



Historical Perspectives on Maya Resistance

The Tzeltal Revolt of 1712

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In the first week of August, 1712, Mayas from twenty-one indigenous towns in the central highlands of Chiapas gathered in the Tzeltal village of Cancuc to proclaim, “¡Ya no hay Dios ni Rey!” (“Now there is neither God nor King!”).¹ A stunning, unequivocal denunciation of Spanish rule, the pronouncement initiated a regional conflict that would last until the following year. In the early weeks, rebel bands overran Spanish estates, ousted Dominican curates from their rural parishes, and humiliated the provincial militiamen mustered against them. Their leaders ordained a native priesthood, aggressively imposed their will on Mayas reluctant to support the uprising, and gradually created a political chain-of-command designed to subject local village authorities to their power. “This,” a rebel from Ocosingo would say, “was the beginning of a new world.”² Only after the president of the *audiencia* himself arrived with reinforcements from Guatemala was the rebellion effectively put down. The last Maya insurgents were rounded up in February 1713.

In January 1994, barely a week after the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) marched into the *zócalo* of San Cristóbal de las Casas, *La Jornada*, a Mexico City daily that has provided some of the best press coverage of the uprising, published a brief narrative of the 1712 Tzeltal Revolt written by Enrique Florescano, one of Mexico’s leading historians.³ The account was offered without any interpretative text, but the drama of the story effectively drew readers’ attention to the long history of Maya resistance in Chiapas and implicitly invited them to examine recent events in broader historical contexts. This is our invitation to readers of this volume, as well.

I would like to begin by emphasizing the need for caution as we take the long view and look for continuities over time. The temptation to

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romanticize the past, especially perhaps for Mayanists, can be very strong. Today as you drive up the steep, curving highway that links the Grijalva Valley and the state capital of Tuxtla Gutiérrez with San Cristóbal de las Casas and the *altiplano*, your first glimpse of highland Maya peoples might well be of *zincanteco* farmers in *traje*, the customary, almost iridescent striped tunics and beribboned straw hats still worn by men from Zinacantán and its affiliated hamlets. The *Guía Roji*, a popular tourist map, invites you to visit Chamula along the way: "*Se trata de un interesante pueblo tzotzil, lleno de atractivos debido a las costumbres de sus habitantes, quienes conservan arraigadas tradiciones católicas y prehispánicas.*"* This timeless image of picturesque Maya peasants living in bucolic, communal mountain villages is, of course, an idealized, romantic fiction that masks a complex, often violent history. But it is a powerful and enduring image not only in the popular imagination but also in the work of serious academics—and also, perhaps, in the consciousness of serious revolutionaries.

John Watanabe has cast studies of Mayan cultural continuity as a contrast between essentialist and historicist conceptual frameworks.⁴ Essentialism dominated the field from the 1940s through the 1960s, as represented in Sol Tax's 1952 edited book, *The Heritage of Conquest* and in the volumes on social anthropology and ethnology in *The Handbook of Middle American Indians*, published in 1967.⁵ Contemporary Maya identity was equated with the persistence of certain diagnostic cultural traits of pre-hispanic origin: the use of indigenous languages and dialects; distinctive local weaving and embroidery patterns in women's and men's clothing; adherence to the 260-day ritual calendar; and belief in nagualism, traditional agricultural and earth deities, and the sacredness of the natural landscape. To be a Maya was to be a *costumbrista*. A recent book by David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*, gives the essentialist position renewed currency.⁶ Rigorously researched and elegantly conceived, it is a book to be reckoned with.

The historicist view poses a radical alternative. Rejecting the very notion of cultural continuity or cultural survival, postconquest ethnic identities are seen as unhappy products of brutal colonial exploitation and capitalist hegemony. The Guatemalan historian, Severo Martínez Peláez, has advocated this position especially aggressively. In the conclusion of *La Patria del Criollo*, he offered a bitterly sarcastic polemic:

"The enthusiasm with which some are in the habit of seeing certain modalities of Indian culture—its antiquity, its 'authenticity,' its simplicity in certain aspects and its 'profound esoterica' in others, its colorfulness—must suffer a rude blow when it is seen that these modalities have been sustained and integrated by a concrete process of several centuries

* "Experience an interesting Tzotzil pueblo, full of charming attractions based on the customs of the inhabitants, who preserve long-standing prehispanic and Catholic traditions."

of colonial oppression. They reveal the oppression itself."⁷

Watanabe, as well as Kay Warren, Sheldon Annis, and others have effectively staked out a middle ground between the poles in this debate.⁸ Because Maya peoples themselves clearly recognize and articulate in profoundly moving ways their own sense of connection to the distant past, the processes by which they reconstruct continuities of form and meaning continue to deserve serious study. But we no longer conceive of these cultural processes as static, or as dependent upon consensual social and political relations within communities, or as taking place behind barriers to the outside world. Factional loyalties, rank inequalities, class differences, gender hierarchies and other fields of political contention have been rife among Maya societies throughout their history, and have always shaped strategies of accommodation and resistance.

