



Maya Shamanism Today

BRUCE LOVE



Maya Shamanism Today:

Connecting with the Cosmos in Rural Yucatan

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Don Mech carefully arranges food and drink for prayers.

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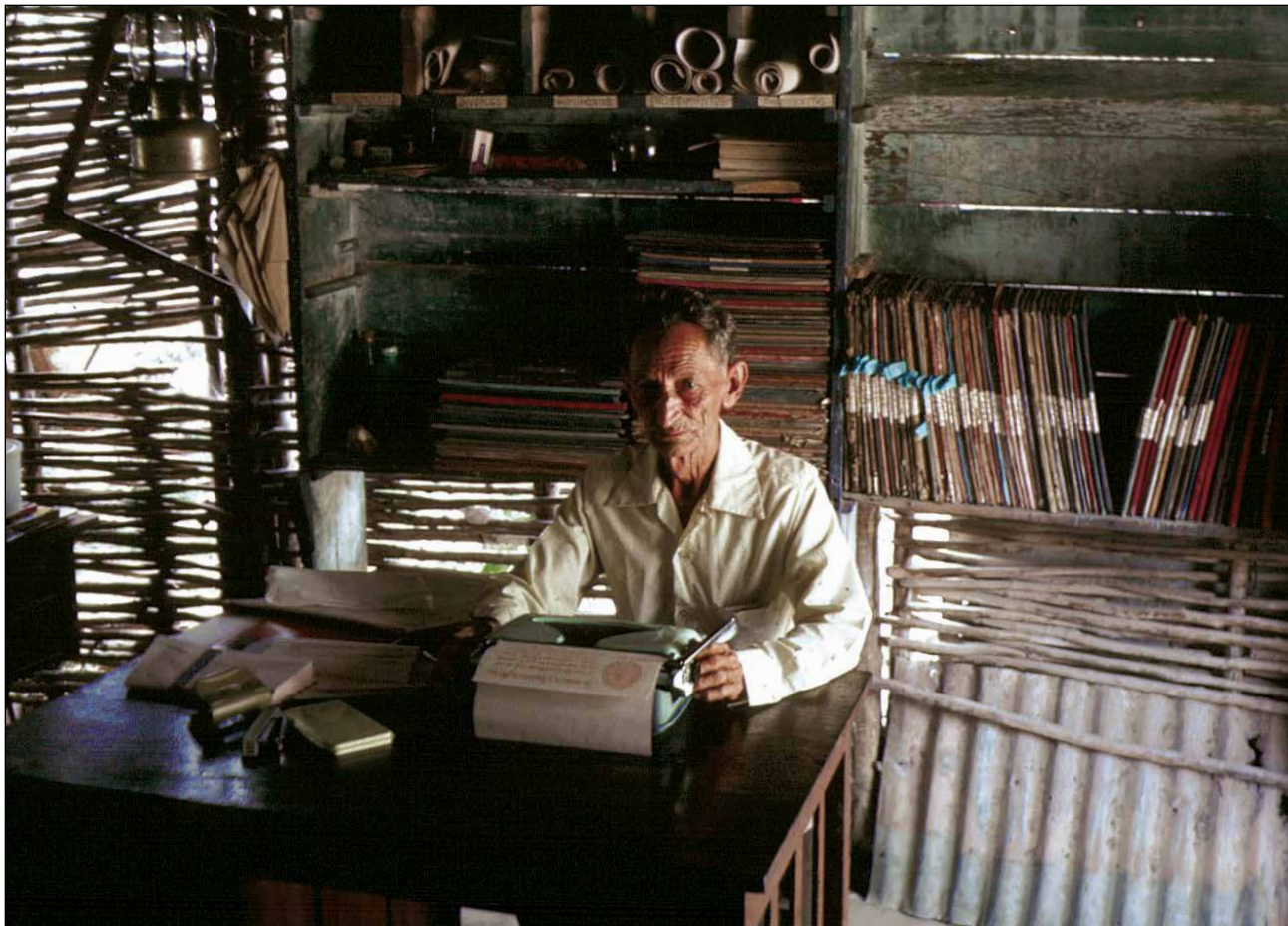
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Don Eduardo Peraza Castillo.

Dedication

In 1978 my wife and I and our seven-year-old son planted ourselves in Becanchen, Yucatan, so that I could improve my Spanish and begin to learn Mayan. In the second month of our stay I was invited to observe, photograph, and tape-record a ceremony led by village shaman Don Ramón Cámara. Over the next several weeks the local store owner and town registrar, Don Eduardo Peraza Castillo, worked late into the night with my old push-button cassette recorder translating from Mayan to Spanish the recorded prayers from the ceremony, which allowed me later to use this material for my Master's thesis and various publications.

I dedicate this book to Don Ramón and Don Eduardo for introducing me to the world of contemporary Maya religion and to the town of Becanchen, which opened its arms to me and my family.

2 Author's preface

The publisher and I are pleased to offer this new edition of *Maya Shamanism Today*, a summary of thirty years of fieldwork among the rural Mayas of the Yucatan Peninsula. Do not look for extraterrestrials, hallucinogenic trances, or prophecies for the end of the Maya calendar. This book is about the working shamans who in their daily lives perform the job of intermediary between their fellow villagers and beings in the spirit world that control the rains, the harvest, sickness and health, birth and death.

