

Balancing the Cosmos

Semana Santa

By Andrew Weeks

In the traditional Tz'utujil-Maya town of Santiago Atitlán, in the highlands of Guatemala, ancient rituals are conducted throughout the year, especially in the *cofradía* or confraternity houses, where images of both Christian saints and old Maya gods are kept. But they reach a climax of intense activity during Easter Week. For the Maya this is a five day festival — all over by Saturday morning — and a period which is also the five "dangerous days" of the ancient Maya calendar.

Regarded as a treacherous time, there is the expectation of risk. This was powerfully brought home to us at the very moment of our arrival. The entire town filled the plaza and lined the streets in a powerful gesture of solidarity to send nine fellow Atitecos, victims of a bus crash, to their rest. The tragic procession of coffins wound its way towards the cemetery on a hill above the lake. At each turn of the route, the coffin-bearers raised their burden three times high above their heads. This was something we would see again in the next few days, but with different burdens.

DAY ONE — Holy Monday

The sixteenth-century church — one of the oldest in Guatemala — overlooks the town from its platform-like vantage. It is sacred space to traditionalists and Christians alike, and on this first day of Easter Week — *Semana Santa* — it must be cleaned and washed with meticulous thoroughness to purge any lingering traces of malign influences from the magical rituals that may have been performed within its walls during the previous year. For one is just as likely to see *ajkuns* — shamans — performing ceremonies at the church's altars or lighting candles in the nave as one is to see a mass conducted by the town's American priest. Uniquely, Santiago Atitlán is part of the diocese of Oklahoma, another demonstration of the town's firm independence of Guatemalan authority.

Even loose plaster must be removed. "It no longer wishes to serve God," the Atitecos say. The members of the different confraternities bring their *santos* — statues of the saints who are also part of the Maya pantheon — to the church for the duration of Easter Week, and these are carefully protected during the cleaning, as dust and plaster descends enshrouding the church in a choking mist.

The careful cleaning of an ancient small square hole in the church floor attracts especially keen interest, for this is the *Rumuxux Ruchiliew* — the "Navel of the Face of the Earth". This is the world's true center and a portal to another world.

The cleaner's arm disappears into the hole right up to the shoulder, and this opening may really give access to structural remains predating the church built above it. This reinforces and gives some credence to persistent oral reports of a system of tunnels and caves underpinning this sacred space. But this is not just to do with the physical

fabric; more important, access is gained to powerful and conflicting spiritual forces. So naturally people are eager to closely inspect the detritus that emerges from it.

The roles of men and women are carefully defined in Atiteco society — in this case the women clean up the mess the men have made. At a given moment, the women and girls who have been waiting none too patiently for their moment erupt into the church bearing pitchers, full of water from the lake, gracefully upon their heads.

They rapidly pour water down the altar steps, returning again and again, flooding the floor of the nave. It is impossible for this sight not to suggest the ancient Maya practice of flooding the great plazas in cities like Copan and Tikal in order to recreate the primordial sea of Creation.

The fruit used to decorate the altar and the ceremonial arches on the sacred route around the town has been especially brought from the coast by a group of young men — the *alguacils*. The fruit is rigorously inspected by senior confraternity officials, for it must be in perfect condition. Under- or over-ripeness would reflect poorly on the celibacy, or rather the lack of it, in the young man who carried that particular basket during the journey.

The fruit, having passed inspection, will then itself be decorated to demonstrate its special nature — its sacredness. This is done with shiny colored foil by confraternity members, their children and, it seems from our experience, any other willing helpers.

Late this evening sees the entry of a unique figure into the proceedings: *Rilaj Mam* — more widely known as *Maximón* — the richly garbed figure who seems to embody an ancient deity and who is, for traditionalists (and tourists), the symbol of the town. The Mam is brought down from his place of rest, of sleep and temporary death, in the rafters of the Confraternity House of Santa Cruz. In pitch darkness and behind matting screens, but nonetheless in the presence of the spiritual and temporal leaders of the community, he is reassembled and dressed in new apparel by his shamanic priest — the *telinel*.

The lights go on and the figure of the Mam, resplendent in new double fedora, multiple scarves, designer jacket, Atiteco embroidered pants and polished miniature cowboy boots, stands revealed to receive petitioners and undergo the sort of close inspection that all ritual is given by the Atitecos.

DAY THREE — Holy Wednesday

The fruit brought from the coast is carried in procession to the center of the town. The figure of the Mam, carried by the *telinel*, accompanies it to the mayor's office to the strains of his waltz-time theme tune.

