

CULTURAL CONTRASTS
and
SENSITIVITY

*The Exploration of Cultural Differences Between
the United States
and
the Villages around Lake Atitlan in Guatemala*

PLUS

An ORIENTATION Guide for O.D.I.M. Volunteers

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Organization for the Development of the Indigenous Maya

ODIM, Organization for the Development of the Indigenous Maya, or in Spanish, *Organización para el Desarrollo de La Indígena Maya*, is a volunteer organization working around Lake Atitlan in the Department of Sololá in Guatemala. JoAn Dwyer leads the organization with its other supporting native, Guatemalan and foreign volunteers. Although our projects are quite diverse in what they have been providing since 2005, they all are based on our mission's philosophy of the interdependent relationships we have with those with whom we learn, share and work. The basis of our connections in the villages is to consistently ask and listen to the local villagers putting foremost their needs and concerns. This means that we must learn to avoid our natural and automatic responses of what we would think or what we would do that come from our own "developed" western culture. This also includes the necessity of flexibility and adaptability on our part to always be cognizant and responsive to inevitable changes which crop up at any point during the planning stage before and in the course of a project. The projects adjust as the needs and desires of the people change. This is how we keep to our mission of encouraging and empowering others as they reach for *their* visions of a positive future.

Exploration of Cultural Contrasts

Advantages of a Small Program like ODIM

"Small programs can play a unique, invaluable role,...[and] tend to be more sensitive to the people they are serving,...[it makes a difference to] live near the villagers [to] have closer relationships with them..." (Bunch, p. vi.)

"Impersonal help that goes in only in one direction causes suspicion and discomfort" (Bunch, p. vii.)

We at ODIM believe the community needs to participate in some manner in all projects. "For programs to be truly successful, they will have to be guided by an understanding of the people's needs, motivations, values and viewpoints, and the possible consequences of the social processes they are setting in motion. Program leaders [from other countries] will need to have a feel for the delicate balances between the value of change and a respect for the society's traditional values, between the demand for excellence and the necessary freedom of local people to make their own decisions and learn from their own mistakes, and between the need for high motivation and the danger of killing their [local] leaders' enthusiasm with overwork." (Bunch, p. viii.)

Basic Cultural Differences

Let's first look at what may be some basic aspects of the indigenous culture you are entering here on Lake Atitlan. Depending on the decade and one's level of being politically correct, Guatemala is a developing country and part of the third world. Its culture is distinctly different from that of the United States or other developed, first world countries. (Lanier, p. 10.). Consequently, especially if staying in the culture for a period of time, some customs of the Guatemalan people may seem contrary to the way we are used to doing things back home. Below we are attempting to describe and explain some of these differences. Because generalizations are always dangerous, so

these descriptions are more to show contrasts than to appear as absolutes. They can be applied only in a broad sense and are by no means a fixed formula.

Core Values of Efficiency or Relationship

The critical difference between our cultures is the primary principle of relationship in developing countries where they put other's *personal honor and feelings above their own and avoid conflict or embarrassing others*. This value is in contrast to that of developed countries that are primarily focused on being *task-oriented with a ruling value of efficiency*. A beautiful example of how relationship is important here is the relationship-building which takes place at the beginning of a new working relationship. In the villages we work in, it is the custom for people to invite us into their homes for a meal as the first step in working together. Taking the time to build relationship and trust is very important before jumping right into work. If we come down to the Lake with a plan of running a very full (and tiring) day to accomplish much for people who are in dire need, hoping to see as many people as we can in the shortest period of time and give them all the medicine, instructions and referrals they need to cure their ailments and improve their lives, ...and likewise, if building the grandest building, with the best materials, in the shortest time... we may be making some assumptions. Let's look further.