Now, a second caution. Though it is true that the history of Chiapas is marked by several dramatic incidents of indigenous revolt, organized armed rebellion nonetheless has been a rare occurrence. This truism also applies comparatively to the phenomenon of peasant rebellion in other parts of the world. Political obstacles to the mass, regional mobilization of rural peoples are always imposing. Opportunities to overcome those obstacles are uncommon in history, even though poverty and political exploitation have been endemic to rural populations. We have recognized for a long time now that 'everyday forms of resistance,' to use James Scott's familiar term, are a far more 'naturalized' response to colonial exploitation than organized revolt.⁹

If there are cautions to take with the long view, there also, of course, are benefits. Cross-cultural, historical studies of indigenous revolt and peasant rebellion have generated an important and sophisticated body of social science theory. My own work has been shaped by E.P. Thompson's notion of *moral economy*, a conceptual framework that James Scott broadened to apply to modern peasant societies, and one that Ward Stavig, in particular, showed can be useful in trying to understand colonial rebellion in Latin America.¹⁰ Thompson, of course, introduced the term in an essay on eighteenth-century food riots in England. These riots, he argued, were not simply protests against high prices during a period of famine, but a reaction to the erosion of a paternalist code of conduct in which government acknowledged certain moral obligations to protect the poor. Scott built on Thompson in a book on early twentieth century rebellions in Burma and Vietnam. In it, he wrote:

*"How, then, can we understand the moral passion that is so obviously an integral part of the peasant revolt we have described? How can we grasp the peasant's sense of social justice? We can begin, I believe, with two moral principles that seem firmly embedded in both the social patterns and injunctions of peasant life: the norm of reciprocity and the right to subsistence."*¹¹

In sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish America, these two moral principles also were embodied in legislative codes introduced with the New Laws and other royal directives that followed.

These laws established controls on the use of indigenous labor, courts in which communities could air their grievances and petition for legal redress, and officeholding structures for local government that codified the system of indirect rule. The Church, too, especially the mendicant friars, assumed a paternalist stance toward indigenous people that embraced these principles. However, creoles often resisted these measures, methods of enforcement often contradicted their intent, and norms for proper conduct were always contested or renegotiated as local conditions altered. In Chiapas, at the end of the seventeenth century, these kinds of challenges to the moral economy escalated as the *audiencia* of Guatemala confronted an economic and political crisis of some complexity. The resulting break-down of a long-standing status quo in the hinterlands north and east of Ciudad Real eventually led to a full-scale Maya uprising. Similarly, we might view the Zapatista rebellion in the context of a post-revolutionary moral economy codified in Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, a moral economy that collapsed when the agrarian reform laws were rewritten by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

The Seventeenth Century Political Economy

The turmoil of the late seventeenth century in Central America broke an extended period of relative calm that was linked to a prolonged economic depression. We owe our understanding of this period to Murdo MacLeod, whose *Spanish Central America* first outlined the broad patterns of economic and social change that unfolded throughout the *audiencia*.¹² For Chiapas, the most telling indicator of the seriousness of the economic downturn is the sharp drop in the Spanish population of Ciudad Real from 280 *vecinos* in 1620 to only 50 by 1659.¹³ Sidney David Markman has added detail to this picture, describing 'a small nondescript town' that lacked a public fountain, whose houses were mostly roofed in thatch rather than tile, and whose most significant public buildings were yet to be completed or were falling into disrepair.¹⁴

With the decline of the provincial capital, colonial authorities who governed over highland villages grew neglectful. For much of the century, yearly *padrones* (censuses) were overlooked and tribute collection was poorly supervised.¹⁵ While lax, irregular government may periodically have led to arbitrary abuses by Spanish officials, administrative neglect seems to have given the Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Chol some breathing room after the terrifying changes of the preceding century. Their populations bottomed-out around 1611, and, in many communities, began to show the first signs of recovery.¹⁶

And as MacLeod emphasizes, two key institutions that brokered economic and political relations between Spaniards and Mayas for the remainder of colonial rule, the town treasuries (*cajas de comunidad*) and religious sodalities (*cofradías*), became well-established in this period.¹⁷

These institutions served the Spanish state, but they also restored some regularity to village life and, over time, were adapted by Mayas for their own purposes. The solidarities, for example, were promoted by the Dominicans to create an alternative source of financial support as parish revenue declined along with native populations. But records suggest that initially local curates did not keep a close watch over the *cofradías*, and that the ceremonial rounds associated with the solidarities became important expressions of community identity.

The consolidation of these institutions enabled indigenous elites to stabilize village politics and in the process preserve their status and authority. It fell to them to negotiate with outsiders—with capricious tax-collectors, aggressive itinerant merchants, or strict Dominican clergymen—to defend their communities. Their investment in the moral economy of seventeenth-century government was considerable, and when Spanish paternalism deteriorated they would face reprisals from their own people as well as from colonial officials.

MacLeod labeled the years from 1685 to 1730 as a time of 'strain and change'; Miles Wortman, more cryptically, described it as a period of 'crisis and continuity.'¹⁸ Spain, crippled by an incompetent monarch in Charles II and bankrupted by decades of war with the Dutch, English and French, was swept up in the collapse of the Habsburgs, the War of the Spanish Succession, and the arrival of a Bourbon king with new ideas about government. For its American colonies, this turmoil spelled more aggressive taxation, bitter quarrels among rival governing authorities, and great uncertainty altogether.

