

Dislocation and Cultural Conquest of the Highland Maya

by Duncan Earle

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The scene is set in 1524. The calendar diviner, Aj Itz, is praying to the Maya deities and counting through the small red seeds that lie in groups of four on his low table, while the Quiché-Maya war chief Tecun Uman paces before him. Each time the diviner comes to the last group, he shakes his head and throws up his hands in dismay. He tells the war chief the Spanish are coming, just as the warrior's dream had predicted, and that there is no escaping defeat at their hands. Tecun, disturbed, orders him to divine again, to call on the ancestral gods to overcome this threat to the Quiché kingdom. Resigned, the diviner sits before his table again, counts out the seeds, and, feeling the body signs run through him like little flashes of lightning, again predicts the kingdom's demise at the hands of the *conquistadores*.

The crowd looks on with interest — Quiché Indians in their festival clothes and tourists towering over them, raising their cameras from time to time. This is the traditional Guatemalan "Conquest Dance," a form of dance-theater performed each year in the town of Santa Cruz,

A scene from the Conquest Dance near Santa Cruz, Quiché. Photo by Duncan Earle





Mayan Indian musicians from Lemoa, Guatemala, play the traditional *tambor* (drum) and *chirimia* for the Conquest Dance. Photo by Duncan Earle

only a few miles from the ancient Quiché capital of Utatlan, where the original scene is said to have taken place. Many Highland Maya towns in Guatemala reenact the Spanish conquest of their ancient kingdoms as a way of teaching their history and celebrating the time when their ancestors were free of a culturally foreign yoke. A central figure in this historical reenactment is the diviner, who uses a 260-day sacred calendar of 13 numbers and 20 deities, or “day-owners”, to make his predictions. This calendrical divination was once a common practice of all native peoples of Guatemala and most of Mexico, as well as central to the numerical and religious systems of the Classic Mayas, who reached their zenith as a complex civilization in the ninth century A.D. Now the calendar survives only in Highland Guatemala, where it is still used in secret by “day-keepers” who, like the diviner in the Conquest Dance, count out a random handful of red seeds from their medicine bundles in groups of four, to predict the fate of their clients.

While the Quiché, like some twenty other Maya language groups in Guatemala, are nominally Catholic, many of them still preserve a belief system that is fundamentally prehispanic. They maintain altars in the fields, in the forests, at the edges of canyons and on the tops of mountains as “tables” on which to serve offerings to the earth deity in exchange for bountiful crops and good health. Addressed in prayer are the deities of the wind and rain, the spirits of the plants and the animals, the volcanoes and plains, the heart of earth and the heart of sky, as well as the Christian saints and Jesus, who is conceived as representing the sun, together with his companion Mary, embodied by the moon. Prayers are offered before the altars in the home, the field, the church or the graveyard for deceased ancestors, believed still to watch over the lives of their descendents.

Much of this belief system centers on the sacred nature of time and of special places, of debts to the earth and the ancestors, and the im-

A diviner reads the Maya calendar to see if his client's journey will be safe. Photo by Duncan Earle



portance of divining one's fate. For instance, certain birds may provide signs or omens, depending upon their flight direction, the time of day or night when they appear, the sound of their call and which day it is of the 260-day calendar. The date 2 TOJ may indicate that a small debt is owed, 3 TZ'I' may suggest asocial behavior afoot, 4 BATZ' may provide evidence of witchcraft, for each day name connotes a complex of meanings, and each number denotes a characteristic strength of that meaning.

This traditional system of belief is well adjusted to the daily life of the rural Maya household. The house itself is seen as "owned" by the original builder — usually an ancestor — and "rent" is paid on AJ, the "house" day, to its first owner. Although long since dead, he is still anxious to see respect paid to him for his original efforts now enjoyed by the living. This is accepted as part of the expense of living on the body of the earth, for everything in the productive and reproductive world costs something and accrues debt. Nature is never taken for granted; thus daily life in the rural household is a careful balance of costs and benefits, of things received and paid out, just as it is in public regional markets. Both economically and ecologically practical, the traditional Maya system also sanctifies the material world of house, corn field and forest and at the same time interacts with it. Corn, for example, the most basic element of the diet, is also the most sacred food-spirit. Just as the Maya farmer "feeds" his field with sweat and his prayers in exchange for that which will feed his household, the spirit of life-sustaining maize is fed through prayer and offerings.

