the lake by boat, you'll see partially submerged buildings along the shore line, as well. Similarly, there are archaeological sites submerged by the lake.



Many of the steep slopes around the Lake Atitlan are used for agriculture because there is so little flat land in the area. Clearing the slopes around the lake for agriculture, however, has triggered significant erosion, which has a negative effect on the environment. When you're in Panajachel, the lake's tourist gateway, you may notice an unpleasant smell when you board your boat taxi. The boat launch in Panajachel is

located near the town's sewage outlet, which dumps directly into the lake, a common practice among the lake's larger communities. Because there is little outflow of lake water, the lake is becoming increasingly polluted with bacteria from effluence. While the lake is amazingly beautiful, the water quality is increasingly deteriorating.

Economy

The economy of Guatemala has great potential, but for a variety of structural and political reasons, the ability for rural inhabitants to find work is very limited. Rural unemployment is extremely high,



prompting many rural residents to play a large role in their own subsistence. In communities like San Martín Chiquito, most villagers are part of both formal and informal economies. As you drive through town and along most rural roads in Guatemala, you will not see supermarkets for groceries, but rather, small stores (called *tiendas*) that individual families often run out of the front of their house. Some *tiendas* may specialize in particular goods or services, whereas others may be more generalized. These *tiendas*

may sell small quantities of fruits and vegetables, as well as a wide variety of other everyday items, such as soap, cell phone minutes, and cold drinks. The photograph above shows a *tienda* that sells cell phone minutes for Guatemalan cell companies Claro and Tigo.



In towns like San Martín Chiquito, there are also more specialized businesses, such as hardware stores (*ferreteria*), lumber yards (*almacén de madera*), and so forth. Large cities like Quetzaltenango support large home centers like Ace Hardware. By contrast, hardware stores in rural areas like San Martín Chiquito are generally small with limited options, and buying building supplies often requires multiple stops. Guatemalan lumber yards usually cut their own dimensional lumber on-site and sell green, rough-

sawn lumber, rather than the kiln-dried types of lumber typical in the U.S. The photo just above shows a typical sight in rural lumber yards, with uncut logs stacked next to finished, sawn dimensional lumber.

In addition to the more traditional “brick and mortar” shops selling goods in rural areas, a wide variety of mobile tradesmen sell their wares. When you are in San Martín Chiquito, use both your eyes, and ears to identify these folks. While *tiendas* may sell a small variety of vegetables, there are also



trucks that drive around neighborhoods with a megaphone, announcing the different types of vegetables or other goods being sold (as illustrated in the adjacent photograph). Often the megaphones are comically loud and distorted. These trucks may sell bananas from the coastal lowlands, as well as a wide variety of more local foods, such as tomatoes, cilantro, chiles, potatoes, cabbage, and other vegetables.

In many rural areas of Guatemala,

including San Martín Chiquito, two principal sources of household food and revenue are crops and

livestock. Many families in the village keep a kitchen garden and farm animals within the confines of the house lot, as well as more extensive crops in fields elsewhere that they rent or own. Often farm animals, such as chickens, rabbits, and pigs, are under foot or in pens. Because the village is at high elevation (over 8,000 feet), the types of crops that can be grown and growing season are limited. As you drive around the countryside near San Martín Chiquito, you may notice a wide variety of vegetables being grown, such as potatoes, broccoli, and cauliflower, as well as corn and other crops. Many households have small plots for growing these foods on open lots in town or in the surrounding hills. Similar to the situation at Lake Atitlan, farmers around the village are expanding their fields further and further up the slopes, leading to more erosion and deforestation.

Formal jobs with salaries are limited in rural areas. If families can grow a portion of their food for their own use, and sell the remainder for cash, then they will have money for purchasing other foods or goods that they cannot grow



themselves. If a family doesn't own the land they farm, they will have to pay rent for use of the land. Other expenses include farm equipment, fertilizer, seed, pesticide, and other materials needed to grow these crops. If it does not rain at the right time, the crops may not flourish, or there may be disease. Thus, farming is a tenuous enterprise and families may lose money on the crop after all their expenses. Every member of the family is a part of the household economy, contributing to the widespread dilemma of whether to allow the children to pursue an education or keep them home to help the family survive economically by working on the family farming plot (called a *milpa*) or performing other chores. Xela AID's scholarship program for children in the community provides a stipend to the student's family to help offset this.