The color photos and the descriptions in this new edition span the period from 1978 into the new millennium, and I can tell you there is no sign that these ritual practices are disappearing.

Please accept the contents of this book as a gift to you from the Mayas themselves who accepted me into their communities and encouraged me to tell the outside world about their lives and their manner of living. It would do the living Mayas a disservice to ascribe to them supernatural powers that fit only our own notion of spirituality. How much better to let them tell us themselves, through their actions in their daily lives, about life in a world controlled by spirit forces. I pray I have honestly conveyed their message.

Pronunciation

Vowels in the Yukatek Mayan language are similar to Spanish, so *a* sounds like English "ah," *e* is pronounced as in English "bet," *i* is like English "meet," *o* is like English "mote," and *u* is like English "lute." When the vowel is doubled it is held longer. "X" in Mayan sounds like "sh." (Frequently the Mayas use *x* as a prefix,

as in *x-túut*, the sacred breads; in English this would be pronounced “sh-toot,” as in “toot your horn.”) The Mayan plural ending is *o’ob*, generally pronounced to rhyme with the long “o” in “strobe.”

The letter *j* used in writing Mayan words is pronounced with the aspirated sound of English *h* but with the air constricted by the palette as in Spanish *jota*. The word for shaman is *aj-meen*, generally shortened to *j-meen* and pronounced with a slight aspiration of the *j* and then *meen* as in the English word “men” but with the *e* drawn out. *J-meen* means “practitioner,” one who knows and does. More often than not the local Mayas drop the *j* altogether and pronounce the word *meen*, with the extended “eh” sound for the *ee*.

The Mayan language of Yucatan has tone, or high and low pitch, that linguists recognize as being significant in distinguishing some grammatical and semantic differences. I follow conventions established in 1984 in Yucatan by linguists and educators in marking high tone, as in the previously mentioned *x-túut*. A long vowel without marking is understood to be low. To standardize vowel length and tone, as well as placement of glottal stops and other spelling conventions, I follow two recent contemporary dictionaries, Bastarrachea et al. 1992 and Martínez Huchim 2005.

Glottal stops, marked with an apostrophe, are important in Mayan. *Ba'al*, which means “thing,” has a stop in the middle similar to the English “button” if you pronounce it without clearly saying the “tt.” Instead of pronouncing the “tt” in “button” most speakers of English instead quickly close their glottis (hence the name glottal stop). Say “button” this way and notice the stop in your throat; now try *ba'al*. Consonants marked with an apostrophe are also “glottalized” and pronounced with an explosive sound.

I use the word Maya and Mayas (plural) for the people, the culture, the archaeology, etc., and Mayan for the language. The Mayas speak Mayan.

4 Introduction

In a remote village in eastern Yucatan, on a warm afternoon in 1992, my Maya friend Damiano and I were relaxing in his rustic palm-roofed house when his younger brother Adán burst in, sweating, out of breath, and very agitated. In hushed tones he related the following story.

He was working in his corn field that day, moving through the tall dry stalks, doubling over the tops to preserve the ears until harvest. Suddenly a strong invisible force hit him in the calf, shot up his pant leg, and left out his waist. It knocked him over. He saw the corn moving but there were no animals or birds. He was very afraid.

Damiano's eyes sparkled with intensity as the event's significance registered in his mind. It was *iik'*, "wind," he explained, teaching his sibling: *k'aak'as ba'al*, "evil thing." Then in hushed tones: "It was caused by a *j-pulya'aj*"—and he translated for me from Mayan to Spanish: "*hechicero*" or "*brujo*." A witch.

So that evening, after dark, quietly taking the back streets of this small Maya village, we went to the house of the shaman Don Aleex to seek understanding and council. He greeted us through his front gate, a system of thin poles tied together in a framework spanning the rough opening in the limestone-boulder wall. After listening intently to Adán's story of events in the cornfield, he motioned us to enter, and led us through the darkness to a small pole-and-thatch hut in the yard beside his house.

There, by candlelight, he performed divination to ascertain the cause and meaning of this frightening occurrence. From his small bag of ritual paraphernalia he brought out thirteen corn kernels. On a low wooden table, as we watched in silent expectation, he shuffled them together, moving his cupped hand back and forth across the surface. He drew out four, then put them back in the pile.

Then he arranged the corn into two groupings, three kernels in a line and a square of four. The remainder were piled to the side. Satisfied, he looked up and gave his reading, or *cuenta*. He told Adán he must obtain a number of *secretos*, special items, and return that night at three for a *santiguar*. The Maya brothers nodded, understanding. I asked Don Aleex if we might possibly wait until daytime so I could take pictures. No, he said, it had to be done at night, in the hour of silence.

We returned at three in the morning, as instructed. Don Aleex was arranging his table with cups of *saka'*, a white corn drink, and branches of *xi'imche'*, sacred leaves. He placed seven cups of *saka'* on the leaves, four in a square and three in a line, and a separate cup of *bendisibi ja'*, "*agua bendita*, holy water," to one side. At the front of the table he lit three candles and began burning *cháal*, a special incense. He splashed some clear cane liquor on his hands, rubbed them together, and dabbed some on his face. He was now ready.

He instructed Adán to kneel in front of the table, and then rubbed Adán's joints with leaves of *tankas che'*. Using a few sprigs of *siipilche'*, he began praying and passing the leaves over Adán's head. When done, he dipped the leaves in holy water and took them out the back door into the yard. He came back with a single leaf, which he dipped into the holy water, said a prayer, and began pouring the seven cups of *saka'* back into a pail. He gathered up all the *xi'imche'* leaves and took them outside, into the darkness. The table was now bare except for three candles and the burned-down incense.

