

# Life story of the master fisherman

## René de Jesús Guerra Pineda

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### Resumen

La presente publicación da a conocer la historia de vida de un pescador artesanal, don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda, originario de Santa Ana, El Salvador, quien desde pequeño migró con sus papás a tierras guatemaltecas. La pesca constituye una importante fuente de ingresos pues desde hace varias décadas se ha dedicado a esta labor. Además de tejer sus propias atarrayas, también ha labrado la tierra para producir maíz, Zea mays y maicillo, Sorghum bicolor.

La investigación tuvo como objetivos dar a conocer la historia de vida del maestro pescador don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda y describir el proceso de elaboración de la atarraya, como objeto importante en el proceso de la pesca. De acuerdo con el resultado del trabajo de campo efectuado, se exponen aspectos destacados de la vida del artesano y agricultor de la población de la aldea Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado, municipio de Moyuta del departamento de Jutiapa, Guatemala. Para la recolección de los datos, la metodología empleada se basó en el método etnográfico de investigación cualitativa, que permite evidenciar las características y aspectos que conforman no solamente la vida sociocultural de las comunidades, sino también la de una persona en particular. Para ello se aplicó la técnica de las historias de vida y la entrevista estructurada, y se realizaron cinco visitas al referido lugar.

**Palabras clave:** pesca, cultivos, maíz, atarraya artesanía.

### Abstract

The life story of don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda, a traditional fisherman is made known in this document. Born in Santa Ana, El Salvador, he migrated with his parents to Guatemala as a child. Fishing is an important source of income for his family, for he has dedicated for several decades to it, in addition to weaving his own cast nets. He has also tilled the land to produce corn, Zea mays, and maicillo, Sorghum bicolor. In addition, fishing has a significant added value, such as the provision of food from rivers, lakes, and seas.

The purpose of the research was to make known the life story of the master fisherman Don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda and to describe the process of making the cast net, an important tool in the fishing process. As a result of the field work carried out, highlights on the life of this artisan and farmer in the town of Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado, municipality of Moyuta in the department of Jutiapa, Guatemala. The methodology used was based on the ethnographic method of qualitative research, which makes it possible to provide the characteristics and aspects that make up the sociocultural life of the communities, as well as of a particular person. Techniques of life stories and structured interview were applied, in five visits made to the community.

**Keywords:** fishing, crops, corn, cast net, crafts.

## Introduction

The objective of this journal is to tell the life story of the master cast net weaver, renowned fisherman and farmer, Don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda, outstanding craftsman who, in addition to having committed to the art of weaving and fishing, also worked in agricultural labors. Native of Santa Ana, El Salvador's Republic, Central America, since he was a child, at the age of 3, he emigrated with his parents to Guatemalan lands in 1995.

The fact that Don René de Jesús Guerra is the last craftsman fisherman in the region of Pedro de Alvarado City, township of Moyuta, department of Jutiapa, and that he managed to learn, from childhood, the trade of fishing and weaving his own cast nets, underscores the importance of his biographical study, as it allows us to understand the trade of fishing, as well as his life full of reminiscences of significant historical and cultural in the aforementioned region.

This research was carried out based on the research policies of the *Centro de Estudios de las Culturas en Guatemala (CECEG)* by its acronym in Spanish), that emphasize the need to give value to the bearers of the traditional Guatemalan culture for their recognition in national life.

Along with this life story, a contribution is being made to the community mentioned, since, the work artisanal fishing is valued, especially, because fish, crabs and shrimps, represent a contribution to the food security of the villagers both locally and regionally, which constitutes the cultural legacy of this extraordinary fisherman as a component of the identity of this homeland.

The general objective of this research is to make known the life story of the master fisherman Don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda,

and as a specific objective, to describe the elaboration process of cast nets and the ways or practices he realized for fishing. The methodology used in this research was based on research, which allows to demonstrate the characteristics and aspects that constitute the life of a determined person. With that purpose in mind, the life-history method techniques and the structured interview. Five visits were carried out on the village where, besides the artisan fisherman, it was possible to obtain information from neighbors who knew him.

Regarding the documentary feature, this research was complemented by the historical method, for which bibliographic reviews related to the topic were carried out. The writing of the brief ethnography of the village was being carried out through oral tradition, due to the shortage of mainly written documents that mention Pedro de Alvarado City.