Here in the mayor's office, surrounded by his confraternity supporters and the focus of attention for a large crowd, the Mam lies fertilizing the fruit — making it potent. All this takes place in the presence of the town's civic authority, which at this time he traditionally usurps.

Later the fruit is taken up again and processed to the church where it will decorate an elaborate wooden scaffold which has been erected in front of the main altarpiece, on which are depicted some of these very ceremonies.

At the foot of the church steps the procession divides and the Mam, accompanied by the sound of the rattling noisemakers which announce his presence, is taken to his chapel, on the left of the plaza facing the church, where he hangs in a tree, perhaps reverting to the form from which he was first made — the *erythrina*, or red seed shaman's tree. He waits to preside over the death of Christ.

This evening many of the townspeople will come to see the Mam raised up on the tree in his chapel. They scrutinise his reborn appearance and apparel while marimba bands serenade him.

This year his sartorial elegance, completed by a scarf patterned with bursting Van Gogh sunflowers, is favorably received by the populace. The hierarchy of the Santa Cruz Confraternity, who are his cohorts, keep him company, ritually smoking and drinking their way through the days and nights till his moment comes.

DAY FOUR — Holy Thursday

In the Confraternity House of San Juan across town, one of the most powerful traditional objects in Santiago Atitlán — the Martín bundle — is taken from the chest where it is kept and danced to the four directions by its servant and keeper, the *nab'eysil* — a celibate shaman priest who in his trance state becomes a conduit for a deity: the Lord of maize, harvest and mountains. It is then placed reverently on the altar of the shrine where it will be revered and nourished until Saturday.

One of the senior ladies of the confraternity exhorts the *nab'eysil* in his dancing of the sacred Martín bundle. She is not impressed by the quality of his rather graceful knee bends and doesn't hold back in demonstrating how it should be done.

As Robert Carlsen sagely points out, "In what probably represents direct continuity with the pre-Columbian past, Atiteco bundles are associated with a priesthood ... the bundle cult remains very much alive in the Atiteco confraternity system."

Although the performance of ceremonies in the confraternity is of the utmost seriousness and some infelicities would be literally world-shattering, the atmosphere is relaxed. These are not just solemn rituals but convivial family occasions.

Throughout the evening the church is thronged with townspeople awaiting the stroke of midnight. There is no sense of patience nor of the need for it. This gives a powerful insight into the nature of the great ceremonial sacred spaces of the past — be they medieval cathedral, Southeastern American Indian square-ground or Mesoamerican ritual precinct: pulsating with expectancy, intensely active and alive.

Meanwhile the *sacristanes*, who participate in both Catholic and traditional rituals, sing their arcane liturgical chant while candles are repeatedly lit and then snuffed out.

The powerful local "canyon water" is ritually drunk — passed around the assembled confraternity elders. In outward appearance a Catholic church, in reality this has become a throbbing Maya sacred space. It is traditionalists who run *these* ceremonies.

At midnight a procession is formed consisting of *alcaldes* — the heads and hosts of the individual confraternities — and *tixels* — ladies of the confraternities with their elegant "halo" headdresses, carrying candles sheltered from the breeze within folded green banana leaves. Followed by all of the other confraternity leaders they rapidly

form up and move at the double, or about as fast as any procession can move, out of the church followed by the large figures of Jesus carrying his cross, the Virgin Mary, and a *santo* known as San Juan Carajo (referred to in English as the "John").

The procession crosses the plaza at a great lick heading for the street which is the central axis of the town. Jesus, bearing his cross, keeps his station to the north, while the Virgin occupies the southern end of the street — the direction associated with the underworld and the place where life is reborn.

Four young men, traditionally apprentice shamans in a test of endurance, will carry the "John" between these two stations throughout the night. This is regarded as a test of spiritual as well as physical stamina, and obstacles will be placed in their path including, reportedly, glass on the street, although it is hard to know whether this is a psychic or material hazard. Certainly they are confronted with drunken haranguing and argument as the night wears on. Yet, according to Robert Carlsen, they shell out hard-earned cash for the privilege.

One can't help thinking of the old Maya gods depicted as being borne on palanquins as the "John", with his somewhat rakish air, goes back and forth busily impregnating the Virgin. Within recent memory these figures were jailed by the local authorities for this one night, precisely in order to prevent such exuberantly licentious conduct!