Throughout the proceedings one of the candles kept going out. It was a *seña*, "sign," Don Aleex said, without elaboration. Then he did corn divination. He shuffled the thirteen kernels and pulled out six, which he arranged four in a square with two below. He shuffled them again and pulled out six. One of them was standing upright! He left it in place and arranged the other five in a circle underneath it. Then he shuffled again and pulled out five. He read his *sáastun*, his sacred seeing device, against the candlelight, then took

6 out a second, smaller *sáastun*, and read it. Finally, he put away his corn.

Our attention turned to the candles. Don Aleex blew them out and inspected them thoughtfully. The one that had kept going out had been spitting and hissing and burning unevenly, creating drops and bumps of wax down the side. He counted the bumps very carefully. Bad news, he said, it was a very bad thing, *k'aas ba'al*. It was a sign from God.

He gave the middle candle, one of the good candles, to Adán and told him to take it home to his *patrón*, or patron saint. He would have to come back the next night, again at three in the morning, to perform a *k'eex*, the next higher level of spiritual cleansing, involving ritual exchange and sacrifice of chickens . . .

And so progresses spiritual healing. The attack in the corn field by invisible forces prompted young Adán, under his older brother's council, to seek a diviner's interpretation, which led in turn to prayers and cleansing with sacred leaves. When God sent a sign that Adán's troubles were more serious than first thought, stronger medicine was prescribed in the form of more elaborate rituals with food offerings.

When finally, on the third night, Adán had made his proper and adequate sacrifices, offerings, penance, and promises, he no longer was victim to the outside evil that had attacked him so suddenly three days before. His state of spiritual balance returned. He felt protected. Don Aleex, a village shaman, drew from his vast store of centuries-old secret knowledge, shared by Maya shamans across Yucatan, to bring about healing. Well-being was restored.

In this example, divination led to a *santiguar*, which in turn led to a *k'eex*. The rituals can occur sequentially, or they may be embedded within one another. Divination occurs during rain ceremonies, and *santiguars* are performed in the middle of thanksgiving rites, but what may appear confusing to the outsider is in fact well-ordered to the skilled shaman. It is part of a strategy for managing life in a complex

supernatural world.

Maya villagers throughout the peninsula of Yucatan rely on local shamans to mediate between them and the spirit world, where forces beyond ordinary control can bring sickness, cause accidents, and most important, damage the harvest.

There are 600,000 native Mayan-language speakers in Yucatan today, people for whom Mayan is their first language. Corn farming is the principal occupation, using a simple but effective system of cutting the forest, letting it dry, burning, planting, and harvesting. The corn field is central to Maya health and happiness. Rain is the key, and perhaps the shaman's greatest work is the dramatic and theatrical annual rain ceremony. But the village shaman also has day-to-day responsibilities, usually in the form of healings, cleansings, and divination.

In the following pages I discuss six principal types of ritual practice, which I have arranged in order from the simple to the complex, from the one-on-one healing event known as the *santiguar*, to a complex week-long affair in which an entire village is cleansed of evil winds.

As you will see, however, there are few clearly marked or strictly held boundaries between these various classes of ceremonies. The shaman demonstrates his art and skill by elaborating and improvising within basic outlines. Thus, from town to town there is great variation in ritual performance, but the rites revolve around a central theme: the manipulation and orchestration of the Maya spirit world. Spirit beings can be allies or enemies, helpers or pranksters, life givers or death dealers. The shaman helps his fellow villagers travel through this cosmic tangle.

8 **Becoming a shaman**

Most Maya shamans say they learned to become a *j-meen* through divine intervention; either through dreams, being miraculously saved, or through near-death experiences. No doubt these are factors, but there are also mentor-apprentice relationships.

At the *lój kaajtal* ceremony described below I witnessed such an apprentice at work (Figure 1). He was there because he was learning to become a *j-meen*. He prayed, sprinkled *báalche'*, and burned incense at a small *mesa*, all under the direction of Don Es, the recognized town shaman who was performing the same rites at a larger *mesa*.

Once, during my visit to his home, the apprentice showed me a jar of glass marbles. “These are just toys,” he said. “They are not real.” He used them to practice reading the *sáastun*, the famous Maya “crystal ball.” I have even seen a notebook filled with written prayers and recipes for different ritual occasions. A *j-meen* had written the notebook to pass on his knowledge to a student.

I see no evidence of the shaman’s work fading out, even with modernization. I like to quote Robert Redfield, who in 1934 published a classic anthropological description of Maya village life. “In Chan Kom,” he wrote, “we are seeing the last generation of Mayas to practice the indigenous rites and rituals associated with the village shaman.” Now, some eighty years later, people are still saying the practice is rapidly dying out; but from what I see it is not disappearing at all. Only time will tell (Figure 2).

Prayers

The shaman’s prayers, in essence, are long lists of sacred names, including Maya gods, Catholic saints, holy shrines, archaeological sites, and cenotes, or underground water sources. One also names the participants,



Figure 1. A shaman-in-training sprinkles *bálche'* over the *chan mesa*, the small altar, under the direct supervision of Don Espiridión.