### Brief ethnography of Pedro de Alvarado City

A village of the township of Moyuta, which constitutes one of the borders between Guatemala and El Salvador. It is located in what was previously known as *Paso del Pijije* (R. Guerra, comunicación personal, 10 de abril de 2021). It is located along the CA-2 route, 166 kilometers from Guatemala City, "to the west of the Paz river, which serves as a frontier with El Salvador, at an altitude of 35 meters above mean sea level. The urban center was established by Government Agreement on October 1, 1959" (Gall, 2000, p. 421).

The population has access to electricity services, piped water, mobile phone service, health center, preschool and elementary educational centers, staff of middle school and high school. There are stores, pharmacies, businesses, butcher shops of beef and pork, and fish markets. The village has its own

cemetery. Furthermore, it offers a football stadium named Bernal Díaz. The neighbors believe that the name of the village is due to Guatemala's conqueror, Pedro de Alvarado, as said character rode through these areas on his way to El Salvador. Furthermore, the land is appropriate for the production of fruit trees such as: mango, tamarind, orange, tangerine, lemon, plantain, coconut and banana. After this brief ethnography, below, the development of the main topic of discussion will proceed.

### **The importance of histories of life in research**

Through the usage of the life-history method technique, the researcher gains a wider perspective of a determined person's trajectory, as long as it is possible to establish what is known in Anthropology as *rapport*, which means, building trust with the individual being interviewed. Why are life stories important when there are no written documents referencing a specific place, institution, or individual? Because, through the narrated story, one not only gains knowledge of the reality involved in a spoken testimony, but also gains the richness provided by description and narrative.

Furthermore, it is possible to contribute to the construction of collective memory with the life stories of people, since according to Pensado (1997), the life stories of people bear especial significance as they narrate events related to the community which individuals belong, because it offers a clear image of the social phenomena within the community.

Through life stories, the past comes back to the present, its memory goes further the rebuilding of a period and its respective details. Such details include "emotions and affections, disappointments and failures, and body language and nonverbal communication that human beings always remember, due to

referred episodes that remain in the individual, as if they still occurred in the present" (De Garay, 2001, p. 26).

In a wider sense, it is possible to understand that deep in every qualitative research, each one is in fact, a narrative research. The research reports are composed of narrative structures themselves, which researchers have accumulated in a practical and theoretical know-how.

With regard to the origin of life stories, some authors have achieved significant contributions, and concerning that, García (1998) states that:

It was in the early 20th century when Franz Boas (1858-1942) began the practice of investigating cultures in a detailed way among the Indian groups of the Kwakiutl to the northwest of North America. The method consisted in applying the already well-known life-history method technique. Although he was not precisely its originator, since, as it is well-known, the ones who began these studies were the Grimm brothers in the 18th century, while searching for the Germanic national soul with an emphasis on Philology (p. 2).

According to the aforementioned author, "the purpose, according to Boas, should be to observe how the world is seen through the lenses of a member from their culture" (García, 1998, p. 2) and, correspondingly he recommended that "first, we should gather the events, building a body of ethnographic data, from which further generalizations could later be derived" (García, 1998, p. 2).

The truth is that "since then, certain oral sources began to be used as a resource to recover the history and cultural process of communities. These oral sources are now known as testimony, case, social history or properly as life stories" (García, 1998, p. 2).

However, to be more specific on the point, what is meant by a life story? It is the technique that allows one to obtain a deep understanding of the trajectory of a single person based on what they say about themselves, their family, and the people who work directly with them.

For Jan Vansina (1968), in studies of orality, testimony is known as the historical reconstruction of the social events of an illiterate community. The autobiographical narrative of a real character linked to those events is known as a life story, which they narrate themselves through their autobiography narrated as an agent, where they narrate their past and, in such a way, allows them to rebuild their whole history.

On the other hand, De Garay (2001) contemplates that “oral history acknowledges, that an important practice within its field, the building of histories of life, understood as oral autobiographical narratives originated in the interactive dialogue of the interview, which is complemented by other testimonies and other sources” (p. 5).