In Guatemala, a revival of indigo production and Honduran silver mining foreshadowed a decisive economic upswing, but also set regional interests against one another in sometimes violent contests for conscripted Indian labor and equally fraught debates over tax policy. The *audiencia*, confronted by intrigues among rival factions throughout the 1680s and 1690s, was devastated by open warfare at the turn of the century.¹⁹ The political infighting in this period centered on a reformist *oidor*, Joseph de Escals, who in 1696-97 accused the *audiencia* president, Jacinto de Barrios Leal, of criminal acts that included extortion, tax evasion, nepotism, contraband trading, and even rape. Escals linked *alcaldes mayores* in Salvador, Sonsonate, and Nicaragua to Barrios Leal, and depicted a complex criminal conspiracy that also included the dean of the cathedral in Santiago. His own allies were mining and merchant interests in Honduras, whom Barrios Leal's faction accused of similar wrongdoings. The quarrel continued after Barrios Leal stepped down and Escals was called home by the Royal Council. In 1699, a royal *visitador*, Francisco Gómez de la Matriz arrived in Guatemala, and with the support of Escals' old allies tried to oust the new president, Gabriel Sánchez de Berrospe. Both sides in the dispute raised an army, and when Gómez de la Matriz fled to Soconusco, the war took on regional dimensions.

These events provide an interesting and revealing backdrop to the

history of civil unrest in Chiapas during the same period. Our picture of economic conditions here remains clouded and the subject of some disagreement. Juan Pedro Viqueira, for example, points to the arrival of the Jesuits in 1695 to make the case that this was a time of new commercial opportunity and relative vitality.²⁰ However, the fact that many Spanish citizens continued to abandon the city through the 1720s suggests that at least in the highlands the depression lingered. And in 1704, the province was again beset by epidemic disease, creating labor shortages and tribute short-falls that drastically lowered productivity and weakened local markets, conditions that persisted under the impact of the rebellion into the 1730s.²¹

Evidence of considerable regional variation also complicates the picture. Some of the Spaniards who left Ciudad Real (later: San Cristóbal) remained in the province, settling to the west in the Grijalva Valley among *Chiapanecos* and *Zoques* near Chiapa de Indios, Tuxtla and Tecpatlán. This lowland economy does seem to have been more dynamic, with commercial opportunities in ranching, cacao and cochineal production, and regional trading along the routes that led north to Mexico and east to Tabasco and a thriving clandestine trade along the Gulf Coast.

Questions about larger economic trends aside, Chiapas also confronted renewed bureaucratic activism of the kind personified by Joseph de Escals that provoked similar kinds of quarrels among Spanish administrators and local citizens, and also imposed heavier burdens on native populations. Two broad initiatives, one by the State and the other by the Church, were in retrospect especially significant. The first was the settlement, early in the 1690s, of a jurisdictional dispute between the *alcalde mayor* and royal officials known as *jueces de milpa* that confirmed the former's authority over the collection of Indian tributes.²² The second was the attempt to secularize Dominican parishes in Chiapas, an effort that reflected a renewed activism on the part of provincial bishops that extended to new anti-idolatry campaigns, the reorganization of *cofradías*, and more frequent pastoral *visitas*. For Mayas and other indigenous peoples, the ramifications of both these developments were complex and multi-faceted, and bore directly on the causes of the Tzeltal Revolt and other episodes of agrarian unrest. Both require closer scrutiny.

The case that led to the ruling regarding Indian tribute had been initiated by the *alcalde mayor* Manuel Maisterra y Atocha. Maisterra seized upon his new authority to consolidate and expand a well-established system of coercive commerce, the *repartimiento de mercancías*, also known as the *reparto de efectos*. The system compelled indigenous peoples to purchase certain commodities, often raw materials such as cotton or agave fiber, and make payment in finished products, such as cloth or thread, at extravagantly unfair rates of exchange. Indians also were forced to accept grossly unfair payments in currency for products like cacao, cochineal, and cotton fabric that were in demand in local and regional markets.

The element of coercion in these exchanges was often pretty crude. The governor's henchmen might threaten to cudgel village authorities or have them arrested if they refused to go along. But the more significant element of coercion was much more subtle, and linked the repartimientos in important ways to other mechanisms of colonial exploitation. In Chiapas, by the end of the seventeenth century, a hefty portion of the bi-annual tribute was required in coin, this despite the fact that the province, indeed all of Central America, suffered a chronic currency shortage.²³ With wage labor opportunities limited in Chiapas, the repartimientos figure to have been the primary source of cash for many Indian tribute-payers, especially Mayas in the poorer districts of the highlands. Consequently, when Maisterra gained control of the tribute, *alcaldes mayores* gained a powerful instrument for imposing the repartimientos. Mayas forced to pay tribute in coin had few choices but to accept larcenous purchase prices for the goods that the *alcaldes mayores* required in trade.

As it happened, Maisterra paid dearly for his avarice. On May 16, 1693, he was struck down and killed by a mob in the Zoque town of Tuxtla who had gathered to protest his repartimientos.²⁴ Tuxtla was a center for cacao and cochineal production, and so an especially lucrative source of profit for the *alcalde mayor*. Killed with Maisterra were his lieutenant, Nicolás de Trejo, and Tuxtla's Indian governor, don Pablo Hernández, who had helped in Maisterra's schemes. The incident also was sparked by fierce rivalries among leading *principales* in the town, one of whom, don Julio Velásquez sought the governorship for himself. The intensity of these factional disputes is highlighted by the fact that Hernández died when the mob set afire his house, as well as those of allied *principales* nearby, in one *barrio* of the town.²⁵ On May 19, a small contingent of militiamen, supported by some 300 native troops from Chiapa de Indios, marched unopposed into Tuxtla, and order was restored. Arrest were made that eventually led to the execution in July of sixteen men and five women.²⁶ Forty-eight others were given two hundred strokes (*azotes*), sentenced to ten years of forced labor, and sent into exile.