Direct or Indirect Communication

Secondly, out of their regard for relationship comes the value of honor and how that effects communication. The culture in developed countries values *direct, accurate* communication whereas down here where *relationships precede all other concerns*, feelings determine behaviors instead of thought or fact doing so. For instance, the "direct communication" in the United States uses short questions showing respect for the other person's time. In addition, people can say what they think – nicely, of course – without it being taken personally; yes means yes and no means no with no hidden meanings. When responding to requests for information or directions, only the facts are given as accurately as possible without thinking about the asker's feelings, and don't trouble themselves with providing or finding an answer if they do not already have the information. However, in Guatemala and here at the Lake there is what is called "indirect communication". People give much consideration as to how to phrase a statement in order to be friendly without offending anyone; a response of yes may only be a means to developing a friendly interchange regardless if they know the answer or not. Therefore, when asking for directions, people will honor us with a factual answer whether or not it is accurate.

Examples:

A) If you ask someone on the street for directions, you will always get an answer even if they do not know of the location. Therefore, you may need to inquire of several persons, but ask those who are walking or on bikes because they live in the area, unlike the police or those in cars. When you have a scheduled or unscheduled meeting, whether it is for 2 or many more people, it is important to always ask how things are and to check-in with others in the group before getting down to business.

B) When you ask questions or seek information, avoid questions that would get a yes/no response because a yes may be an automatic answer without meaning to indicate the affirmative. Or when setting an appointment, people may answer "yes" in order to be polite or accommodate you, even though they know already that the date or time may not work for them. Therefore, if you want to know if someone will be able to attend an

appointment or event and you suspect the answer is no, they will answer yes as many times as you ask them in order to not say no out loud or to your face. It is usually a better idea to ask which days or times work for them or to give them a couple options so they can choose the one which works best for them.

C) Patients in our *jornadas medicas*, or clinics, will appear very accommodating if we ask yes/no questions. Team members ask patients if they speak Spanish. The answer is usually, “yes” when in fact the patient may not or not sufficiently for this purpose. Imagine going to the doctor and speaking and hearing only your second language – not a comfortable situation. The translators are invaluable to the patients so that they are able to communicate in their first language about such personal and specialized topics.

D.) If you make a referral for a patient to go to another clinic for a surgery or specialized treatment, you may get a response from the patient that they think you would want to hear. The reality is that they may not be able to consider taking another day off from work or away from the family, cannot afford the expenses of travel, or they may feel uncomfortable traveling to a different town or clinic. Consequently, we rely on the local community workers to help determine a patient’s actual needs. Establishing trust and relationship in the community does not occur overnight but takes time to get to the point where more direct conversation can take place.

Structure or Flexibility

In the United States and more “westernized” countries, time is the basis of the structure of a day and frames our daily life. For us it is satisfying, if not enjoyable, to use time efficiently and to plan out each day to the minute. Events are expected to begin on time with any socializing taking place either before or after the set time. However, here in Guatemala we also have the expression, “on Guatemalan time.” This refers to persons arriving for events, appointments etc. at least a half hour or even an hour late. Since persons are regarded more highly than schedules, time is totally flexible and spontaneous responding to what life brings. On the other hand, events are important. But events entail the process instead of the product. An “event” starts with the preparation. For example, a wedding is much more than showing up to watch the vows being taken – it includes getting dressed for the wedding, the journey to the wedding and the informal visiting which takes place before actually sitting down to hear the processional music. The invitation said 4 p.m. and that is when the process started!

Examples: These indicate how many programs with good intentions can fail here if they remain attached to their cultural origins in a foreign culture.

A) A foreign program director once had an appointment to meet a community leader of the village to which he was offering support. The villager did not arrive for the appointment for 45 minutes so the director decided not to do any further business with him.

B) Another time there was a team of Guatemalan clinicians who arrived 30 minutes late for a clinic and the foreign organizer of the clinic was the only one who was nervous – no patients even showed up for another 30 minutes after the clinicians arrived.

Just as trying to make plans too far in advance can lead to extra work due to intervening changes or complications, so will a returning team notice that no two annual visits will be the same in their structural details, location, translators or even presenting illnesses. When the day does come for your clinic, remember, “The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” The flexibility and adaptability of the team while they are here

aides ODIM to maintain the priority of respecting the needs of those we hope to encourage and empower before our own needs.