Throughout the night the figures of the Virgin, in this manifestation known as María Andador (Mary of Pain or Sorrows), and Jesus move towards each other along the north/south axis, with the "John" all the time going between them, until at sunrise all three images converge at the center of the town. Thus Jesus is conceived at the dawn of the day on which he will be crucified and resurrected — a neat circularity, persuasively demonstrating Maya non-linear time.

DAY FIVE — HOLY FRIDAY

In the clear dawn sunlight, the large crowd turns and follows the procession of figures up the steps from the market, across the plaza, ascending by stages to the church. The sun has risen, Christ is renewed, the ceremonies are going according to plan.

As the statues return to the church they pass a line of kneeling youths, each clutching a very large Easter candle. Each family has sent a representative, usually a young lad. In the nave they move slowly forward on their knees to lay the candle on *Ruk'u'x Muxux* — "Heart of the Navel" — the purple cushion that covers the hole that is the navel of the world.

Bunches of the candles are then taken and placed in the hole itself for even greater sanctity. Traditional shamans ply their trade at the side altars of the church, presenting the candles to the images which stand there — saints, gods and other sacred icons. Manifestations of the numinous — sacred holes, sacred caves, images or bundles — all can open onto the spiritual realm. As Peter Brown, the historian of the Late Antique wrote of Byzantium, "The icon was a hole in the dyke separating the visible world from the divine...Icons were active." For the Maya, their world is filled with such openings — portals which can take many different forms.

Reputedly chosen during the preceding year for their cuteness, the Boy Apostles attend the crucifixion clutching the symbols of the Passion. Earlier they enjoyed a multi-course re-staging of the Last Supper, passing each plate of food to their

mothers who sat behind them and whisked the different courses off into containers for later.

The Santa Cruz Confraternity, as the name implies, is responsible for many of the arrangements for the crucifixion of Christ. They arrive from their other duties, attending upon the Mam in his chapel on the plaza, to the sound of the noisemaker. They show reverence to the crucified figure whose loincloth is carefully decorated with coloured foil — just like the fruit.

And then they supervise the raising of the cross in a haze of copal smoke, to the roll of drums and a surge of intense psychic involvement from the packed crowd.

The cross is set in the hole that is the navel of the world. And just as the cross became a sacred tree — the Rood — in the imagery of the newly converted pagan Anglo-Saxons in seventh-century England, so for the Maya it becomes that central image of the World Tree, a shamanic *axis mundi*, its roots planted in the world's navel. This seems a resurrection rather than the death of Christ, for He is reborn as the living tree which grows from every grave in the town cemetery.

After mass has been said by the resident American Catholic priest, in one of his limited appearances during Holy Week, the Christ is taken down from the cross and placed within the *urna* — a glass-sided coffin. Inside this has been placed a mattress and appropriate bedding for the sacred figure — each layer being enthusiastically sprayed with multiple cans of deodorant. This is a good example of the adaptability of the Atitecos and of their willingness, even enthusiasm, for putting to use modern accouterments which take their fancy. Ritual and ceremony are not set in the amber of a museum, and spray cans are probably more efficiently focused for propelling intense sanctification at a target than the old technology of swinging copal censers.

Another example of this adaptability is the fondness for flashing Christmas lights as an adornment to objects of spiritual significance. A point of reference might be the droplets, beads and jewels that signify "holy" in classic Maya art, or the glistening "light bulb" jewels that imply status in objects or attach to water in a Mixtec codex. So, as the *urna* is raised, the lights that decorate it blink in sacred synchronicity while a flashing star plays a synthesized version of "While Shepherds Watch", or can it be that Santa Claus or even Rudolph is coming to town?

It is part of the political and social theater of public ritual that the *urna*'s progress to the plaza, marshalled by the *catequista* forces of Catholic Action, should be so tortuous. It will take an hour at least for it just to emerge from the church, enforcing a lengthy waiting period on the traditionalist advanced guard of the procession as they sit sighing on the gracefully rounded church steps.

When Christ in the *urna* finally emerges, the Mam is brought out from his chapel to observe the proceedings and with his supporters await their entry. They have decided to play a game of cat and mouse throughout the afternoon.

The waiting continues as Christ's pallbearers inch carefully down the church steps and onto the brightly colored and intricately designed sawdust carpet produced by local artists, their friends and families. Each is responsible for the design and execution of a section of street.

While the *urna* and its bearers descend onto the plaza, this vibrantly colored carpet is

still being laid around the town to mark their route and to ultimately vanish after their passage. The trampled remnants are snatched from beneath shuffling feet by enthusiastic children. Plastic bags at the ready, they sweep up good fortune.