After the Tzeltal Revolt nearly twenty years later, the repartimientos of one of Maisterra's successors, Martín González de Bergara, were cited by the Dominican chronicler, Fray Francisco Ximénez as a major provocation, and in the aftermath of the revolt, the *audiencia* undertook a lengthy judicial review of the whole history of the system of coerced commerce.²⁷ There can be little doubt that the repartimientos were the most significant single factor that provoked rebellion in colonial Chiapas. However, we should remember that the incident in Tuxtla did not flare up into a regional uprising. And in 1712, the Tzeltal Revolt was confined to the northeastern corner of the highlands. The rebels would fail to gain support from Tzeltal communities in the valleys southeast of Ciudad Real, or, with a few exceptions, the Tzotzil towns just northwest of the capital. Moreover, in 1712, the Zoque governor of Tuxtla sided

with colonial authorities, and supplied the Spanish army with horses, corn, and other provisions during the campaign to quell the revolt. During both episodes, then, many pueblos that played every bit as significant a role in the regional commercial network built around the repartimientos remained pacified. It's worth asking why.

As a working hypothesis, the impact of the repartimientos seems likely to have been a function of three variables. The first was the relationship between subsistence agriculture and the commodities demanded in trade. In Chiapas, the same ecological conditions that favored the production of cash crops like cacao, cochineal, or raw cotton—moderate yearly temperature variations; more reliable water sources—also favored higher corn yields, and even, in some places, two annual harvests. We might conjecture, therefore, that even though demand for certain cash crops might be very intense, if subsistence was still relatively secure, the likelihood of organized violence was significantly lower than in zones where corn yields were lower and of poorer quality. This may explain, for example, why Tzeltal communities like Amatenango, Pinola, and Teopisca, located in the upland valley district known as los Llanos where cotton was grown, never joined the rebellion.

A second critical variable was the impact of the repartimientos on indigenous modes of production, especially the organization of family and household labor. In *Class and Society in Central Chiapas*, Robert Wasserstrom documented claims that by the 1760s and 1770s, demand for cacao had reached a level that forced at least some Zoque farmers to abandon foodcropping altogether, a situation that worsened the periodic famines associated with locusts and bad weather.²⁸ Just how widespread such conditions might have been, and just when the repartimientos reached such a critical intensity remains very uncertain. In general, we know surprisingly little about how indigenous men and women coordinated the production of subsistence staples with the cultivation and manufacturing of commercial commodities. Presumably, at least in the early years, pressure to produce certain kinds of goods could be accommodated more easily than others without significant reallocations of land or redeployment of labor. Rebellion seems less likely under these conditions, and more likely when existing modes of production had to be radically reordered.

For the highland Tzeltal, one dimension of the repartimientos' impact is certain. Here, the chief demand was for cotton cloth. Cloth also was the one item in village tribute assessments that *alcaldes mayores* did not require in cash. As a result, the trade was especially hard on Maya women, for they were the weavers. The work also required them to clean sticks and seeds from raw fiber and spin thread, tedious, time-consuming tasks in and of themselves. In addition, women were required to provide menial labor during the actual visits by Spanish authorities. They were pressed to cook, launder clothes, and provide other domestic services, and must sometimes have been subjected to sexual harassment and rape. Margaret Villanueva has linked incidents of re-

bellion in eighteenth century Oaxaca to the abuse of women weavers there.²⁹ Consequently, it seems reasonable to suggest more broadly, that when the repartimientos disrupted household modes of production, which were always highly gendered, the likelihood of violence increased. The Tzeltal Revolt, of course, was precipitated by the actions of a young woman.

Finally, a third variable that shaped the impact of the trade was the private interests that local *caciques* and *principales* (indigenous nobles) themselves had in cashcropping and craft specialization. Among the Zoque, for example, native elites controlled much of the land devoted to cacao and cochineal, either as customary entitlements attached to their *cacicazgo* or as private property. In theory, as entrepreneurs in their own right, they should have suffered from the monopolistic practices of the *alcalde mayor* and would have been better off with an open market. In practice, they seem to have reconciled themselves to partnerships in the trade, and been beneficiaries rather than victims. As a result, in the more commercialized zones of the province, where we might expect sharper social inequalities to have produced higher levels of political conflict, local government seems to have been more stable and the colonial system of indirect rule more effective.³⁰ In contrast, in the poorer districts of the province, and in the heartland of the Tzeltal Revolt, native elites were weaker and more vulnerable, and local government seems to have been less stable.

In the highlands, only one *cacicazgo* is known to have survived into the eighteenth century.³¹ Centered in Ixtapa, a Tzotzil town west of Ciudad Real, it included Zinacantán, San Gabriel, and Soyaló. Elsewhere, power rested with the descendants of lesser nobles, the *principales*, who controlled the municipal offices of *alcalde* and *regidor*. At the end of the seventeenth century, local politics in these communities seem to have been increasingly volatile and native elites especially vulnerable to outside interference. In Cancuc, the meddling of the *alcalde mayor* in 1665, and the village priest in 1677, provoked bitter divisions over *cabildo* elections.³² And in 1679, the entire village council in Tenejapa, along with their immediate predecessors, were arrested by the *alcalde mayor* for habitual drunkenness and incompetent government.³³ Eventually, alienated Maya elites such as these would lead their people into rebellion.