Figure 2. A century ago British ethnographer Thomas Gann described rain ceremonies among the Mayas of (then) British Honduras. He could have been describing a twenty-first century *ch'a' cháak* for all the similarities. Illustration from Gann 1917.

the offerings, the day, and the time of day. In the case of the *waajil kool*, one may call out the size of the *milpa* (corn field), for example, sixty *mecates*. Naming is the key. The more inclusive a register of entities, the better the effect.

Almost always the Holy Trinity comes first, for example *tu kili'ich k'aaba' Dios Yuumbil, Dios Meejenbil, Dios Espiritu Santo*, “in the holy name of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.” As an example of naming, in the *waajil kool* prayers from Becanchen, Don Ramón prays:

“I stand here before the *mesa*, I offer these first fruits to . . .” and there follows a recitation of names of *báalamo'ob*, “spirit protectors,” *kanaano'ob*, “guardians,” *iik'o'ob*, “winds,” *meyajo'ob*, “spirit workers,” *jóoyajo'ob*, “waterers,” and *tepal'o'ob*, “rulers.” The offerings themselves are called out: corn drink, fermented honey, bread crumb soup, layered breads, cigarettes, chickens, and turkeys.

Then follow the Catholic saints, first women, then men: Santa Ana, Santa Lucía, Perfecto Socorro, Santa Librada, Santa Asunción, Virgin de Fátima, Virgin de Guadalupe, Santa María, and Santa Marta. The male saints are San Juan Bautista, San Pedro, San Isidro, San Antonio, San José, San Joaquin, San Felipe, San Lorenzo, San Buenaventura, San Francisco, San Dimas, San Martín, San Bernardino, San Miguel

Arcangel, and Niño de Atocha. There are also the regional holy santos: Tres Reyes de Tizimín, San Román Campeche, Santiago Halachó, and Santo Cristo Chumayel.

All the above were named, repeatedly, in proper order to provide protection for Luis Xool, the corn farmer, and his family and his *milpa*. Prayers are long and low, usually just a murmur. The words themselves are holy, *úuchben t'aan*, “ancient speech.” A single prayer can last up to thirty minutes, usually including multiple repetitions of phrases and sections.

Within the prayers are interspersed Mayan phrases that connect the parts together, phrases like *utia'al bakáan xan* that do not translate directly, but when repeated over and over form a liturgical rhythm. The outside participants generally do not listen or try to understand the prayers. They quietly talk among themselves and go about preparing the offerings of food and drink as the *j-meen* focuses on the altar, consecrating it with holy, ancient words.

Blending belief systems

Throughout the towns and villages of Yucatan (and probably in the big cities, too) Maya shamans conduct rites and ceremonies that are outside the purview of the Catholic Church; but this does not mean they are not Catholic. They are. But in a typical small village the Catholic priest may come to town only two or three times a year, usually to perform a wedding ceremony. At that wedding he will baptize the children born since his last visit.

In the priest's absence Catholic ritual continues in the form of evening *novenas*, or prayer singing, in which groups of males sing, in Spanish, from their Catholic song books (Figure 3). Church assistants light

12 candles and incense and place offerings of various drinks on the altar while women and children sit on chairs and benches. After the songs, the men pass in front of the numerous saints on the altar, crossing themselves in reverence before each image. Afterwards, everyone shares the drinks. *Novenas* are also frequently performed in private homes, where women singers often take a lead role.

In towns where evangelists have converted portions of the population to any number of Protestant sects, church life is of course quite different. Since my own fieldwork has been among practicing Catholics, I can only report that aspect of the Maya religious experience.

A good example of how Maya indigenous ritual mixes with Catholicism occurred in a rustic village church when *novena* singers were performing their songs in front of the church altar while the shaman was kneeling beside the altar holding up cups of drink offerings (Figure 4). At a point during the *novena* he went outside and hung his offerings in the trees for the Maya spirits of the fields and forests.

The line between what is “Maya” and what is “Catholic” is not clear, although language is one marker. *Novenas* are in Spanish, but just before the *j-meen* took his offerings outside, the singers switched to Mayan. Mayan is for the agricultural and forest gods, Spanish is for the *santos* on the altars in church and home. The *j-meen* is in charge of the Maya spirit world; the visiting priest and the *novena* singers operate the Catholic one, but the distinction blurs as the two worlds merge.

Syncretism, or mixing of belief systems, follows a pattern today that was established five hundred years ago at the arrival of the Spaniards. The Maya people accepted certain aspects of Catholicism but the Catholic priesthood would not accept the indigenous faith. Today the *j-meen* incorporates Catholic saints in his prayers to the rain gods, but the rain gods would never be mentioned in a Catholic mass (Figure 5). At least the Church no longer persecutes followers of the indigenous ways.



Figure 3. Village singers in their rustic palm thatch church sing Catholic *novenas* during evening services.



Figure 4. Cups of drink offerings are presented to the Catholic saints and then hung outside in a nearby tree for the spirit protectors of the fields and forests.



Figure 5. The holy cross, draped in a white shroud, is incorporated into the *ch'a' cháak* rain ceremony, a strong example of syncretism or blending of belief systems.

16 During the first century of Spanish rule the dominating clergy punished any Mayas found practicing the old customs. In one tragic case of cultural misunderstanding a group of seventeenth-century Maya religious practitioners was making a procession, wearing robes and head-gear similar to ecclesiastic garments. They were accused of mimicking and mocking the Church and were severely punished when, in fact, the Mayas were honoring the Church by adopting some of its attributes. The Church today knows that the Mayas of the forest practice an indigenous form of religion and seems to accept it.