Inclusion and Privacy

Here in Guatemala the sense of exclusion or ownership is unknown. This is in deep contrast to the culture up north that is centered around privacy, possession and ownership. Anyone present is automatically included in a conversation, meal or a group activity and possessions are used freely by all including food, tools, clothes, etc. For instance, “all is ours” means that “your” clothes, food, music is ours, too, and so is everything else. Or “we” have food in the kitchen means everyone in the house including any guests have access to that food. Life here is based around community and family; thus it is not desirable to be left to oneself in this culture.

In conversation it appears rude to hold a conversation exclusively in a language (English or Spanish) that not everyone present speaks. The same is true for making plans in front of others that are excluded from the conversation because of language barriers. Of course, on some occasions it may be necessary to speak in English, and an open pardon can be made promising to return to the common language. Show respect by saying, “*Disculpe, por favor es necesario para nosotros a hablar en ingles.*” Also, it is important to remember to translate during a conversation where there is not a common language between all people.

Examples: These illustrate our need for constant awareness to be inclusive in both public and private settings. A) Giving something including food to one or some persons in front of others should also be avoided. It is rude to refuse an offer from another person. Hence, during clinics or construction projects we provide lunch for all volunteers and workers – including the translators, their children and other volunteers. If bringing snack food, it is advised to eat it in private or bring enough for everyone. B) When parting company, if someone offers to join or accompany you, it is best to gratefully receive their offer; it is a rejection if you don’t accept their offer. C) Here personal space is quite limited. The prime example is any mode of public transportation: there is always room for at least 8 more people in the pick-up, minibus, boat and probably 20 more on the chicken bus! Passenger vehicles are never considered full, so be prepared to get cozy. Keep this in mind when packing and carrying belongings and money – these are prime pick-pocketing conditions. D) Noise is adored here with loud fireworks and *bombas* (sound like bombs!) going off at all hours day or night, radios blasting out the door and windows of homes and loud speakers on vehicle roofs or churches broadcasting their singing and revivals throughout the village. E.) In contrast, communal living and the importance of family and community in the villages is a beautiful demonstration of the inclusion and shared living in this culture. Families comprised of many children and generations cook, eat, work and sleep together. Babies bond with their mothers wrapped inside traditional cloth tied across her back always near to her rhythmic breath and heartbeat.

Even in the poorest of villages classism can reign strong. The patronizing aspect of handouts that some foreigners are so ready to give actually feeds this animosity between the haves and have-nots, causing ostracism and only reinforces the resulting sense of dependency and victimization. Give-aways are not only ineffective, but, in fact, are detrimental... (Bunch, p. 20.). Villagers learn to beg instead of learning how they can help themselves and that they are capable of solving their own problems. Even with

children, if one or some children receive a gift while others in the community do not, this can cause problems between the children and is unfair and unequal. We do not encourage giving handouts (candy, clothes, t-shirts, cash) unless they are given openly to everyone participating and are organized and distributed in a way predetermined with ODIM volunteers. We have learned these items are best distributed by trusted locals. As in the United States, we discourage handing out money to people, as often it is used to buy alcohol which is detrimental instead of beneficial to a family and community.

On the other hand, Casa Rosada, which is both JoAn's home and the team's community space, is private. This is important for JoAn's safety, the security and safety of your group while you are with us, in addition to the reputation of ODIM. Therefore, please talk to JoAn first if you wish to make any kind of arrangements with others, foreigner or a local villager or to invite anyone to Casa Rosada.

Individualism or Identity with the Group

The following are two more ways to identify and understand what differentiates our cultures. These can help us to let go of some of our cultural baggage and embrace the indigenous culture in which we live and volunteer. These may not be as directly related to our work together, but offer a broader glance into how we can come to understand our cultural disparities.