Now let's turn to the second field of bureaucratic activism. As emphasized above, the commercial and administrative energy of the *alcaldes mayores* in this period was matched by the bishops and Dominican curates who revitalized the provincial Church during these same years. Between 1658 and 1712, four bishops, Fray Mauro de Tobar y Valle, Marcos Bravo de la Serna y Manrique, Fray Francisco Núñez de la Vega, and Fray Bautista Alvarez de Toledo promoted a variety of projects that created new burdens for indigenous communities. Of the four, thanks to the account of Francisco Ximénez, Alvarez de Toledo is the most notorious.³⁴ He founded the Hospital de San Nicolás in Ciudad

Real, and imposed a new parish tax on highland communities to fund it. His *visita* in 1709, depleted *cofradía* funds by half throughout the highlands, and left such bitterness that the announcement of a second *visita* in the summer of 1712 was a decisive factor in the outbreak of the revolt.³⁵

But his predecessors had done their share, too, to unsettle conditions in the hinterland of their diocese. Tobar y Valle had redrawn parish boundaries and established new parish seats (*cabeceras*), reforms that tightened ecclesiastic administration. Bravo de la Serna founded a seminary in Ciudad Real in hopes of pushing secularization, and also set new constitutions for Maya *cofradías* that resulted in closer supervision of their finances.³⁶ Bishop Núñez de la Vega compiled a new handbook for the Dominican missions that promoted an aggressive campaign against idolatry and shamanism. Like Alvarez de Toledo, he carried out two pastoral *visitas* within a two year interval. During one, he destroyed painted images of two Tzeltal deities that had been nailed to a beam in Oxchuc's church, and confiscated, there and in other towns, the calendar boards used by Maya shamans.³⁷

Like the interferences of the *alcaldes mayores*, the bishops' actions disturbed village elites and alienated old allies. In 1709, Lucas Pérez, the *fiscal* or parish assistant in Chilón, refused to pay a fee imposed by Bishop Alvarez de Toledo during his notorious *visita*, and was deprived of his office and imprisoned.³⁸ In Bachajón, around the same time, the *fiscal*, Gerónimo Saroes, was booted out of the pueblo after a fight with his priest.³⁹ Both would go on to become major figures in the Tzeltal Revolt, as would another former parish assistant, the sacristan in Cancuc, Agustín López. The crackdown on shamanism and idolatry also must have upset village politics. The whole construction of power among Maya peoples was linked to indigenous beliefs about the super-natural, including the efficacy of ritual, the constant presence of spiritual guardians, the revelations of dreams and hallucinatory visions. Mayas, then, would have viewed an attack on the ritual specialists as a threat to the well-being of the whole community.

Early in the eighteenth century, a wave of popular religious cults swept through highland Chiapas, testaments to Maya belief that material misfortunes were intertwined with the sacred. In 1708, crowds gathered in Zinacantán to hear the preachings of a mestizo hermit, who was said to have a miraculous statue of the Holy Mother hidden in a tree. During the Lenten season in 1712, just months before events began to unfold in Cancuc, authorities learned of another cult, this time in Santa Marta. A shrine had been built that housed another miraculous image of the Virgin, who had appeared to a young Tzotzil woman named Dominica López sometime the previous fall.⁴⁰ The woman's husband, Juan Gómez, told Fray Joseph Monroy of Chamula that he had discovered the effigy at the site of the visitation, a form originally made of human flesh that had changed inexplicably into wood.

Both cults drew Mayas from all the districts of central Chiapas, and

even some Zoques from the western highlands. Both were suppressed by Dominican and diocesan authorities without violence from either side. The Tzeltal Revolt began much the same way, with a miraculous apparition, but this time the confrontation led to a regional war.

The 1712 Rebellion

The rebellion originated as a conspiracy among a small group of dissident Maya principales who promoted a new cult in Cancuc. María López, the thirteen year-old daughter of their leader, Agustín López, claimed the Virgin Mary had appeared to her on the outskirts of town. Her father, Cancuc's sacristan, was joined by Gerónimo Saroes, Sebastián García, Gabriel Sánchez, and Miguel Gómez.⁴¹ Saroes was the exiled fiscal and *escribano* from Bachajón. Sebastián García and Miguel Gómez, both of Cancuc, were former regidores. All four, Agustín López later told a Spanish court:

*"were men of authority and all the Indians had much respect for them. In this time and occasion they were poor; myself and the others could scarcely put our hands on a single manta."*⁴²

In the simplest of language, this remains the most revealing and moving explanation for the rebellion to appear amongst the thousands of pages of reports and testimony the event would generate. A former ally of local Spanish rule, López' bitterness is palpable, and the idiom he invoked to describe their poverty draws our attention directly to the *repartimientos*.

By late June or early July, the conspirators had recruited support for the cult from the standing *alcaldes* and *regidores* as well as the two *fiscales* who served the village priest.⁴³ *Fiscales* from Chilón and Tenango soon arrived to pledge their support, too, and the movement began to grow.⁴⁴ However, one of Tenango's *fiscales*, Nicolás Pérez, remained loyal to the Church.⁴⁵ He helped Cancuc's parish priest, the Dominican Fray Simón de Lara, escape to the capital shortly before the *cancuqueros* declared themselves in open rebellion.