According to Taylor and Bogdan (1987), three stages must be considered during the data collection and storage phases. The first stage, which is crucial for establishing an initial empathetic connection with the potential informant, is the foundation of the *rapport*, or as it is commonly said, to break the ice. Once trust is founded, the informant can feel comfortable with the researcher’s presence and agrees with answering questions with evident naturalness and enthusiasm.

The second stage is when field strategies and tactics are established to be in the place and moment where the information is generated, and the third stage involves recording the data in the form of written field notes.

The life story is a type of in-depth interview in which the researcher tries to grasp the significant experiences of the life of a person and the definitions such person applies to those experiences. Through the oral testimony, the researcher obtains personal information, life narratives about their experiences and testimonial information about certain events and periods of time about their life in particular, which took place in determined places and historical and socio-cultural contexts, which are always shaped by the individuals by personal meanings and experiences of the interviewee (Galindo, 1998). Finally, to conclude this discussion about the importance of histories of life, it is recalled what Angrosino (2012) states: that the life story is used when one single individual needs to be studied. It is also employed by the researcher when there is a need to study a particular individual who lives an ordinary life. This is the case of the fisherman Don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda, whose life story is told below.

For this reason, the contributions of this research enable a dialogue of social sciences where methodologies intertwine, in accordance with reality laid in the hint, in this case, the story of the fisherman, who represents an entire era, an environment, and consequently, a proper cultural expression that manifests how he managed to harmonize with nature to create authentic ways that sustained his daily life for several years.

### Family

Don René de Jesús Pineda was born on February 5th, 1952 in Cantón las Marías, Santa Ana, Republic of El Salvador. At the time of the field visit, he was 69 years old. He is the son of Don Albino Guerra, farmer, now deceased and Rufina Pineda, who took care of the household chores, now deceased too. Don René de Jesús Guerra is the third of 8 children

his parents had. He has four more brothers: José Albino, Josñe Mario, Leonel and Nery Fernando; his sisters are: Blanca Rosa, María Luz (deceased) and Irma, all bearing the surname Guerra Pineda. Out of all of his siblings, he was the only one who liked fishing. One of his brothers graduated from night school. Another brother is a builder, the other one works as a courier of the capital city and the younger brother emigrated to Mexico. His surviving sisters are widowed and dedicated to household chores. He was three years old when his parents emigrated to Guatemalan lands. According to his statement, his parents left their place of origin because the land was unproductive and there was great poverty. This aligns with the statement of Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz in his travel narrative to the parish of Santa Ana, where he stated that “after traveling along rocky roads, the lush, extense, and fertile valley, where this town is located begins, but it is poorly cultivated” (Cortés, 1958, p. 226).

### **The father's trade**

When his father was young, he dedicated himself to the most honorable labor for any free man: farming, as it was -and still is- the traditional trade in the southeastern towns of Guatemala. Furthermore, both his paternal and maternal grandparents had practiced this trade for generations. Don Albino Guerra had friends, with whom he shared some pastimes such as hunting, as at that time, edible wildlife was abundant. Deer, armadillos, pacas, squirrels, black iguanas, and green iguanas were common. The latter two were prepared in *iwaxte*, a stew made with tomato, *pepitoria* (the result of roasted and grinded squash seeds), garlic, onion, chili peppers, and tomatillo. There was also a variety of birds, including the *mona*, a tailless bird resembling a hen, hence its name, along with quails and pigeons. In addition to hunting, he also made

adobe bricks for constructing the walls of rural houses, as at the time, houses were built only with bahareque, which consists of “a trellis of sticks woven with cane and mud” (Larousse, 1998, p. 95). Adobe bricks are made from soil and chopped grass. The process involves preparing

A large quantity of soil, adding water to turn it into mud, and mixing in grass, which acts as a binding agent, making the material more cohesive. Then the mixture is placed in rectangular molds and left to dry in the sun (Esquivel, 2017, p. 5).

The number of adobe bricks needed to build a house is generally around 400 or more, depending on the size.