In the United States we have been ingrained with the importance of independence and self-standing with our own individual identity. We value having our own opinions, knowing how to make our own decisions and speaking for ourselves. In a group situation we can take initiative – it is even expected of us – and, furthermore, behavior reflects only on the person, not the group. However, here in Guatemala and in villages on the Lake, there is a culture of “if I belong, therefore I am.” Identity is tied to the group, team, tribe, family, church, etc. and the group protects and provides direction for its members. It is only one's role in the group that will determine if he or she can show initiative or take leadership because individuals don't expect to stand alone. Thus, an individual's behavior will reflect upon the whole group.

Relaxed or Traditional Social Practices

This range of cultural conduct is along entirely different lines, that of depth of traditions and cultural history or if the community is urban or more isolated and rural. Younger, developed countries (i.e.: USA, Australia) are considered more informal culturally with a casual atmosphere, dress and less protocol. Alternatively, an indigenous culture has traditions and expected respectful behaviors. Furthermore, more traditional cultures display a greater power distance between levels of authority and greater gender differences.

The indigenous Maya with whom we work have a rich cultural history and traditions that date back far before the Spanish conquest of Latin America. Here in the villages around Lake Atitlan we can witness a lifestyle with deep roots in their very old culture. Thus, the air of respect and tradition is very strong, but along with that is a rigid and clear disparity in power, class and gender. In their societies steeped in ancient customs and traditions, protocol is important such as with greetings where making a good first impression must show respect and sincerity. See the Greetings and Farewells in the Tread Lightly section below.

Culture and Visiting Volunteers

Taking all this into account, an in-country team organizer often has to learn, possibly the hard way, how to develop his or her relationships within a local Mayan village. In our case, ODIM works in two quite different but proximate villages, San Pablo La Laguna and San Juan La Laguna. When you visit the villages where we offer clinics as a medical, dental, educational or construction team member much has already transpired that has helped to pave the way for your brief visit. With each program we continue to develop the credibility and reputation of ODIM. In addition, we must also consider and be mindful of the local village coordinator's standing within his or her own community. The village coordinator makes the contacts for patients, volunteers, translators and supplies as well as many other necessities for the event. Much has transpired during our time here in building our relationships with these workers we have sought within each of the communities. We are careful in our preferences and have found trustworthy and respected leaders in their communities with whom we work closely all year long.

Besides their history of war, poverty and a general sense of persecution and being vulnerable, a village may have been victimized by foreigners who have taken advantage of their ignorance and susceptibility, have robbed them, not kept their promises or otherwise been deeply disrespectful. As a result an entire village can become scarred and generally distrustful of foreigners – remember, this is a culture based on relationship. And, unfortunately, it works both ways; a desperate life can give way to desperate behavior. Local villagers learn the same smooth talk and the bad tactics of stealing, cheating and robbing they have experienced from the foreigners (not to mention cable TV) and become adept at taking advantage of others whether foreigners, their own friends, neighbors or even family members. Moreover, even in the more progressive of the two villages in which we work, politics, competition and expectations between families, people, and neighborhoods can still come into play. We are aware of and are still learning about all these dynamics.

Living permanently in Guatemala constantly reminds us that the indigenous people are a very sensitive and proud people who live in a feeling, relationship-oriented community. However, we are and always will be foreigners. We need to be ever watchful of how we are perceived and received.

There is a lot to think about here. Hoping this has tweaked your consciousness, pass your time here with a more cognizant awareness of what you are seeing and experiencing. Also, always feel free to talk further with us or amongst yourselves about these issues – we all need to keep learning.

Probably one of the most important things for us serving in this culture so different from our own is to be open to new experiences, open to learning, and to remember that we DO NOT have all the answers or even the correct answers. As Arthur Melville, a priest who spent 6 years working with and learning from the people in the mountains of Guatemala discovered: “The downtrodden of Guatemala guided me close to the earth, leading me to recognize that education is not intelligence, technology is not growth, philosophy is not wisdom, theology is not spirituality (Melville, 2).