In the first week of August, letters written in Tzeltal by Gerónimo Saroes were sent out to villages all over the highlands summoning local *alcaldes* and their townspeople to Cancuc for a great convocation, and instructing them to bring *"all the cajas and drums, and all the books and money of the cofradías."*⁴⁶ At least twenty-one Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Chol pueblos sent representatives to the gathering:

- Tzeltal: Bachajón, Cancuc, Chilón, Guaguitepeque, Moyos, Ocosingo, Petalsingo, Teultepeque, Oxchuc, Sibacá, Sitalá, Tenango, Tenejapa, and Yajalón;
- Tzotzil: Hueytiupán, Huistán, Mitontic, San Pedro Chenaló, and Santa Marta;
- Chol: Tila, Tumbala.

At this point in the political narrative, it is tempting to view the rebellion as an inexorable force that spread like proverbial 'wild fire.' As

Robert Wasserstrom first emphasized, a closer look reveals a more complicated story. Principales in many of the villages resisted turning over their community's assets to the *cancuqueros*. Instead, they buried ledgers and strongboxes in caches hidden in the mountains.⁴⁷ The alcaldes of at least one village, Chilón, refused to come at all.⁴⁸ Two early casualties of the revolt were fiscales in Tenango and Oxchuc who were killed for refusing to participate, Nicolás Pérez and Fabian Ximénez.⁴⁹ And soon after the August convocation, Cancuc confronted a rival cult in Yajalón, where a woman named Magdalena Díaz claimed she had been visited by the true Virgin.⁵⁰ Rebel soldiers put a quick end to her challenge. Finally, Simojovel suffered a vicious raid that left hundreds dead, when tzotziles there refused to join.⁵¹ Facts like these must temper more idealized accounts of the uprising, but they should not overshadow the impressive efforts of rebel leaders to build solidarity and create an effective fighting force.

These men and women appropriated the rituals and practices of the Catholic Church, the nomenclature of the Spanish militia ranks, and the office structures of royal government, and set out to turn the colonial world upside down. Cancuc was styled *Ciudad Real Cancuc de Nueva España*; Hueytiupan was cited as *Guatemala*, Spaniards were denounced as 'Jews' and the real Ciudad Real as 'Jerusalem.' These were powerful rhetorical plays, designed to assert the legitimacy of the movement in language that Spaniards would understand.

The actual structures of rebel government did not replicate Spanish forms so literally, and the balance of political power among rebel leaders remains the subject of some disagreement. Throughout the rebellion, the shrine in Cancuc, where María López (more commonly known as María de la Candalaria, her *nombre de guerra*) preached and consulted with the Virgin, remained the both the symbolic and active headquarters for the uprising. She was attended by her father, who seems to have had a hand in nearly all the major political and military decisions taken by the rebels. But as the movement developed, others arrived to play critical roles.

None has received more attention than Sebastián Gómez de la Gloria, who came to Cancuc after the initial conspiracy was underway. He arrived with a fantastic story, an account of a visitation with San Pedro himself, who invested him with the authority to act as bishop. At the August gathering, in Cancuc's church, he ordained the first rebel priests, the fiscales who had supported the cult early on, along with three newcomers, Sebastián González of Guaguitepeque, Francisco Pérez of Petalcingo, and Francisco de Torre y Tobilla of Ocosingo.⁵² Francisco de Torre y Tobilla later testified that Gómez "*baptized him, pouring water on his head and placing his hand on it, lowering it from his forehead to his nose saying in his mother tongue [Tzotzil], 'in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.'*"⁵³ Some weeks later, at least thirteen more fiscales were recruited to the rebel priesthood.⁵⁴ These men wore the vestments left behind by their curates, preached inside village churches, and even con-

secrated marriages that they dutifully registered in the *libros de matrimonios*. But like their Spanish role models, they also would charge fees for their work. This aroused such discontent that leaders were forced to send an angry letter among the pueblos reminding townspeople of the important of obedience.⁵⁵

That letter came not from Sebastián Gómez de la Gloria, but from Nicolás Vásquez of Tenango, who boasted later, "*I was superior and had command over all the other captains, vicarios, and curas.*"⁵⁶ Vásquez was one of four captains general named to head the rebel army. The others were Jacinto Domínguez of Sibacá, Juan García of Cancuc, and Lazaro Ximénez of Hueytiupán.⁵⁷ Vásquez emerged as their leader, and the account of Agustín López suggests that he worked hand-in-hand with López and Gómez de la Gloria in what can best be described as a leadership collective. Rebel captains were named in each town to recruit soldiers, muster supplies, build defenses, and lead their townsmen when the war started in earnest. Surprisingly few of them seem to have been current or former officeholders, suggesting that the cancuqueros did not trust local principales to sacrifice their own interests for the good of the movement.

Now, as for the war itself. At the start, provincial Spaniards were caught at a disadvantage. The alcalde mayor Martín González de Vergara had died just before the crisis began, leaving the office of regional governor vacant. Local militias mustered in Ciudad Real and Ocosingo were slow to mobilize and their officers were inexperienced and indecisive. Consequently, authorities in the province were unable to suppress the rebellion in its initial stage. In September, an army of mestizo and mulatto conscripts from Guatemala led by Spanish officers under the command of audiencia president, Toribio de Cosío, arrived in Ciudad Real to lead a new campaign. Their offensive began in earnest in November, with aid from the indigenous governors in Chiapa de Indios and Tuxtla. The alcalde mayor in Tabasco opened a second front in Maya territory to the east.