Entrepreneurship is important in developing countries because businesses create new jobs and



increase productivity. In places like Guatemala, where there is a need, there is an opportunity. *Tiendas*, which typically occupy the front room of the entrepreneur's home, generate income for the household while avoiding the costs of a free-standing store. Xela AID has helped create and support several local businesses, including the sausage-making cooperative, a weaving cooperative, and a party rental business.

One of the most imaginative enterprises I've seen while traveling through the countryside are micro-businesses selling Mexican gasoline, which is cheaper than the gas at local Guatemalan gas stations. By purchasing drums of government-subsidized gasoline in Mexico and subsequently selling it in Guatemala by the gallon, these small, informal businesses are able to make a quick profit. As you travel through Guatemala, look for plastic gallon containers on the side of the road with a number on them – 20, 25, 30, and so forth, like in the photo here. This is the price for a gallon of Mexican gas in Quetzales. You might notice that the further you travel away from the Mexican border, the more

expensive the price is!

The Mayan Culture and San Martín Chiquito

The Maya culture has existed for thousands of years. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the early 1500s, numerous Maya city-states controlled vast portions of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras. Although the Spanish conquest of these Mayan city-states initiated a new era for the Maya, the Mayan people have survived and adapted, and their culture continues today. Mayan groups still exist within the geographical footprint of where they lived prior to the Spanish, with Mayan still living in communities within all five Central American countries. Today, there are approximately six million indigenous people within those countries that speak a total of 29 Mayan dialects (Guatemala has 21 recognized distinct Mayan languages, and Mexico has recognized an additional 8 languages). Within the portions of the central highlands of Guatemala around Quetzaltenango, San Martín Chiquito, and Lake Atitlan, there are four major language groups: Mam (spoken in San Martín Chiquito); K'iche;

Tz'utujil; and Kaqchikel. The latter two languages are spoken at distinct Lake Atitlan communities and, interestingly, have traditionally been unintelligible to each other, suggesting a long history of entrenched language groups in the Maya region. I say "traditionally" because increased interaction between these traditional groups today has resulted in more common usage and borrowing of specific terms. For example, as Leslie has pointed out to me, the K'iche term "utz pin," which translates as "very good" in English, is a term widely used in business names in Quetzaltenango and therefore is more widely understood by Mam-speakers. While these languages are still largely unintelligible to one another, proximity has caused some dialect-specific words to cross into broader use.

Weaving and Dress

As you travel through the highlands, I encourage you to take note of the traditional clothing (*traje indigena*) of the Mayan people you see. Weaving has a very long history with the Maya; scenes depicted on pottery and murals from thousands of years ago illustrate colorful, decorative textiles, and spindle



whorls (used in the process of making thread) are common items found in archaeological household contexts. As you travel from one region to another, from one community to another, you'll notice that while the style of traditional clothing may not change dramatically, the weaving designs are distinct for each area. This is a way for traditional Mayan men and women to express both their identity as Mayan, as well as signify what community to which they belong, as each community has its own distinctive design for men's and women's clothing. Women's most striking element of traditional dress are their blouses, called *huipiles*.

Interesting, the weaving cooperative in San Martín Chiquito has begun to incorporate older designs back into their weaving as a way of perpetuating traditions into the future. You can see a wide variety of these designs in San Martín Chiquito at the weaving *tienda*, adjacent to the Xela AID clinic. A few examples of designs from San Martín Chiquito, made by some of the members of the weaving cooperative, are shown in the photograph on the previous page taken by Justin Flint. While many traditional women in the community wear *traje indigena*, it's unusual to see men wearing traditional clothing outside of ceremonial activities. Like women's clothing, men's traditional clothing is distinctive from one area to another in design and expression. In some areas, like around the highland K'iche community of Chichicastenango, men wear specific clothing elements, including a wrap-around woolen "skirt" that is not worn in other areas of the highlands. In general terms, partially because of the high labor cost of making traditional clothing, more men and women (especially younger generations) wear western dress daily. While weaving has been a long-lived, traditional practice among the Maya for thousands of years, the arrival of the Spaniards, and their accompanying Nahua warriors from central Mexico, changed aspects of weaving. For example, it's unclear if each community has always had unique designs used as identifiers, or if this has at least some basis in the effort of Spanish colonists to track movements of indigenous peoples. As discussed below, the Spanish demanded tribute in the form of cloth from Mayan weavers. Perhaps more interesting when thinking about identity, research in the highlands suggests that some traditional communities incorporated design elements introduced by the Spanish and Nahua into their weaving. The K'iche community of Totonicapán, located to the north of Quetzaltenango and well known for both its wood-working and weaving, serves as an example. Members of the community's *cofradia* (a brotherhood of elders) in the early 1900s were documented as creating and wearing weavings that are very similar to central Mexican Saltillo serapes. Totonicapán is known to have had enclaves of Nahua settled there after the invasion of Guatemala in the 1520s, and the evidence suggests that these enclaves (also called *barrios*) of central Mexicans not only became integrated parts of these traditional Mayan communities, but grew through time. The creation of these weavings in a central Mexican tradition were one example of this integrated community. William Wroth and others have written about the integration of Nahua into Mayan culture and society and those references are at the end of this document.