The next section will give you ideas and some concrete information to assist you in having a more comfortable and fuller experience while here at Lake Atitlan.

Tread Lightly

The following are some tips on language and appropriate behaviors, actions, and dress which we ask our volunteers to adhere by to show the respect to the people and culture here around the lake.

Common Phrases

Here are some common phrases which might help you to connect with the people you work with or who you see in the streets.

- *Hola* Hello
- *Buenos dias* Good day (greeting--use anytime before lunch)
- *Buenas tardes* Good afternoon (greeting—use after lunch but before dark)
- *Buenas noches* Good night (greeting—use after dark)
- *Buenas* a greeting at any time especially if you don't know which time of day it is
- *Mucho gusto* Pleased to meet you
- *Como estas? Muy bien* How are you? Very good
- *Adios* Good-bye
- *Hasta luego* See you later
- *Nos vemos* See you later
- *Que le vaya bien* May you go well
- *Gracias/muchas gracias* Thank you (very much)
- *Cuanto cuesta esto/a?* How much does this cost?
- *Si* Yes
- *No* No
- *Bienvenidos* Welcome
- *Pase adelante* Come in
- *Por favor* Please
- *Igualmente* You, too
- *Mucho gusto* Nice to meet you

Here are a few Tz'utujil (the local Mayan dialect spoken in the villages where we work) phrases which might be helpful in greeting people in the communities.

- *Sacara* (sak-a-RA) Hello
- *Utz a wha* (oots a WATCH) How are you?
- *Utz maltiox* (oots mal-tee-OSH) Good and you?
- *Maltiox* (mal-tee-OSH) Thank you
- *Kibana* (kee-bah-NAH) Goodbye

Dress

We ask that while you are here volunteering with us that you remember that the dress in the Highlands of Guatemala is much more conservative than we may be used to. Here most women and some men still wear their traditional dress or *traje*. The women wear a *corte* (skirt) which is of a thick woven material they wrap around several times and tie with a *faja* (beautiful woven belt). They wear a *huipil* (woven top) made of a weave specific to their village with their own personal designs embroidered around the neckline; they take much pride in their *huipiles*. The younger indigenous women, though, are now wearing *blusas* made of lightweight manufactured material for everyday wear saving their *huipiles* and traditional *corte* for fiestas and special events. The men also have traditional clothing, but many, both old and young, now wear western style clothing because of the expense involved in wearing *traje* and increased exposure to Western commerce.

So what should we wear as guests in this culture? It is best to dress conservatively while you are down here. We request women (and men, too) wear shirts that cover your shoulders. For women, this would exclude spaghetti straps, tank tops and anything that would reveal your midriff. Also, we usually do not wear shorts here, so it is preferable

to wear pants Capri length or longer. In the Mayan culture it is inappropriate to show your knees. Guys, please wear a shirt at all times... yes, even if you are working up on a roof and are hot! As for swimwear, anything that is discreet; one piece swim suits or tankinis are best—no skimpy bikinis, please.

Gestures

As with most cultures, some gestures in Guatemala have other implications than what is familiar to us. Never point your hand or finger (especially at a person) – this is considered rude. Instead of pointing you will see people here purse their lips and point in a direction with their lips. A definitive “no” can be expressed by waving a raised pointer finger from side to side. A “tsst, tsst” sound is used to get someone’s attention or to scare away dogs. Horns in cars and tuk tuks are used often here. Often if you hear a car or tuk tuk horn behind you, they are letting you know they are passing, so it is more of a warning to not turn in front of them or make fast moves.

Greetings, Farewells:

There are certain protocols for greetings here. When you are introduced to someone it is polite to lightly shake their hand; it is also customary between women to connect right forearms. Between women friends it is common to also touch cheeks. But as visitors, please do not go initiating kisses on the cheeks unless the other woman initiates it... usually it takes a while to build a relationship with someone where they are comfortable with this. In a group whether meeting people for the first time or seeing friends or acquaintances, people always shake hands with everyone in the group, and the same is customary upon departing. When on the phone or starting a meeting, first always inquire how the other person is before getting to your point or commencing the business discussion.