Descriptions of the fighting recall accounts of the wars of conquest, with Spanish officers on horseback, backed by cadres of crossbowmen, musketeers, and pikemen. The Mayas defended their territory with ambushes, impeding audiencia forces with pits lined with sharp sticks and mud barriers, and pummeling them with stones from hidden troop placements. During the sieges at Huistán, Oxchuc, and finally Cancuc, these adversaries fought hand-to-hand, the Mayas armed with pikes, axes, and throwing stones. Remarkably few Spanish soldiers lost their lives in these encounters, though hundreds of Maya rebels and non-combatants perished. Cancuc was taken on November 21, 1712. María López (de la Candelaria) and Agustín López managed to escape. She died in childbirth some four years later, just two weeks before her family's hideout near Yajalón was exposed and her father arrested. Sebastián Gómez de la Gloria escaped, too, and was never caught. Nicolás Vásquez and a handful of other captains held out until February of

the following year.

Conclusion

During the final siege in Cancuc, María López had prophesized that some day the Virgin would return and the Tzeltal would rise again. In June 1727, the fifteenth anniversary of her original vision, Spanish authorities feared her prophesy was about to be fulfilled. The *justicia mayor* of Tabasco, Andrés de Arze, called out his militia when a revolt was reported in three Zoque villages along the frontier with Chiapas.⁵⁸ His would claim to have exposed not one, but two conspiracies. The first was led by a Zoque principal from Tecomaxiaca, and included Tzeltal supporters from Chilón, who migrated seasonally to the frontier to work in the cacao orchards. The second, he linked to the return of the Cancuc Virgin, who was reported to have reappeared in Bachajón, where Francisco Saroes, a kinsmen of one of the original Cancuc conspirators, served as fiscal. Arze tortured two of the alleged leaders of this new rebellion, Antonio Vásquez of Cancuc and Marcos Velásquez of Bachajon. He also sent an alarm to the governor of Chiapas, Martín Joseph de Bustamente, who immediately sent out inquiries to officials in his province. Even under torture, neither Vásquez or Velásquez admitted to any wrongdoing, and Bustamente found no evidence of unrest among the Tzeltal and Tzotzil pueblos near Ciudad Real. In the end, Arze's conduct was condemned by royal authorities for needlessly enflaming public tensions.

The Arze incident highlights a pervasive and deep-seeded fear of the Maya among *ladinos* (non-Indians) in the frontier towns of southern Mexico, a fear that has persisted to the present-day. Distant from centers of state power, non-Indians in towns like San Cristóbal, Comitán, or Ocosingo have felt vulnerable and endangered by the indigenous populations that surround them. These conditions have promoted intense, racist hatred of the Maya, and made *ladinos* themselves prone to initiate violence in the first-place. Cultivating fears of endemic Maya rebellion has enabled reactionary landowners and others to justify unprovoked attacks on settlements of Maya peoples periodically throughout the history of the state. Movements like the Tzeltal Revolt, or the Zapatista uprising, largely began as defensive reactions to these and other forms of *ladino* violence.

Just how the social memory of contemporary Mayas in Chiapas integrates these historic revolts and periods of unrest is a question that lies beyond my expertise. We may be tempted to assume that the Maya view these episodes with deep pride, as heroic moments that foreshadow or prophesize an end to oppression and a new age of Maya sovereignty. Drawing from Victoria Bricker's *Indian Christ, Indian King*, and work by Dennis Tedlock and James Sexton on Maya folktales in Guatemala, I suspect that alongside any mythic representations are sober, hard memories of death and famine, of disorder and dislocation, of families

torn apart and people disappeared.⁵⁹ As we admire the grit and courage of a new band of Maya insurgents, and celebrate the wit and ingenuity of their *subcomandante*, we must not lose sight of the heavy cost that ordinary men and women will bear, nor forget that these events engender nightmares as well as dreams.

Endnotes

1. Included in this essay are reworkings of material included in Gosner, *Soldiers of the Virgin*. Other secondary works on the Tzeltal Revolt include: Bricker, *Indian Christ, the Indian King*, Chap. 5; Klein, "Peasant Communities"; Martínez Peláez, *Sublevación*; Saint-Lu, "Poder colonial"; Thompson, *Maya Paganism*; Viqueira, *María de la Candelaria*; and Wasserstrom, "Ethnic Violence".
2. Archivo General de las Indias (AGI), Audiencia de Guatemala (AG), Vol. 295: Cdrno 6: Testimonio de Francisco de Torre y Tobilla, folio 10-11, February 19, 1713.
3. *La Jornada* Newspaper, January 9, 1994.
4. Watanabe, *Maya Saints*, pp. 5-11.
5. Tax (ed.), *Heritage of Conquest*; Wauchope (ed.) *Handbook*.
6. Freidel, Schele & Parker, *Maya Cosmos*.
7. Martínez Peláez, *Patria del criollo*.
8. See Warren, *Symbolism of Subordination*; Annis, *God and Production*.
9. See Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.
10. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" and "The Moral Economy Reviewed" in *Customs in Common*; Scott, *Moral Economy*. Useful critiques of moral economy approaches include: Adas, "'Moral Economy' or 'Contest State'?"; Bohstedt, "Moral Economy"; and Hunt, "From the Millennial." See also, Stavig, "Ethnic Conflict"; and De Jong, "Community Discourse," for other examples of moral economy approaches in colonial Latin American history.
11. Scott, *Moral Economy*, p. 167.
12. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, Part Three.
13. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, p. 218; Gerhard, *Southeast Frontier*, p. 161.
14. Markman, *Architecture*, pp. 63-69.
15. AGI, Contaduría, 971 (1622); Archivo General de Centro América, Guatemala City (AGCA), A3.16 (I) 37648 2566, Padrones 1665.
16. Gerhard, *Southeast Frontier*, pp. 158-161; MacLeod, "Outline," p. 8.
17. Archivo Histórico Diocesano, San Cristóbal (AHDSC), Libros de cofradías, Chilón, Sibacá, Yajalón. 1677-1827; MacLeod, "Papel social y económico."
18. Wortman, *Government*, pp. 91-110.
19. For the best overview of these conflicts, see Wortman, *Government*, esp. pp. 94-99.
20. Viqueira, "Tribute y sociedad," pp. 248-249.
21. AGCA A3.16 (I) 4753 367 (1705).
22. See MacLeod, "Dominican Explanations," p. 43; and Viqueira, "Tributo," pp. 238-240.
23. For a more complete account of tribute practices, see Gosner, *Soldiers of the Virgin*, Chapter 3.
24. AGCA A1.15 559 49: Autos sobre la motin habido en Tuxtla fue asesinado el alcalde mayor, 1693. The best account of the riot in Tuxtla is MacLeod, "Motines."
25. MacLeod, "Motines," p. 237.
26. MacLeod, "Motines," pp. 241-242.
27. Ximénez, *Historia*, III, pp. 257-259; AGI, AG, 312: Expediente sobre la averiguación de los fraudes por los alcaldes mayores, 1718-1729.
28. Wasserstrom, *Class and Society*, pp. 47-48.
29. Villanueva, "From Calpixqui to Corregidor," p. 32.