### **Childhood**

Don René de Jesús Guerra studied until he was 14 years old because, as he stated, when they arrived in these Guatemalan lands, there were no state schools in the village. There weren't even houses, only forests and mountains. He learned to read and write and studied up to the fourth grade of elementary school. The school day began at 7:00 in the morning and ended at 12:00 noon, from Monday to Saturday. He had only one teacher, who taught all the grades, the following year, the teacher would instruct first and second grade, then three levels the following year, and so on until reaching the fourth grade. He mentioned that he liked going to school because he wanted to become someone in life, so he wouldn't have to live through the poverty his parents endured, which forced them to leave their place of origin. According to him, he and his siblings went through many hardships. They walked barefoot and had little clothing to wear. However, they never lacked food because their father cultivated the land and provided protein from wild animals, which were abundant in the region. He also shared that many of his childhood friends left to the north, that is, to

the United States, always due to the scarcity their families faced. He also shares that, now that they've become great businessmen, some of them who got the opportunity continued their studies and improved their status.

### **Beginnings of Don René de Jesús Guerra in the trade of fishing**

Since the beginnings of humanity, fishing has been fundamental to human existence, as humans relied on gathering and hunting for survival. For this reason, fishing should not be seen as merely a pastime but rather as a skill-intensive process that requires a long period of learning, skill, and expertise especially when using a net to fish.

Before dedicating himself to the trade of fishing, Don René de Jesús Guerra started working at the age of eight, carrying boxes that had been confiscated due to smuggling at customs. While at the border, he knew that some of his coworkers were fishermen, which sparked his interest in fishing. On his own initiative, he began his first attempts using a fishing hook. However, he faced the drawback of catching only one fish at a time. Encouraged by this challenge, he asked one of his coworkers to lend him a casting net. Not only did the coworker lend him the net, but he also taught him how to cast it into the water. Don René de Jesús Guerra recalled that, at first, it was difficult for him since mastering the technique was no easy task. However, with practice, he gradually gained control. Since he did not yet own a net, he continued fishing with a borrowed one. Eventually, after saving up a few coins, he was able to buy his own. Although he was still a child and lacked the strength and arm reach of an adult, he quickly discovered a natural talent for casting the net, a skill he refined over time until he mastered the art of fishing. As he grew older, he also became stronger. His favorite fishing spots were the Negro and Paz rivers, which serve as

a natural border between Guatemala and El Salvador. Don René de Jesús Guerra stated that at that time there was an abundance of fish; one could find "large shrimp, *chacalín*, catfish, snook, tilapia, and crabs" (R. J. Guerra Pineda, personal communication, April 10, 2021). The catch was used for family consumption and, in some cases, for sale, as several neighbors would request it. He was a fisherman for 60 years. When the fieldwork was conducted, he was about to complete one year since retiring from this occupation, which he had practiced almost daily after his workday at the customs office. In the community, everyone knows him as René, the fisherman. However, despite being retired, he still goes fishing once a week, although fish are no longer as abundant as they used to be. Whatever he manages to catch is for his own consumption.

Nowadays, only *pepesca* (small kind of fish), bute, tilapia, and *chacalín* (a kind of crustacean) can still be found. These animals are eaten in different preparations: fried, in broth, and dried, that is, they are covered with a generous amount of salt and set out in the sun to preserve them, and later cooked wrapped in an egg batter that finishes cooking in a stew made from tomato, *miltomate* (husk tomato), sweet pepper, onion, garlic, bay leaf, and thyme. This dish is usually eaten during Holy Week. When asked about the difference between a *pepesca* and a tilapia, he explained: "*Pepesca* is small and shines in the water when it moves" (R. J. Guerra Pineda, personal communication, April 10, 2021), that is, when *pepesca* swims, it flashes silvery reflections. In contrast, tilapia is large, black, and has scales.

At the time of the interview, he said that he still fishes in both rivers, the Negro and the Paz. Regarding the name of the Negro River, he explained that it comes from the village of



Barranca Honda, Moyuta; its waters are murky, which is why it has that name. However, when it merges with the tributary that comes from the village of Las Flores, in the same jurisdiction, the waters become clearer. He commented that these streams now have few fish, unlike before when they were abundant. Currently, he goes fishing two days a week, and the most he manages to catch is one or two pounds, just enough for his family's consumption.

In his opinion, fishing has declined because in 1982 "a flood came", meaning there was heavy flooding, and scared the fish, which is why they've been disappearing. You can still find pepesca, tilapia, and *chacalín*, which is the same as shrimp. Crabs are no longer found. In his entire life as a fisherman, he only had one accident: he was on his way to fish when he slipped on a rock, fell into the river, and hit his chest. He spent over 15 days in pain but, as he says, "thankfully I didn't break anything" (R. J. Guerra Pineda, personal communication, April 10, 2021).

