

Archivo General de la Nación, México
Year 1836, Ministry of the Interior
Indian Tribes

Juan Isidro Bojórques, speaking for himself and in the name of the Opatas tribe, to petition that the lands they have been taken away be returned to them.

Your Excellency, Mr. President:

Juan Isidro Bojórques, *natural* [native to] the town of Oposura and of the Opatas nation in Sonora, speaking for himself and as the envoy of the thirty-six pueblos that together constitute this nation, I approach our highest Mexican government, before your excellency, with the proper respect and obedience, I come before you to say the following: that five years ago, in 1831, when other representatives commissioned by the Opatas traveled to the national capital of Mexico City and exposed at that time their complaints concerning the hardships that had befallen them, his excellency, the president who at that time governed the Mexican nation, Don Anastasio Bustamante, deigned to listen attentively to our calls for justice, and in response gave those representatives a presidential order for the Governor of Sonora to administer justice to the pueblos; notwithstanding the President's intention, as soon as the order was given to the governor, he looked upon it with disdain and, rather than administering justice, he mistreated the Opatas envoys, speaking to them with offensive words. [I tell you this], your excellency, for you to see how the orders coming from the highest levels of government are obeyed.

Be so kind, your excellency, to hear a small summary of what has happened to Opatas pueblos of Sonora: most of the towns have been dispossessed of their lands through violent means, and the most recent case is that of Cumpas, where the Governor of the Department of Sonora sent armed troops to protect the lands that belonged to the priest Don Juliano Moreno, taking prisoner the Opatas who had burned the fences that the priest had placed around the village lands, and carrying them off to Arizpe [the capital of Sonora] – without taking into account that this same parish priest had first burned the fences that the villagers had built around their fields, sending his horse and mule herds into the Indians' planted fields in order to damage their crops.

And, why does the Opatas nation suffer such violent assaults and losses in their pueblos? For two reasons: first because they are obedient to the laws and to the government of Mexico; and, second, because the usurpers of our lands are all brothers, relatives, *compadres* [fictive kin] and friends of the Authorities, that is, of the Sonoran government and its subalterns, and finally, because they have money and in this we find that the government there serves the powerful, but not the ones who have justice on their side. The ones who control the government in Sonora are the Escalantes, Morales, Morenos and Escobosos and, since they are all related, particularly in Oposura, whose pueblo I represent, all of [these families] follow the governor considering that we Indians are ignorant and will tolerate anything. Because of this the officials who govern in Sonora are worse than the Spaniards, and we Indians live in the epoch of freedom more oppressed than when we were subjected [to colonial rule]. There was independence for the Morenos, the Escalantes, the Morales y and Escobosos, but not for us; I say this because in those times [the colonial past] they never took away our lands, and now they deprive a community of its land and there is no justice.

For all of these reasons, filled with confidence, the Opata pueblos of Sonora have sent me to your excellency to tell you to issue an order so that they will return the lands to the pueblos that have been dispossessed. Make the government officials in Sonora understand that you, as the highest authority in the Mexican nation, demand that they treat us well and not take away our property. The pueblos also want your excellency to order that they should not charge us more than very moderate parochial fees for marriages, baptisms and burials, because our people are very poor and constantly occupied in the military campaigns against the Indians who do not live in villages as Christians [*gentiles*].

These benefits [*gracias*] Mr. President, which the thirty-six Opata pueblos of Sonora ask of your excellency through my agency as their representative, were already granted by the president who preceded you, Don Anastasio Bustamante. What has happened, however, is that they have not been honored and, in this way, the highest government of the land has not been obeyed. For this reason, I beg you to issue another order the same as the first one, and I ask you to name someone of the complete confidence of your government to go to Sonora and officially recognize the land titles for the town commons of each of the Opata pueblos, so that you will be properly informed of the losses they have suffered, which are the cause of their hunger and misery, and their lands will be returned to them.

I beg your excellency to excuse the language of my explanation, for it is not my intent to fail in my respect for you as the President of the Mexican Republic and as the sovereign father of all your subjects. Arizpe [Sonora], July 2, 1836. Juan Isidro Bojórques.

Source: Archivo General de la Nación, *Gobernación*, caja 4.

Note: Anastasio Bustamante was President of Mexico in 1830-1832 and again, 1837-1839. Valentín Gómez Farías was president in 1833-1834, and Miguel Barragán was President in 1835-1836, when Bojórques penned or dictated his letter.

Discussion points:

Note the word *natural*, by which Bojórques identified himself at the beginning of the letter. This was a common way of referring to Indians in colonial documentation, distinguishing their status as “native peoples” but also indicating their claim to certain basic protections in their lands and persons as vassals of the king. By 1836, when this letter was written, Indians in Mexico were legally citizens; yet, it is noteworthy that Bojórques called himself a “natural,” or was so designated by governmental intermediaries. It illustrates the ambiguity of citizenship in this early period of the Mexican Republic.

“Your Excellency”: the title by which Bojórques sought to express his respect and deference to the Mexican President came from the conventions of colonial hierarchy in which “Your Excellency” was the proper form of address for the viceroy, the highest ranking colonial official in New Spain.

What is Bojórques’s principal complaint? What do you make of the final sentence in this letter, in which Bojórques characterizes the President of Mexico as “the sovereign father of all your subjects”?