30. Among the Tzeltal, for example, the cotton-producing towns in los Llanos, and among the Tzotzil, Simojovel, where tobacco was grown, and Zinacantán, where salt was harvested, were conspicuously unresponsive to the rebels in 1712.
31. AGCA A1.24 10216 1572 folio 100: Título de gobernador de los pueblos de Istapa, Zinacantán, San Gabriel, y Soyaló a Don Cristóbal Sánchez. March 16, 1701. In the seventeenth century, heirs claimed titles to cacicazgos in Chamula (1601) and Bachajon (1630), but no references to *caciques* in these towns have been found for the eighteenth century, AGCA, A3.16 4516 355: Tributos, 1601; Breton, *Bachajon*, pp. 249-259; and Calnek, "Highland Chiapas," pp. 93-94.
32. AGCA A1.14.21 908 119: Autos sobre una elección en Ocotenango, April 9, 1675; Petición de las justicias del pueblo de San Juan Enavgelista Ocotenango piden aprobación de elecciones. January 1, 1677.
33. AGI, AG, 29: Carta del Capitán Don Juan Bautista Gonzalez del Alamo a la Audiencia, 1682.
34. Ximénez, *Historia*, III, p. 257.
35. AHDSC Libros de cofradías. La cofradía de Santa Cruz, Sibacá, 1677-1716; La cofradía del Santísimo Sacramento, Chilón, 1677-1827; La cofradía de la Parroquia de Santo Domingo, Chilón, 1677-1827.
36. AHDSC, Libros de cofradías, Chilón, 1677-1827.
37. Núñez de la Vega, *Constituciones diocesanas*, 9th Pastoral Letter, Section 10.
38. Ximénez, *Historia*, III, pp. 257-258.
39. AGI, AG, 296: Testimonio de Agustín López, folio 63, 1716.
40. AGI, AG, 293: Testimonio de los autos fechos sobre decirse que hace aparecido la Virgen Santísima Nuestra Señora a una india del pueblo Santa Marta, May 1712.
41. AGI, AG, 296: Testimonio de Agustín López, folios 87-88, 1716.
42. AGI, AG, 296: Testimonio de Agustín López, folio 88, 1716.
43. AGI, AG, 296: Testimonio de Agustín López, folio 64, 1716.
44. AGI, AG, 296: Quaderno 5, folios 294-295, 1713.
45. Ximénez, *Historia*, III, p. 270.
46. Ximénez, *Historia*, III, pp. 269-270.
47. AHDSC, Libro de la Cofradía, Santo Domingo Chilón, August 4, 1715.
48. Ximénez, *Historia*, III, pp. 272-273, 278-279.
49. Ximénez, *Historia*, III, pp. 273-274.
50. Ximénez, *Historia*, III, pp. 286-287.
51. Bricker, *Indian Christ*, p. 64; AGI, AG, 295, Qdrno 5, folio 208, March 1713.
52. AGI, AG, 296: Quaderno 5: Testimonio de Gerónimo Saroes, folio 294, 1713; AGI, AG, 295: Quaderno 6: Testimonio de Francisco Torre y Tobilla, folios 10-11, 1713.
53. AGI, AG, 296: Quaderno 6: Testimonio de Francisco de Torre y Tobilla, folio 10, February 19, 1713. Translation from Bricker, *Indian Christ*, p. 61.
54. AGI, AG, 293: Testimonio de los autos contra diferentes idios de diversos pueblos por haber administrado los santos sacramentos, 1713.
55. Ximénez, *Historia*, III, p. 283.
56. AGI, AG, 295: Qdrno 5, folio 202, March 1713.
57. AGI, AG, 295: Qdrno 5, folio 202, 1713, and, folio 294, 1713.
58. AGCA, A1.15 176 13, 1727: Autos fechos sobre las noticias dadas por el alcalde mayor de la provincia de Chiapa a su Señoría el Señor Presidente Gobernador y Capitán General de este reyno.
59. Tedlock, *Breath on the Mirror*; Sexton, *Mayan Folktales*.