### **His Learning in the Art of Weaving Cast Nets**

The process of weaving cast nets is labor-intensive, time-consuming, demanding, tiring, and yet entertaining (though slow). The amount of time invested depends on the size of the net. It can take from one to four months. What is a cast net? In its most common definition, it is a net used for fishing. It is woven with synthetic thread that ensures it doesn't break. This thread is purchased at hardware stores and comes in cones of various thicknesses, numbered from one to six. For the cast nets woven by Don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda, he uses thread number six because it is the thickest. There is no exact count of how many yards of thread a cone contains.

To weave, he uses a wooden tool made from castilian rod, shaped like a "U" with two slots on each side. This tool is called a needle. It is similar to a piece from the stick loom known as "*el hijo*" by textile weavers (Esquivel and Molina, 2011, p. 53). The needle is loaded with the content of two cones of thread, making sure to tie the first one firmly to the second. The tools needed to weave the thread include the needle, a gauge stick, and the *mayero*, which is the tool used to weave the body of the cast net.

The process begins with what Don René calls a *cabezada* made of 75 steps of thread. This serves as the base where the actual weaving starts. After three rows of stitches, one additional stitch is added, in Don René's words, "a son is added." This process is repeated, adding a stitch after every three rows. This is necessary to gradually widen the diameter of the cast net until it reaches the desired size.

Once the desired length is reached, both sides are joined to close the cast net. However, it is not yet complete, it still needs to have lead weights added to the bottom so that, when thrown into the river, the net sinks and captures as many fish as possible. To do this, a fold of about a quarter of the size span is made inward, like a bag, and pieces of lead with a hole through the center are inserted. The thread passes through this hole and secures the lead pieces in place. The number of lead pieces used depends on the width of the net. Some nets use between 250 to 500 pieces. The final step is to tie a rope to the upper end (the *cabezada*), which allows the fisherman to hold onto the cast net when throwing it.

Throwing a cast net into the water is not easy, it requires skill, dexterity, and knowledge so that the net opens fully and lands precisely where fish are abundant. The rope tied to the *cabezada* (head rope) is held on the wrist, and

with a circular motion, the net is cast into the water. That is the correct way to throw it.

When asked how long it takes to weave a cast net, Don René de Jesús Guerra said it takes him about a month and a half, working on it in intervals. The time also depends on the size, larger nets take more time. He sells large nets for Q600 and medium ones for Q400.

### **His beginnings as a farmer**

He learned to love farming from his father. That's why he knows how to prepare the land before planting the only two crops that grow in this region: corn and millet. Beans are not cultivated because the area is extremely hot. However, beans are consumed daily and are purchased from villages where they are grown.

Don René de Jesús Guerra explained that the land designated for planting is prepared before the first rains arrive, which typically occur during the first half of May. The perimeter of the soil is outlined, about one meter wide, to burn all the weeds around the area. If available, organic fertilizer like chicken manure is then spread across the surface. Next, using a pair of oxen, the soil is plowed into furrows, as shown in the photo at the end of this journal. That's how the land is prepared for planting.

Meanwhile, the corn cobs saved from the previous harvest are inspected. These were carefully stored in the kitchen, above the *poyetón* (a type of wood-burning stove), where they were exposed to the smoke from burning firewood used in cooking. This method preserves them from pests like weevils. Next, the female kernels are selected from each cob, these will be the seeds planted in the furrows. Only male kernels remain on the cob.

When asked how to distinguish between male and female kernels on the same cob, Don René de Jesús Guerra explained that his father

taught him that the kernels on the ends of the cob are male, and those in the middle are female. Additionally, male kernels are small and round, while female kernels are flat. This distinction is unique to corn seed selection. This knowledge of identifying seeds is part of the ancestral wisdom passed down from generation to generation.