The household environment, as well as the rural Maya house itself, provides not only the setting for daily life but for their religion as well, while the local Catholic church is but one of many similar stations on the community map. Whereas most world religions tend to be universally applicable through standardized churches, the traditional Maya system, like most Native American religions, tends to be bound to a specific ecological niche, a particular sacred geography. When we North Americans move from one place to another, we quickly adapt ourselves by seeking out a similar church or social group that fulfills our needs. A Catholic in New Hampshire can receive Mass in Virginia with no difficulty, for the church structure is virtually identical and heaven is either as close or distant in both states. But for the followers

of the Maya calendar the church is a fixed and specific location. Thus we must ask ourselves, what does it mean to remove the Mayas forcibly from their traditional homes? What is the cultural impact of becoming a refugee in a different country, or even another part of the same one, when cultural belief is so intricately tied to place?

Between 1980 and 1984, a million Maya Indians were moved from their homes through a systematic operation carried out by the national military. Tens of thousands of Maya men, women and children were killed. Over one hundred thousand fled into Mexico, most of them settling in a string of refugee camps just along the border. Thousands more are now being moved by the army into strategic resettlement camps as part of a militarized development plan. The United States harbors an estimated 70,000 Maya, although very few have legal refugee status. Whichever the form of dislocation, the effects were and continue to be traumatic. People have been abruptly and violently removed from their land, their relatives, their ancestors and their sacred geography. Not only have they suffered materially and emotionally from the loss of loved ones and the hardships of flight, but they have also been robbed of their "church," their traditional spiritual foundation, by losing the land on which they were raised and sustained.

When the Highland Maya were conquered by the Spanish in 1524, they were forced to pay tribute to their new rulers, yet most were allowed to remain on their land. This is, no doubt, a key reason for the high degree of cultural conservation by the Indians of the Highlands. The history of post-conquest Guatemala has been one of increasing encroachment upon Indian lands, but none has been as swift and

"Here we are with our arms just crossed."
Chuj Mayan refugees in the camp of Rio Azul
in Chiapas, Mexico, regret that they are not
able to work their land. Photo by Duncan Earle



Suggested reading

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See also *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, especially vol. 7, nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4 (1983), and vol. 8, nos. 2, 3, and 4 (1984).

For further scholarly information on this topic write:

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massive as this, and none has endangered traditional Maya culture so profoundly. Even the areas fortunate enough to avoid extensive violence suffer under the general militarization of the Indian regions. All Mayan men are forced to serve one day a week in paramilitary civil patrol units, which disrupt daily life and create bitter internal strife within communities. For those who have been displaced, resettlement in government-supervised camps has led to massive alienation and widespread conversion to government-backed evangelical protestant sects. Separated from land and ancestors, unable to feed the altars or petition them for aid, many traditionalists experience extreme cultural disorientation, for which conversion to a politically safe evangelical sect is merely a convenient refuge. Those who belong to Reform Catholic or the standard Protestant groups are also strongly pressured to convert to the new sects. This they often do out of fear of being accused of subversion, for such an accusation leads to questioning or even disappearance.

In some part of rural Guatemala, the "day-keeper," following the custom of his ancestors, still divines for his clients. The "fate-measuring" medicine bundle is taken down from the house altar and placed on a low table. Red seeds and rock crystals are poured out, and a handful is removed, as the diviner summons the ancient deities. The seeds are grouped into fours, as the spirit-owners of the days are called up in their proper order, "1 C'AT, 2 KAN, 3 CAME . . ." And, as in the Conquest Dance, the client inquires about the future, hoping to learn something about the fate of his children, his village, his culture. These questions are on the minds of the Guatemalan Mayas wherever they have taken refuge, but the answers do not now rest in their hands.