Early History of San Martin Chile Verde

The community of San Martin Chile Verde (composed of the adjacent towns of San Martín Chiquito and San Martín Sacatepéquez) is long-lived. This area was documented as a community at the time of Spanish conquest in the early 1500s. After the Spanish established their presence in the adjacent city of Quetzaltenango (also known by its indigenous name, Xela or Xelaju), the colonial powers set up a series of *encomiendas*, or tribute systems, across the highlands. These *encomiendas* were areas where indigenous Mayan inhabitants were forced to offer labor and goods to Spanish colonists (*encomenderos*), who in turn were responsible for their well-being and conversion to Catholicism. One *encomienda* containing at least 2,000 Maya inhabitants encompassed both San Martín Sacatepéquez and nearby San Juan Ostuncalco and required indigenous labor and tribute to the Spanish colonist

Francisco de la Cueva, who controlled the *encomienda*. A translated document from the mid-1500s documents the following tribute demands:

“Every 70 days [the Indians] are to give 100 *xiquipiles* of cacao plus 400 pieces of cotton cloth of good measure and twenty bedcovers, as well as twenty pieces of ornamental cloth of the type they usually give, and twelve baskets of salt. [Every 70 days they shall furnish] provisions for the pig farms, having planted cornfields for [this purpose]. On certain days and holidays they are to bring honey, chickens, quail, and eggs, and clothes for the swineherds. [The Indians] need not give anything more [than this], save for some food for the *calpisque* who lives there [and whose job it is to oversee the swineherds]” (Lovell and Lutz 2013:161).

So, in sum, the annual requirements of this particular tribute included large amounts of cacao, honey



chickens and eggs, plus 2,000 pieces of cloth, 100 bed covers, 100 pieces of ornamental or adorned cloth, and an unspecified amount of clothing made from local cotton cloth. Except for chickens, which were introduced by the Spanish, all of these goods were traditional to the Maya for thousands of years.

In early Spanish documents, San Martín Sacatepéquez was also known as Zacatepéquez, perhaps

referring to *zacate*, the Spanish word for grass. Interestingly, in another document from the early Spanish colonial period discussed below in detail, some scholars believe they have identified the Mayan place glyph for the village of San Martín Sacatepéquez, and the top portion of the place glyph appears to look like grass waving in the wind, as seen in the image below. This figure can be found digitally here: <http://lienzo.ufm.edu/en/>.

Xelaju and Quetzaltenango – Diverse Cultural Origins

Over the many years I’ve traveled to Guatemala, I’ve been confused about the two different names for Xela – Xelaju and Quetzaltenango. I’d always figured one was the indigenous Maya name (Xelaju) and the other (Quetzaltenango) was a Spanish name. I did some reading on the subject and was intrigued by what I learned.

Xelaju is the traditional Mam name for the community that has been in the western Highlands of Guatemala for hundreds of years. When Pedro and Jorge Alvarado and their large armies arrived in the western highlands in several campaigns during the mid-and late-1520s, much of the area around Xela was controlled by K’iche Maya, but the traditional Mam name of “Xelaju” was still used. Under Spanish rule, however, the Spanish used the name “Quetzaltenango.” This was the name used by the thousands of central Mexican warriors (referred to as *indios amigos* in Spanish documents) who accompanied the few hundred Spanish soldiers on these military campaigns. The word

“Quetzaltenango” does not hail from Spanish, but rather the central Mexican language Nahuatl, which meant something like “place of the Quetzal” (the national bird of Guatemala).