However, according to Don René de Jesús Guerra, if a person doesn't know how to distinguish between the two types of kernels and plants them indiscriminately, both will germinate and grow. But the difference lies in the fact that the female plant, in addition to producing flowers, also produces corn with kernels. These can be consumed while still tender, and those not eaten in that state later become full-grown corn. The male plant, on the other hand, produces a "child" and its cob doesn't develop kernels, only corn silk. Therefore, to make the most of the planted land, seed selection must be done to ensure that only female kernels are sown.

Don René de Jesús Guerra only plants creole seeds, as they have advantages over commercial ones, which are selected and costly. He explained that the cob produced from creole seed has a compact tip at the top that prevents water from entering and causing the kernels to rot.

The varieties of corn considered creole in this community are known as "bayonillo, arriquín, and Oaxacan corn" (R. J. Guerra Pineda, personal communication, April 9, 2021). According to Don René, a good harvest is when more than 100 quintals (hundredweight units) of corn are obtained from one block of cultivated land. In bad harvests, only 35 to 40 quintals may be gathered.

To ensure a fruitful harvest, besides sufficient water, it is necessary to fertilize the young plants about eight to ten days after they sprout.



For this, he purchases well-known commercial fertilizers like *20-20* and *Triple 15*. The best way to apply fertilizer is to bury it near each corn plant, which prevents rainwater from washing it away and ensures the plant benefits from it. For one block of land, nine bags of fertilizer are needed, each costing Q165 (Q represents the Guatemalan currency: quetzals). (R. J. Guerra Pineda, personal communication, April 9, 2021).

In addition to fertilization, the plants must be protected from pests such as measuring worms, cotton bollworm, banded cucumber beetle, and root-eating caterpillars. To combat these pests, he buys specialized products from agro-veterinary stores for fumigation. Don René personally handles both planting and harvesting, starting early in the morning due to the extremely hot climate of the region. Working early helps him avoid exposure to the harsh sun.

When the corn reaches maturity, it's time for what Don René calls "*dobla de la milpa*", bending the corn stalks. This involves breaking the stalks toward the furrow so the "calle" (the space between the furrows) is cleared for planting sorghum bicolor. This activity is carried out in the second half of August, and the plants remain in this position until December, when "*la tapisca*" (manual harvesting of the corn) is done, collecting one by one, plant by plant.

Why is it necessary to bend the corn stalks? Because doing so protects the kernels, by turning them upside down, and the corn husk prevents rainwater from seeping in, allowing it to simply slide off.

When it's time to gather the cobs, they are picked one by one and piled up in the field. Then, the harvest is transported to the house yard using a cart pulled by oxen or loaded onto pack animals with special saddles. What is a

pack saddle? It's a special type of saddle used exclusively for carrying loads. In this southeastern region, it's called "*aparejo*" or "*arquillo*" (Esquivel, 2001, p. 37). Once the harvest has been hauled in, the cobs are shucked manually, one by one. This process involves the entire family, who work together to shell the kernels.

While they take the husk off the corn, they listen to ranchera music, especially songs by duets or trios from the golden age of Mexican cinema. It's also a good time to talk about matters of the heart: who likes the girl from the village of Palos Abrazados, or how they also liked the young women from El Rosario and El Salamar. At the end of the workday, they sit in the shade of a tree to write love letters to the girls they care for. On full moon nights, they continue taking the husk off the corn. If any cob is found rotten, it is set aside. The healthy ones are gathered together, and this is when they select the best cobs to save as seed for the next harvest.

These chosen cobs keep their husk. The husks are left on so they can be hung in the kitchen, directly above the cooking area, where they are exposed to wood smoke, which helps preserve them from pests like the weevil.

The corn husks are stored under a roof, as they are part of the cattle's diet during the dry season, and they are sold to neighbors who own between one and five cattle. The cobs of corn go through a process called *aporro*, which involves repeatedly striking them with a mallet about 1.37 yards long to separate the kernels. Don René de Jesús Guerra strikes his corn in a hammock, and with each strike of the mallet, the kernels come loose and fall below the hammock.

Once the corn has been shelled, the kernels are winnowed in the afternoon, which is when the wind tends to blow more steadily. The breeze

helps separate the chaff that has detached from the cob, leaving the grain clean and free of residue. The necessary amount is then stored for the family's yearly consumption. For this purpose, Don René uses silos or granaries that are thoroughly cleaned beforehand to ensure proper preservation. The rest of the corn, though not a large amount, is set aside for sale.