From the beginning of Maya-Spanish contact the religions showed some remarkable parallels, at least in outward appearances. The ancient Mayas walked in religious processions carrying images; Maya priests wore robes, sprinkled holy water, and burned incense. There was a belief in an afterlife and a form of heaven. To this day one of the trickiest questions is which part of Maya ceremonial life comes from Spain and which part is indigenous.

During one *ch'a' cháak*, or rain ceremony, that I witnessed, the Mayas constructed a row of four arches leading from the main *mesa*, or altar, to a small shrine with a holy cross (Figure 6). A student of colonial churches in Yucatan suggested to me that the arches were an imitation of church architecture, creating a sacred space in the forest similar to the high ceilings and sanctuaries in town. On the other hand, we have a description from a sixteenth-century priest, before the Mayas incorporated Spanish religious practices, of a Maya procession passing through a forest trail “adorned with arches.”

Likewise, the symbolic importance of the direction east may or may not come from Catholicism. The Mayas always orient their *mesas*, or ceremonial altars, to the east. But the altars in the Catholic churches—at least in Mexico—face that way, too. In other words, the person standing in front of the altar, facing it, is facing east. Did the Mayas adapt the Catholic way or is the orientation a coincidence? The ancient Mayas



Figure 6. Palm arches define sacred space in the forest clearing. Is this a holdover from Precolumbian times or an influence of the Catholic church? At the base of each arch is a stone seat for the *cháako'ob*, gods of rain, thunder, and lightning.

18 made *báalche'*, a ritual fermented drink; today the *báalche'* is commonly referred to as “*vino*,” apparently in reference to the Catholic ritual wine. Certain breads, baked in the pit ovens along with other ceremonial breads, serve as “host” during a form of communion performed by the village *j-meen* in the absence of Catholic priests (Figure 7). San Isidro is patron saint for the corn farmers and is referred to as lord of the *milpa* (Figure 8). The whole matter of syncretism is worth a book-length treatise.

Individual Mayas perform prayers and services in their homes and with their neighbors, carry out funeral rites, commemorate bereavement anniversaries, gather for baptism ceremonies known as *jéetsméek'*, make offerings in the corn fields for the *aluxo'ob* and *báalamo'ob*, venerate *santos* in their homes, and do innumerable activities that could be called religious. For this discussion, however, I focus on the ceremonies and rites performed by the *j-meeno'ob* of Yucatan, the shamans. These are rites that they alone can run correctly. They possess ancient knowledge of sacred formulae crucial to making events successful.

There is another class of religious ceremony known as the *gremio*, which includes multiple processions with delegations from numerous communities. These are not included in the current work because they are not directly conducted by the *j-meen*, although *j-meeno'ob* play an important role. They are more in line with religious festivals or fiestas than shamanic rituals.

The following rites and rituals, with their myriad variations, are ongoing today throughout the peninsula. Here begins their telling.

***Santiguar*: a simple cleansing**

Santiguars are performed to cleanse people of dangerous and harmful winds. In the Maya view, most sickness comes from winds (consider the word “malaria,” from the Italian *mala aria*, “bad air”), and the



Figure 7. A version of Catholic communion performed as part of the rain ceremony is administered by the village *j-meen* in the absence of Catholic clergy.



Figure 8. San Isidro—saint of the corn fields—carries his hourglass-shaped gourd water bottle, machete, sharpening file, steel-tipped planting stick, axe, gourd cups for mixing *posole*, and rifle.

Maya shaman has the power to exorcise those winds. Strictly translated, *santiguar*, a Spanish word, means to make the sign of the cross on something, but for the Mayas it is a healing ritual in which the shaman prays over his patient while brushing him or her down with sacred, anointed leaves. Sometimes he makes the sign of the cross on the patient and sometimes not, depending on his own practice. Variations are innumerable.

My own first encounter with *santiguars* was in Popola, a small Mayan-speaking village just north of Valladolid. Don Esteban did curings in his palm-thatched home on Tuesdays and Fridays. On one particular day in 1983, as I sat by the door, notebook and camera in hand, a man came complaining of a headache. Don Esteban's altar, in the dark interior at the east end of the house, was ready.

On the altar sat a rustic wooden box with a glass door in front containing five *santos*, or religious statues. The biggest one, at the back and in the center, was the Virgen de Fátima. Forming an arc in front of her, from her left to her right, stood the Virgen de Perfecto Socorro, Corazón de Jesús, Virgen de Guadalupe, and an angel with no particular name. On the wooden table in front of the *santos* were five candle holders, including a clay one in the shape of a bird. Some freshly picked flowers adorned the scene. On one corner stood an empty shot glass.

Don Esteban motioned for the man to sit facing east, toward the altar. He lit candles and poured *aguardiente*, a clear liquor made from sugar cane, into the shot glass (Figure 9). Then he reached down, picked up a piece of folded cloth, and carefully unwrapped a very tiny object. Pinching it between his thumb and forefinger, he dipped it into the liquor. It was called *koj kaan*, "tooth of snake"—a rattlesnake fang!

He methodically pricked the man's neck and shoulder area about a dozen times, placing each fang prick carefully, giving special attention to the lower right side of the neck. Then he put away his rattlesnake fang and applied cane liquor to the man's neck, rubbing it in with his fingers.