In general terms, many commonly-used names of towns and locations in the highlands of Guatemala actually hail from these central Mexican warriors, although, of course, there are also Maya names for them. The name “Atitlan”, as in Lake Atitlan, is another Nahuatl name, meaning “at the water.” Famous towns in the highlands, such as Totonicapán, Momostenango, and Chichicastenango, for example, all are Nahuatl names for towns formerly known by traditional Mayan (in these cases, K’iche) names. Even the name of the country, Guatemala, is likely derived from the Nahuatl word *Cuahtēmallān*, which was used by Nahua warriors accompanying the Spanish campaign to conquer the region in the 1520s. All across the highlands, the area has a dual heritage of being Mayan but having place names originating with foreign invaders.

After these Spanish campaigns to control Guatemala, these central Mexican warriors tried to document their key roles in the conquest of Guatemala. Some warriors from the central Mexican town of Quauhquechollan created a large fabric map called a lienzo, which documented their journey from the Aztec empire capital of Tenochtitlan to Guatemala. An image of that lienzo appears above (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lienzo_de_Quauhquechollan.jpg). This very rare depiction of the conquering of Guatemala from a native perspective shows the initial alliance with the Spanish and illustrates the path taken and the many battles along the way.

The picture below is a close-up of the upper left corner of the lienzo depicting this alliance (for a digital version, see <http://images.doaks.org/warfare/items/show/30>). It depicts the alliance between



central Mexican elites and the Spanish and the subsequent journey to Guatemala through southern Mexico. The lienzo depicts many unique and interesting things. For example, small details like the roads traveled are portrayed in unusual ways. Traditionally, foot prints in Mesoamerican drawings like this illustrate directionality on a path. This lienzo, however, shows both human feet and horse hoof prints (horses were introduced by the Spanish) (see figure below). Because many Mexican indigenous warriors identified with the Spanish, they portray themselves as light-skinned, whereas Mayan people are portrayed as dark-skinned.

After conquest, as scholars Laura Mathew and Florine Asselbergs have documented, many Mexican natives stayed in Guatemala and created

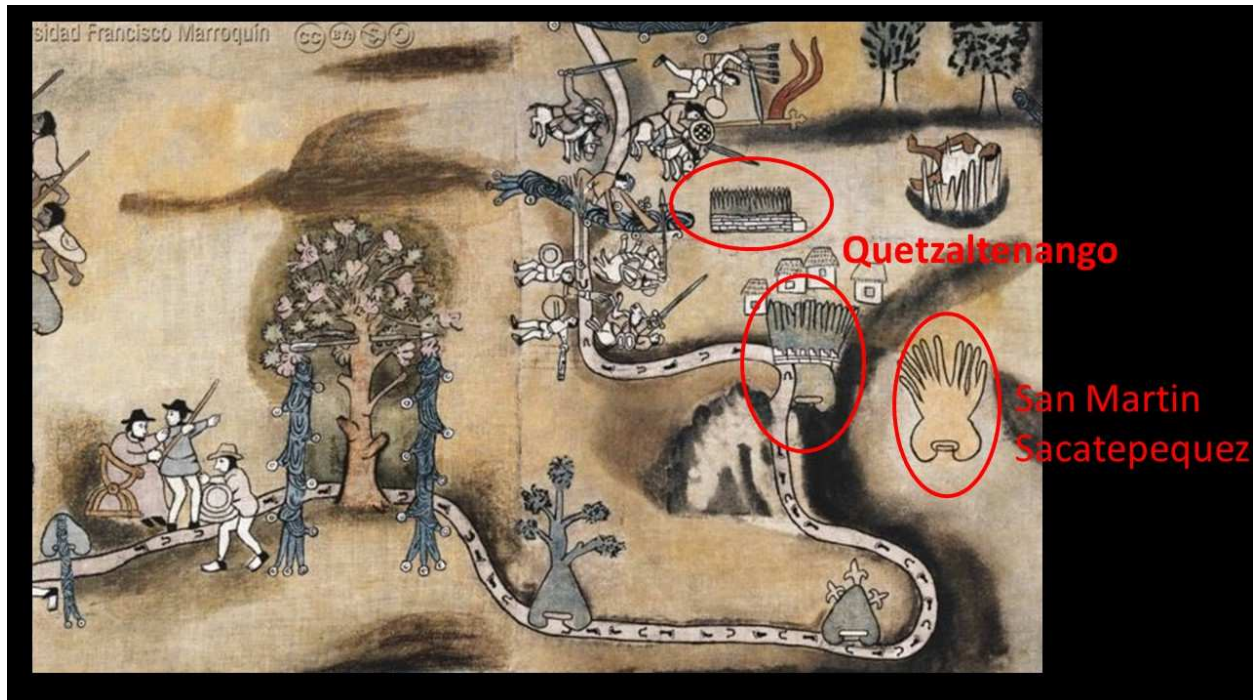
Nahua barrios in early Guatemala towns including Totonicapán, Santiago and Ciudad Viejo (the original colonial capital of Guatemala). Subsequent generations of these original Nahua soldiers struggled for recognition by the Spanish crown for their efforts. Laura Mathew's recent book on these Nahua in Guatemala documents their identity transformation across generations.