Regarding the production of sorghum bicolor, he explained that it can be cultivated either alongside the corn or in separate plots. Since Don René de Jesús Guerra does not own land and has always rented it, he plants sorghum bicolor in the same field as the corn. Once the seed heads (*bellotas*) have fully matured, he harvests them using a curved tool called a sickle. According to him, harvesting sorghum bicolor is rather unpleasant because of a fine dust it gives off, commonly known in eastern Guatemala as "*afate*." This dust causes itching on the arms, hands, and eyes, watery eyes, and sneezing. Due to these physical discomforts, it's hard to find laborers willing to help with the harvest. Nevertheless, sorghum bicolor continues to be cultivated and harvested. The plant residue is used to feed horses and cattle.

Don René de Jesús Guerra also mentioned that he plants squash and grows loroco plants (*Fernaldia pandurata* Woodson). He explained that the loroco plant has male and female varieties. The female plant can be identified by its broad, small leaves, while the male has long, narrow leaves. Both produce flowers and edible loroco, but the difference is that the male plant does not produce seeds.

### His family

Don René de Jesús Guerra was 25 years old when he met a young woman during a trip to El Salvador. She frequently traveled there to visit relatives who lived in the neighboring country. According to Don René, when they saw each other, "they liked each other right

away." (R. J. Guerra Pineda, personal communication, April 10, 2021). After two years, the woman named Zoila Yolanda Perdomo Godoy, originally from Santa Ana, Petén, Guatemala, became his life partner. Don René says he "stole her away" from El Salvador and brought her to live near the border. Eventually, they moved to Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado. She dedicated herself to housework, while Don René worked in farming, customs, and fishing. Together, they had four children, two sons and two daughters: Yanira Yesenia, Heidy Celeste, Elmer René, and Jairo Osmin Guerra Perdomo.

They lived together for 42 years. His two sons learned the art of fishing, but they do not pursue it as a profession. They had the opportunity to go to school, graduated, and now work for local companies. Don René de Jesús Guerra shared: "My sons like to go fishing, but only for fun." (R. J. Guerra Pineda, personal communication, April 10, 2021).

In addition to their biological children, the couple also adopted a daughter from a family that lacked the resources to support her. Her name is Emeli Saraí Guerra Perdomo. She is single and lives at home with them.

### The home

Don René de Jesús Guerra shared that the land where his house stands was inherited from his father. Through hard work and great effort, he managed to save up a few coins and gradually built his house. In addition to working in customs, farming, and fishing, he also used his free time to weave cast nets on commission, and that's how he slowly gathered the resources needed to complete the house.

On his property, he planted mango, sincuya, cashew, custard apple, nance, banana, coconut, lemon, and orange trees. He also had a small garden where he grew, for personal consumption, cucumber, bell pepper, tomato,

cilantro, mint, squash, and okra (in the community it's called *ocle*, a vegetable that somewhat resembles bell pepper).

The first house he had near the border was made of adobe. He made the adobe bricks himself to build the walls, because, in addition to being a fisherman and farmer, he also knew how to prepare the materials needed for adobe. He learned this skill from his father, who had experience in making this traditional construction material. It's important, Don René noted, to know which type of grass is best suited for adobe production.

### **A Glimpse into Magical Thinking: Don René de Jesús Guerra and His Encounters with *La Siguanaba***

Don René stated that on one occasion while out fishing, a woman appeared in front of him: "I was walking behind her, followed her to the river, but when I got there, she was gone." (R. J. Guerra Pineda, personal communication, April 10, 2021). This woman, dressed in white with long hair, appeared to him several times, but he never saw her face. Strangely, every time he reached the stream, the woman had vanished.

On another occasion, while traveling from Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado to the municipal capital of Moyuta, and while crossing the Las Carretas river bridge, "a tall woman dressed in black stepped in front of the bus to stop it. She got on and went straight to sit in the very last seat". Don René said he looked at her three times because she seemed so strange, especially since she had boarded at the bridge, an area with no houses, only wilderness.

At that moment, the driver told the bus assistant, "Go collect the fare from the woman who sat in the back." But to everyone's surprise, she was no longer there. No one saw her get off, and the bus hadn't stopped. According to Don René, it was an evil spirit he

believed was *La Siguanaba*. On another day, when he went out to pick squash for lunch, he saw a long-haired woman in the cornfield, but when he approached, she disappeared. He also believes this was *La Siguanaba*.