22 He then picked up a bundle of *siipilche'* leaves and sprinkled it with the clear cane liquor. *Siipilche'* is a shrub with the peculiar trait that its leaves are arranged like crosses, one leaf pointing up and two leaves pointing out to either side. Over and over within a single bush these cross patterns appear, giving the plant a very sacred quality (Figure 10). The leaves are dark green, small, and rounded, with a small pointed tip. Throughout the peninsula shamans select bundles of these leaves to do purifications and cleansings. Sprinkling the bundles with *aguardiente* gives them added power.

With this purified leafy bundle, standing to the side of the patient, Don Esteban began brushing down the patient's head and shoulders while quietly murmuring prayers (Figure 11). He did this for about two minutes, and then moved to the back of the patient and repeated the brushing and the praying, but this time for about seven minutes.

At the end of each prayer Don Esteban circled the air above the patient's head with the leaves, counterclockwise, and finished with an upward spiraling flourish, as if to draw out sickness from the patient and send it skyward. Then it was over. The patient paid Don Esteban a minimal fee, exchanged a few quiet words, and left.

On subsequent days I witnessed the same performance on a man with pain at the base of his skull, a man with a sore shoulder, and a mother and young daughter who took turns sitting in the chair (Figure 12). In the latter case the little girl was constantly blinking her eyes very hard. Something was seriously bothering her. After he finished doing *santiguar* Don Esteban gave the mother a small bag of leaves, a paper package of medicine, and instructions for their use. The girl was no longer blinking! This was my first indication, occurring early in my days of field work, that these healings really worked.

The mother asked the girl if her eyes hurt. No, she said, meekly. They left together and I watched out the



Figure 9. Don Esteban, in front of his home altar, uses clear cane liquor to purify his healing instruments.



Figure 10. *Stipilche*' has special properties that make it suitable for brushing away sickness.



Figure 11. During a *santiguar* a patient sits in front of the shaman's home altar as he brushes away evil winds with a leafy bundle of *siipilche*'.



Figure 12. A small girl with eye problems receives *santiguar* as well as herbal medicine.

front door, bending to peer under the palm leaves as they disappeared hand-in-hand down the dirt street lined with white-painted rock walls, turning a corner to their home.

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As for the man with the sore shoulder, I know his pain also lessened and his condition improved, because I was that patient.

The basic idea of the *santiguar* is to remove winds, *iik'* in Mayan. The following list was compiled from personal field notes, and in most cases I was able to get an explanation as to their form or their nature. For some, I heard the names in tape recordings and did not have a chance to ask about them.

Partial list of sickness-causing winds

(Remember, the *x* is pronounced like “sh” in English)

x-áakat iik': a wind that skips or hops along the ground, leaping forward in an arcing motion.

búujuka'an iik': a wind that comes down from the sky and injures people.

x-buyut iik': a wind that covers a person's body like a blanket.

x-color iik': three winds—white, black, and red (*sak iik'*, *boox iik'*, *chak iik'*); they are three distinct winds but mentioned as a group.

x-k'oha'an iik': a weak wind, not very strong.

múisib iik': a sweeping wind.

mosoon iik': a whirlwind.

papagayo iik': a wind that comes from high in the sky, strikes people and hurts them, then goes back again, far away to the sky.

pa[u]pa[?] iik': unknown.

x-péepem iik': a wind that moves like a butterfly.

siete machos, siete burros, siete rayas: no explanation given except that they are twenty-one winds.

tankas iik': a spirit or soul wind (all animals have *tankas*) that causes numbness in parts of the body.

x-toj iik': a strong wind that shoots along in a straight line.

x-tuis[?] iik': a wind that moves along the ground somewhat similar to *x-áakat iik'* but instead of hopping or skipping directly forward, each time it rises up it loops back on itself, advancing forward but in a backward-looping fashion.

t'u'ul paach iik': a wind that strikes a person in the back or follows a person.

tulix iik': a wind in the form of a dragonfly; it comes from the forest, from around pools of standing water.

yuyu iik': unknown, possibly in the form of an oriole, *yuyya* or *yúuyum*.

Most commonly a bundle of *siipilche'* works to brush down a patient, but I have also seen *tankas che'* and *ruda* used, two other species of sacred plants (Figure 13). I am sure there are other varieties available. In one case a shaman used a heavy fist-sized object wrapped in a black cloth. When he showed it to me I discovered it was an archaeological piece, a crudely carved jaguar made of limestone.

Santiguars are the most frequently performed healing ceremonies in Yucatan, covering a multitude of minor ailments including stomachaches, headaches, sore throats, and earaches. When the symptoms persist and the *santiguars* do not seem to be working, the shaman needs to divine the underlying cause and proceed to a higher, more complex level of curing. The causes, as understood by the shaman and his patients, are almost always supernatural. To understand them requires divination.



Figure 13. As an alternative to *siipilche'*, the herb *ruda* can be used in *santiguar* cleansings.

30 Divination: reading the signs

Divination is the art of perceiving secret knowledge. The shaman, through mastery of his techniques, sees and interprets information hidden from the uninitiated. Many Maya people rely on divination by shamans to help them understand their world and to receive guidance in their affairs. They come to their shaman with questions like, What is causing my sickness? Which direction should I go to hunt deer? When should I plant corn? At least in some parts of the peninsula divination is called *joots'ik cuenta*, “extract an account,” or “draw out a reading.” Shamans accomplish this with corn kernels, with *sáastuno'ob*, and with other revered objects.