Meals and Mealtime

Ideally Guatemalans eat 3 meals a day; however many of the families we work with do not have this luxury. Maize, or corn, is the main staple in the diet of indigenous people which is usually eaten in the form of tortillas. Usually tortillas are eaten with every meal, and the preparation of the tortillas is a very important job of the women in the family. Luckily for those of us who do not know how to prepare tortillas, there are *tortillerias* on almost every corner. Refried black beans often accompany the tortillas as well as various vegetables. Sometimes and depending on the family’s economic situation eggs and meat are additions to this diet.

The most important and largest meal of the day at lunchtime; it is very important for us as volunteers to be aware of this. If possible the children and fathers return home for this meal. Usually the local people we were working with (patients who may have been waiting) will return home for this important family meal. Thus, we usually break for about an hour starting around 12:30 or 1 p.m. This is quite different from customs back in the States culture where often we eat lunch at our computer or get a quick bite during errands and are back to work. It is important for us to also embrace this time of breaking bread together in community besides relaxing during a hard days’ work.

This means, therefore, it is important to remember to pack lunches for all who we are working with including translators, their children, our construction foreman and

community leaders present as well as any other volunteers who have joined us. In this culture, those being served usually finish all the food on their plates and wait for the host to offer more food. Therefore, if there is enough prepared, remember to offer seconds to all (example two sandwiches for everyone).

On the other hand, if you are offered food, it is considered rude to refuse. It is best to accept the offer even though you may feel that they are being generous and may not have the resources to provide this food. After eating everyone thanks the cook or host and others at the table with “*gracias*” which others respond with “*buen provecho.*”

Photographs

We are all amazed at the beauty and color of Guatemala and frequently reach for our digital camera to capture a scene, a moment or a face. However, photographs are not understood by some of the indigenous people, who believe that the camera can take away the soul of a person. If taking a picture of an adult or especially of a child, please ask permission first, out of respect. In addition, there has been a history of child abduction and trafficking in the country, so it is possible that a foreigner taking pictures of a child or even interacting with a child could be perceived to have bad intentions. Be careful not to focus too much attention on a child and especially never with a camera. Families can react very strongly. Fortunately, we have not had recent negative incidents here around the Lake.

The next section gives you some very interesting facts about the area you are visiting.

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Geography, Climate, and People Around the Lake

The Origins of Lake Atitlan

The lake is actually a product of three volcanic eruptions and subsequent caldera [large depression formed by the explosion or collapse of a volcano] which took place over millions of years. The first eruption occurred around 14 million years ago, the second around nine million years ago, and the last eruption which created the lake we see today occurred around 85,000 years ago. This last eruption spread ashes all the way up to Florida and down to Panama. "Atitlan's exact dimensions are somewhat disputed. However, it is described in official literature as about 12 miles long and between 4.4 and 7.5 miles wide. Its total surface area is estimated to be 130 sq. kilometers, with water depths ranging to 340 meters with a relatively flat floor" (Szybist, 7). The water level fluctuates from year to year with occasional more dramatic drops or rises. This is explained by scientists by possible magma activity in the floor of the lake. The lake is surrounded by 3 volcanoes; San Pedro stands alone near the town of San Pedro, and the volcanoes Atitlan and Toliman are next to each other with Toliman closer to the lake, with a little hill called Cerro de Oro sticking out of its base near the shore. The word Atitlan is actually a combination of two words in Nahuatl, a Mexican dialect, which means "at the lake."

Climate

Temperatures are usually between the 70s and 80s and feels spring-like year round. The two seasons are the dry and rainy season; the rainy season lasts from May through October, but these rains are confined to primarily the afternoon and night, and are not too heavy. Year round the nights can be cool, and during December-February it ranges from breezy to windy. The weather here is just lovely... it is no wonder why they have come to call this the Land of Eternal Spring.