Now it is the Mam's turn to play a waiting game. The noisemaker rattles provide a counterpoint across the plaza to the rolls on the snare drum which accompany the *urna*.

Much attention is understandably given by the *telinel* to the roping which stabilizes the Mam while he rides upon his mount's shoulders like a jockey. Binding is an integral idea in the cult and legend of the Mam. His wooden constituent parts are bound together and, it has been suggested by Nathaniel Tarn, this may be one meaning of the name *Maximón* — "The Old Lord who is Bound". *Rilaj Mam* is an honorific which encompasses duality — Venerable Grandfather/Grandchild.

Suddenly the time seems just right and, his moment come, the *telinel* hoists the Mam onto his shoulder, and with the Santa Cruz Confraternity and his supporters in train moves rapidly across the plaza to dance a somewhat threatening attendance upon the Christ.

It is important to point out that while the Mam superficially takes on some of the role of the familiar "Judas", he is regarded in a way very different from the vilified and abused effigies of other Central American towns. He is a powerful and subtle deity figure with many names which mirror his many roles and talents.

His sudden surges forward, as if to hurry Christ on his way, produce a hum and some squeals from the crowd, which otherwise stays the course quietly, watching closely and minutely observing with a palpable intensity for as long as this drama takes.

And this "Passion play" will continue for as long as the *telinel* can endure — on this occasion well past nightfall. His "performance" will be discussed and analyzed throughout the next year, and, crucially, he will be compared to the great *telinels* of the past, those almost mythic shaman figures. This is a very critical audience.

The crowd indeed will stay on, lining the processional route along the town's streets. They discuss the day's events throughout the night, while the *urna*, with trance-inducing rhythm, inches along inscribing a sacred path.

For the young men who carry the huge and unwieldy *urna* this is an agonizingly slow procession: three steps forward, two steps back; one step forward, three steps back. They will bear the palanquin in this shuffling, swaying tango for the next fourteen hours, until it returns to the church at dawn when the *Maya Semana Santa* will have run its course. Here there will be no Sunday resurrection, for rebirth has already taken place.

This year the Mam and his confraternity handlers controversially decide to extend their confrontation with the *urna* and "see Christ off" the edge of the plaza instead of retreating and relinquishing the space to the domination of the Christian church.

The *urna* starts to disappear down the steps into the town. After some discussions, the *catequistas* agree to give way, move on and vacate the plaza — at least for this year.

This confrontation might be seen as a battle of wills between the old Maya god — a

tough and savvy survivor — and the crucified Christ. But in the thought-world of the Maya, they may each simply have their role to play — in balancing the cosmos.

FURTHER READING

Robert Carlsen's *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town* (University of Texas Press, Austin: 1997) is a fascinating mix of analytical sociology and anthropology interspersed with first-person reportage of dangerous times in Highland Guatemala during the protracted civil war. It should acquire the status of an ethnographic classic.

It seems that there is a part of Nathaniel Tarn which will always be, like Basho, a wandering poet: an anthropologist/raconteur. And his book, *Scandals in the House of Birds* (Marcilio, New York: 1997), written with Martin Prechtel, reflects that in being a potpourri of interview, opinion, myth and nitty-gritty. Once you know something of the subject matter, it is an amazing assemblage culled from two distinct periods separated by almost thirty years.

Allen Christenson's book, *Scaling the Mountain of the Ancients*, which places the iconography of the church's main altarpiece in the context of Santiago Atitlán's ceremonial life will soon be available, published by the University of Texas Press.

Martin Prechtel has written two books on the traditional life in Santiago Atitlán "from the inside": *The Secret of the Talking Jaguar* (Tarcher Putnam/Element: 1998) and *Long Life, Honey in the Heart* (Tarcher Putnam: 1999). These are problematic works, and I think it fair to say that the jury is out as to the strict accuracy of some of the content. There can be no doubt that Prechtel is singularly familiar with the traditional life of Santiago Atitlán, having become one of very few outsiders to speak Tz'utujil and having participated in the ritual life of the town while living there within the community. He has co-authored articles with both Carlsen and Tarn, but in his own books he has aimed to address and appeal to a non-academic audience with specific agendas — that of the "New Age" and of the "men's movement". That focus, combined with a penchant for flowery, not to say purple prose — slangy yet saccharine — has made the usefulness of the information, which should be and may still be uniquely valuable, difficult to separate from fable and heroic saga. Prechtel seems in danger of following in the footsteps of Carlos Castaneda — but that may be exactly what he has in mind.