Divination by corn kernels, in its simplest form (if there is such a thing as simple divination), consists of laying out thirteen kernels in a sacred pattern, shuffling the corn together, and drawing out numbers of kernels (Figure 14). Numerology is the key to understanding divination, and thirteen is the holiest of numbers.

Don Es of Xuilub makes two columns on his small wooden altar with three pairs of kernels in each column, making a total of six on the left and six on the right. The thirteenth kernel is the center, called *puksi'ikal*, “heart.” He shuffles them together with his hand and draws out a number. Then he shuffles them all together again and draws out another number. After repeating this three times, all the while praying, he has received inspiration. A divine answer has begun to emerge.

Then he reads his *sáastun* (Figure 15). Most often the *sáastun* is a small glass ball, a marble really; but many other glass objects, often faceted, are also used, such as bottle stoppers and antique glass doorknobs. I remember how disappointed I was when I first saw the glass marbles. Not only were they common playthings—I thought—but they were rather defective, full of air bubbles. Little did I know these bubbles



Figure 14. Shuffling thirteen kernels of maize, Don Es divines supernatural forces at work.



Figure 15. A *sáastun* catches light and flashes it for the shaman to communicate with spirit beings.

played a key role in the shaman's communication with the spirit world.

The Maya use of "crystal balls" is fairly well known, and there is a certain excitement and romanticization by outsiders regarding this practice. But we must take care not to preconceive how they are used, thinking that visions or images appear in them. Fortunately, by working closely with a number of shamans I was finally able to understand—in a beginner's sort of way—what they were looking for as they peered into these glass spheres.

When Don Es uses his *sáastun* he holds the glass ball in front of a candle and watches how the light catches the small bubbles inside (Figure 16). By turning the marble he makes the bubbles cluster in groupings. As with the corn kernels, the numbers hold the answer: three is for the *tres personas* (father, son, and holy spirit), and four is for the *santo wiinklil*, "the holy ones," a generic term for the rain gods or sky gods. By combining the readings from the corn kernels and the *sáastuno'ob*, he makes a meaningful *cuenta*, or account.

In a remote village in Quintana Roo I witnessed a rather spectacular divining session using sixty corn kernels and four *sáastuno'ob*. My friend Damiano from Xuilub had a serious pain in the side of his mouth and decided to visit a *j-meen* other than his own grandfather. He loaned me a bicycle and we rode for half an hour on dirt roads to arrive at San Silverio where Damiano found the house of Don José, a shaman of wide renown.

"Who is he?" asked Don José, nodding his head in my direction. Damiano explained that I studied Itza things, like Chichen Itza and the work of the ancient ones. Don José seemed content with the answer and let me photograph and tape-record.

As Don José led us to his back yard the sun was just setting and the western sky was glowing. He sat at



Figure 16. The air bubbles inside the glass, rather than being imperfections, are key to reading the signs.

a small wooden table with Damiano at one side. The *mesa* had a small wooden cross on the west side, and a large pile of corn kernels with a small cloth bundle on top. He unwrapped the cloth and took out not one *sáastun*, but four! I had never heard of using so many.

First he picked up one of the smaller ones, an amber-colored marble, and placed it between the forefinger and middle finger of his left hand, holding it out at arm's length toward the western horizon. Then he put a small green one beside it, still holding it out toward the sky. With his right hand he slowly turned them and positioned them until they "lighted." Then he positioned a large clear glass marble between his middle finger and his ring finger, and finally put the fourth one below that, between his ring and little finger. He held all four *sáastuno'ób* at arm's length, toward the sky above the horizon, and stared into them intently until he was satisfied.

"Look!" he said to me in Mayan. "See the little holes in the sky?" As I peered closely into the bottom *sáastun*, suddenly the light caught the little bubbles inside and they flashed. "Look!" he repeated. "You can see the angels." "*Ti' aan te' ka'an elo'*" (there they are in the sky). "This is how they speak to me. They are near. Their word comes down. The spirit makes a blessing, makes salvation. The holy ones make a sign and then READY!"

Damiano explained to me that the *santo wiinklil*, or holy beings, communicate through the *sáastun* from a great distance—all the way from the sky. Peering into the *sáastun* is actually "seeing" the sky. When the *sáastun* lights, Don José has received his "sign." He is sanctioned and empowered by the sky beings. Now he can read the kernels.

He immediately started shuffling kernels of corn and praying. He shuffled them fast and hard, back and forth, in the middle of the table. Suddenly he stopped, made the sign of the cross over the pile, pulled out

36 about half the kernels, and set them to one side. From the remaining pile in the center he began pulling out bunches of five. Five, five, five, five, and one left over. He put the one left over at the top of the table to his left. Then he combined all the kernels together and started shuffling and praying again. He stopped, crossed the pile, and divided it in half.

From the remaining half he again pulled out bunches of five. Five, five, five, and four left over. These four he put at the top, to the right of the one. He repeated this process four more times until across the top he had a one, four, one, two, one, and a five. On the seventh repetition he did the same thing again except when he pulled out the clusters of five he arranged them along the bottom of the table from his left to his right. After four bunches of five there were two left over, which he placed above, completing the arc of numbers across the top. *Siete puntos*, seven points, he explained.