Mayan History Around the Lake

"Mayan civilization evolved out of cultural contact between expansive Mexican peoples and sedentary populations of what today is Guatemala, Belize, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador. Mayan society was more decentralized than the societies of the Aztecs and Incas. Powerful city states politically dominated outlying regions and often warred on one another. [...] Mayan society was (and remains) characteristically sedentary and agrarian. [...] Over time, Mayan civilization in Guatemala has devolved into 22 linguistically distinct but otherwise culturally related indigenous groups" (Szybist, 12).

Mayan society originally developed in the Highlands and Pacific Coast of present day Guatemala; however for still unknown reasons, the society relocated to the northern lowlands somewhere around 150AD. Thus the classic Mayan civilization developed in the lowlands and the city of Tikal and other sites of ancient Mayan ruins in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico flourished.

After 900 A.D. the lowland cities began to decline and the population migrated back and populated the Guatemalan Highlands once again. At this point the Tz'utujil and Kaqchikel people invaded the Lake Atitlan region. These two groups along with the Quiche warred over the lake region. "The power balance between the Tz'utujiles and Kaqchikeles, and the Quiches alternated considerably in the Guatemalan Highlands and along the coastal piedmont throughout the Pre-Conquest period" (Szybist, 13).

The Spanish arrived in 1524 under the command of Alvarado. The Spanish tried to subdue the fighting between the groups, however later used two groups to fight against each other to maintain Spanish control in the region. The Spanish organized the Indigenous into separate communities and villages which still exist today in order to maintain rule and authority. The villages on the lake today are predominantly either Kaqchikel or Tz'utujil communities. Tz'utujil villages on the lake include primarily San Lucas Toliman, Santiago Atitlan, San Pedro La Laguna, San Juan La Laguna, and San Pablo La Laguna.

More recently the 36 year "civil war" which ended in 1996 with the signing of the peace accords, was in some ways more of a genocide against the indigenous people in Guatemala. It consisted of many dictators and military rule, and increased the tensions and racism between the indigenous and ladino. Many indigenous Maya from villages and communities throughout Guatemalan were killed during this "war." Since this war is far too complicated and there are far too many important details to provide in this document, we have provided a reading list which has many books that have been written from different perspectives about the war which are a great place to start to try to understand this complicated history.

Some Facts about San Juan and San Pablo

We primarily work in the villages of San Juan and San Pablo and hold medical *jornadas* in surrounding communities as well. San Juan and San Pablo are next to each other on the lake, but recently have taken somewhat different paths of development. The population in both villages is almost completely Tz'utujil Maya, and the language spoken in both villages is also Tz'utujil. Some people in the villages speak Spanish; however many, especially the older generations, do not speak any Spanish or have only a limited use of the language. Thus we rely much on our interpreters and contacts in the communities whose relationships with us are invaluable to our work here.

San Juan has begun to develop recently in a positive way. There has been increased eco- and cultural tourism in the town and there is a more positive feel among the people in the community. There are many women's weaving groups in the town and they take pride in their weavings made from natural dyes. The streets are clean, have road signs and beautiful art on the walls, sights quite unusual in an indigenous village in Guatemala.

San Pablo is a more oppressed village on the lake and is one of the 40 poorest municipalities in Guatemala. In San Pablo 85% are illiterate and about as many do not speak Spanish. In addition a study in 2008 in the town found that only 25% of the children between the ages of 5-10 years old in the town are enrolled in school. A recent government document stated that 89% of the population in San Pablo suffers from chronic malnutrition. Contaminated water in both communities is a huge problem, and in the country accounts for 80% of all illnesses and many deaths. In this department of Sololá, diarrhea and respiratory illnesses are the leading causes of death and 25 of every 1,000 children die from gastrointestinal diseases, illnesses that are all preventable.