### **Final Comment**

To the head of the Department of Folk Arts and Crafts at the *Centro de Estudios de las Culturas en Guatemala (CECEG)* by its acronym in Spanish), at the San Carlos de Guatemala University, it was a privilege to interview the last fisherman and cast-net weaver in the village of Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado, town of Moyuta, department of Jutiapa.

His was a life dedicated to honorable, dignified labor, work that provided sustenance for his family and for the neighbors who purchased the fish he caught. With this publication, value is given to the bearers of traditional culture, as shown in the life of Don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda, a life full of anecdotes, stories, and beliefs, but above all, of tireless labor until his final day.

The death of this artisan on December 24, 2021, just hours after going fishing, brought profound sorrow and left a great void, both within his family and the community. He leaves behind a craft legacy to the neighbors for whom he wove cast nets, helping to carry forward this ancestral fishing tradition.

### **Acknowledgments**

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René's life, which allowed the author to better understand the life history recounted in this work. Special thanks also to anthropologist Silvia Priscila Casasola Vargas for translating the abstract.

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**Figure 1.**

Fisherman Don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda.

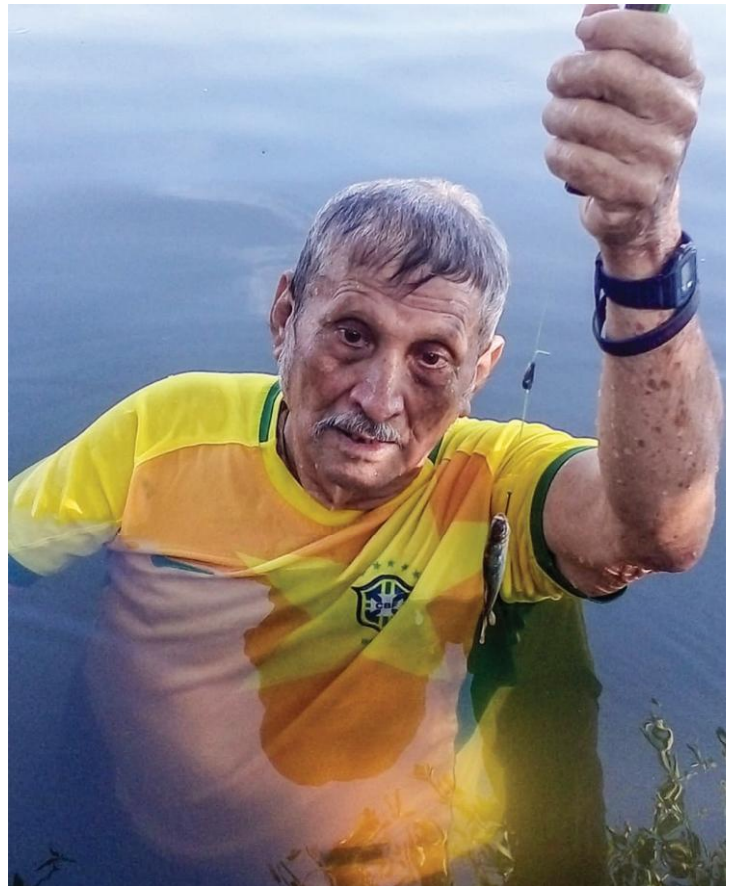
April, 2021.





**Figure 2.**

Traditional house built with adobe bricks and a tile roof.  
April, 2021.



**Figure 3.**

Don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda fishing with a  
hook. Photograph by Guerra Perdomo  
August, 2021.





**Figure 4.**

Don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda showing a cast net.  
April, 2021.



**Figure 5.**

René de Jesús Guerra Pineda and Javier Carpio show off two cast nets.  
April, 2021.





**Figure 6.**

René de Jesús Guerra Pineda, in the courtyard of his home, the place where he weaves the cast nets.  
April, 2021.



**Figure 7.**

Fisherman don René de Jesús Guerra Pineda with two cast nets for fishing.  
April, 2021.



**Figure 8.**

Preparation of the soil. April, 2021.