Other close-up images from the lienzo illustrate the atrocities that occurred during conquest, as well as less violent things, such as traveling Mexican traders walking through the highlands. A close-up providing a detailed look at the lienzo is shown to the left. Additional close-up images from the lienzo,



including the ones shown here, are available if you have interest (http://images.doaks.org/warfare/items/browse?search=lienzo&submit_search=Search).

The lienzo image on the next page depicts the Spaniards crossing rivers near a large Ceiba tree along the Pacific coast and then heading into the highlands. A place glyph shows that the first highland community (indicated by homes) they reach is near a large mountain. This glyph, which symbolizes this community's identity, consists of a band representing a stepped wall that has feathers on top. (A similar band indicating a wall surrounds the alliance scene at the beginning of the lienzo.) The scholar Florine Asselbergs has identified this as a place glyph for Xelaju (Quetzaltenango). The Spanish had conquered Xelaju in 1524, but as Asselbergs has documented, the lienzo illustrates a great battle between the Spanish and their Nuhua *indios amigos* just outside Xelaju. To see a variety of place glyphs depicted in the lienzo, including Xelaju, click here: <http://lienzo.ufm.edu/en/view-the-lienzo/place-glyphs-in-guatemala/>. A close-up of a portion of the lienzo, showing the place glyphs for both San Martin Chile Verde and Xela is shown below.



If you want to learn more about the Spanish and central Mexican conquest of Guatemala in the 1500s, visit the great website by the Universidad Francisco Marroquin in Guatemala City (where many of the images presented here are from) here: <http://lienzo.ufm.edu/en/>. Additionally, several scholarly books and articles listed below document both the Lienzo de Quauhquechollan and the Nuhua presence in Guatemala during and after the conquest. Florine Asselbergs was the first scholar to describe and decipher the lienzo in detail. Laura Matthew has done a tremendous amount of research on Nuhua warriors and subsequent generations in Guatemala.

Major colonial towns in the highlands (such as Antigua with its distinctive colonial architecture) are best understood when we consider both their Mayan heritage and their colonial history. For example, the tribute demands made by the Spanish nearly 500 years ago make evident the importance of agriculture and weaving. We see that those traditions continue today at the Mayan village of San Martin Chiquito. The Maya – 6 million strong across Central America – clearly have adapted and persisted through Spanish colonization and historical and modern persecution.

Acknowledgements

I began to learn more about the rich colonial history of the Guatemalan highlands several years ago while working on a book about the northern edge of the Spanish frontier (the American Southwest). During that process, I discovered both parallels and dissimilarities between the two areas, which has interested me even more about the process of colonialization and the long-term effects on native populations. Conversations and emails with scholars Florine Asselbergs, Laurie Webster and Will Wroth helped me connect different kinds of information related to thinking about colonialism writ large in Guatemala and beyond. I appreciate the comments and thoughts of both Sue Rikalo and Leslie Baer Dinkel on an earlier draft. This document is much clearer because of editing by Jill Onken. Photographs are by the author except for one noted by Justin Flint. Images taken from websites have accompanying information on their origins.

Additional Reading on the Colonial History of Guatemala

Asselbergs, Florine

2008 *Conquered Conquistadors: The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan: A Nahuatl Vision of the Conquest of Guatemala*. University Press of Colorado, Boulder.

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2007 Whose Conquest? Nahuatl, Zapotec, and Mixtec Allies in the Conquest of Central America. In *Indian Conquistadors; Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, edited by Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk, pp. 102-126. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

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2007 *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahuatl, and Maya Accounts of the Conquest Wars*. Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park.

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