In both San Juan and San Pablo, the main source of income is coffee. During the months of November-February, most people in the town are out picking coffee beans in the mountains behind the town. Thus, the people in the villages have a little more money during these months when there is more constant work, and the rest of the year,

they rely on other odd jobs, such as help with construction, planting corn, harvesting avacados. The people in the town who have finished school (which would be our equivalent to a trade high school) are teachers, treasurers, secretaries, our tour guides; however these people also have a hard time finding work. The women in San Juan almost all make weavings using the backstrap loom and naturally dye their weavings with plants; while the women in San Pablo all crochet, and most of their products are little hacky sack balls which they get paid a very low price for from the intermediaries.

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**Primary Resources:**

*Foreign to Familiar, Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-Climate Cultures*, by Sarah Lanier. McDougal Press, Hagerstown, 2000.

*Two Ears of Corn, A Guide to People-Centered Agricultural Improvement*, by Ronald Bunch. World Neighbors, Oklahoma City, 1982.

*The Lake Atitlan Reference Guide: The Definitive Eco-Cultural Guidebook on Lake Atitlan*, by Richard Morgan Szybist. Adventures in Education, Inc, 2004.

**Suggested Reading:**

*Foreign to Familiar, Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-Climate Cultures*, by Sarah Lanier. McDougal Press, Hagerstown, 2000.

This is a good book to help understand some of the cultural differences between the culture we come from and other cultures where we travel or work. This book is more of a cultural anthropology theory book, and is written at a higher more college type reading level.

*Two Ears of Corn, A Guide to People-Centered Agricultural Improvement*, by Ronald Bunch. World Neighbors, Oklahoma City, 1982.

This book is great for developing both agricultural and other community based grassroots programs. It takes into account the need to empower and listen to the local people in the community and looks at using appropriate education and technology.

*The Lake Atitlan Reference Guide: The Definitive Eco-Cultural Guidebook on Lake Atitlan*, by Richard Morgan Szybist. Adventures in Education, Inc, 2004.

This book provides lots of really good information about the physical and cultural aspects of the communities on the lake and was written by a man who lives in Panajachel. It includes sections on the geography, culture, economy,

contemporary society, religion, and information on each of the villages on the lake which goes beyond the information in tour books.

*I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman In Guatemala*, by Rigoberta Menchu, translated by Anne Write. Verso, 1983.

This is the autobiography of Rigoberta Menchu, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. She is a Quiche-Mayan woman who grew up in a community in the Guatemalan Highlands. Her book recounts her childhood growing up in poverty and her work at home and on the coffee fincas. She lived through the civil war, worked to educate herself and fought for the rights of her community and the indigenous people in Guatemala.

*Guatemala Blood in the Cornfields*, by Bonnie Dilger. Publish America, 2005.

This is a first person narrative recounts the histories of the people who lived through the turbulent and repressive decades from 1973-1994 when the peace accords were signed. The author lived for years in Guatemala around the lake and she recounts episodes of the abuses of the indigenous population during the war.

*With Eyes to See: A Journey From Religion to Spirituality*, by Arthur Melville. Still point, 1992.

“Set within a gripping tale of adventure, *With Eyes to See* is an unblinking examination of faith and personal strength, of the inner workings of the Catholic Church, and of the author’s struggle as a priest to reconcile his new-found spirituality with traditional Catholic doctrine.” Arthur Melville I a former Catholic priest who spent six years in the mountains of Guatemala, and in this book he recounts the spirituality he found in his work here.

*Voces Rompiendo el Silencio de Utatlan*, directed by Yedra Garcia Bastante

Not sure if this book is currently in print, but it is a compilation of stories of the indigenous people living in Santa Lucia Utatlan in the Highlands of Guatemala near Lake Atitlan. The people working on the project interviewed people and the village and compiled their stories of their horrible experiences during the decades of violence during the 36 year “war.”

*Culture Grams*

These are great recourses you can buy on the internet for just about any country. It is a 5 page document that tells important general information about the country, some information on history, culture, geography, statistics, customs, etc. It is great for reading up on some background information about a country, and the culture gram on Guatemala is good and pretty accurate!