That still left the half pile in the middle. From this pile he also pulled bunches of five and placed them along the bottom in line with the other fives. Finally, there were three left over. He put these three in the middle. When all was done, he had eight fives across the bottom, a small pile of three in the middle, and an arc across the top reading one, four, one, two, one, five, and two.

As I recorded this in my notebook, counting along with Don José, a shiver ran through my body as I realized I was making bars and dots that looked like ancient Maya numbers—bars for fives, dots for ones!

Don José looked at his *sáastuno'ob* again, and then proceeded to give Damiano a reading based on the seven *puntos*. He talked back and forth with Damiano asking him about his pain and how long he had had it. He told Damiano to come back tomorrow and bring certain numbers of leaves of various herbs and three eggs. The numbers across the top of the table helped him decide how many of which remedies to bring the next day.

Don José borrowed my flashlight and went into the darkening forest to get some plant medicine. He came back with a green sprig, broke it open, and put drops of sticky white sap directly on Damiano's tongue. As we left, Damiano said his mouth felt better. Tomorrow he would return to complete his healing, following instructions divined by Don José.

There is another method of divination that I have seen only once in Yucatan, but I have heard that it is used as far away as Guatemala and the Mexican state of Guerrero. I suspect it is employed all over Central and North America. It is from a book called *Oráculo novísimo o sea el libro de los destinos*, a book of oracles. The copy I saw was published in Mexico City in 1950.

Three men came to the house of Don Esteban, the village *j-meen* mentioned earlier, who performed *santiguars* in Popola. They looked as though they had come a long way on foot, probably on a forest trail. They were very concerned about a sick woman back at their village. They spoke intently to Don Esteban before the *j-meen* took down from a shelf an old frayed book wrapped in newspaper.

Carefully opening it, he unfolded a large page of figures that almost covered the table (Figure 17). The page was filled with rows and columns of images, in some ways similar to tarot cards, with cups, swords, skulls, and numerous other icons.

Don Esteban instructed one of the men to circle his hand over the table three times counterclockwise, and then drop his hand down with an outstretched forefinger so that it landed on an image. After he did this Don Esteban opened the text and read the appropriate passage. He did this three times in all, and then a long discussion followed.

Don Esteban went out the back door and returned wrapping something in newspaper, making a small



Figure 17. Don Esteban consults a book of oracles in the same way his Maya ancestors consulted the hieroglyphic codices.

package that he put on the altar. He then took out a small clean white cloth and put it, too, on the altar. He proceeded to pray over the objects and sprinkle them with *aguardiente*. Then he folded the cloth and handed it and the package to the three men and gave them detailed instructions on how to use them, based in part on information gained from the Book of Oracles.

The men paid Don Esteban and left to go back to their village. Three days later they returned with the sick woman so that Don Esteban could perform a proper healing for her.

After years of observing the practice of divination in Yucatan, I began to understand the connection to the ancient past.

Maya codices, or painted hieroglyphic books, were used to divine good and bad auguries for days and events. Filled with images of gods, hieroglyphic phrases, and sacred numbers, the ancient Maya books guided the priests, giving divine prescriptions for correct performance on ritual occasions. The codices named the type and number of offerings for proper ceremonial observances in Precolumbian times just as the *siete puntos* of Don José, the seven piles of corn kernels in an arc across the *mesa*, told the modern diviner—descendant of the ancient Itza—how many leaves of herbs to use, how many eggs to bring the next day, and how many days to take the medicines.

In both cases—the modern diviner with his *sáastun* and corn kernels and the ancient Maya priest with his hieroglyphic books—the instructions come from the invisible world of gods and spirits residing in the sky. Divine guidance is made manifest to the religious specialist through his holy instruments so he may convey the hidden messages to his fellows.

40 *K'eex*: payment to the underworld

Don Mech was a great and humble *j-meen*. When I knew him he lived at Chac Neh, a small settlement deep in the Quintana Roo forest, on the ancient raised-stone highway leading west from Coba. A narrow footpath takes the traveler along the 1000-year-old causeway, away from the tourist center and its surrealistic Club Med hotel (where visitors cannot open their windows because the rooms are sealed shut against snakes, scorpions, poisonous centipedes, and all else that the dark jungle offers). In 1983 a diesel-fueled generator powered this ultra-modern edifice amidst a town with no electricity and no running water, a palm-thatch settlement of Mayan-speaking corn farmers.

But within a bare 100 meters the dense foliage muffles the roar of the generator, and the trail, like hundreds of thousands of other trails in Yucatan, becomes a narrow artery to the corn fields and bee hives, a back road to neighboring habitations, a trail only for the locals.

Demetrio, or Don Mech, invited me to come to Chac Neh on a Friday in January to follow him to a night-time *k'eex*, a complex healing ritual in which payment is made to the underworld and evil winds are transferred from a person and his household to the earth and the jungle. *K'eex* translates as “exchange” or “transfer.” From Chac Neh we walked some seven kilometers to Coba village for a curing and healing ceremony at a rustic native household almost in the shadow—and behind the high back wall—of the Club Med.

Before leaving his tiny *ranchería*, or settlement, at Chac Neh, Don Mech selected a bundle of *siipilche'* branches from a bush growing in his yard, and from another, *xi'imche'*. I have already mentioned *siipilche'* used in bundles during *santiguars*. *Xi'imche'* is also a shrub, but the leaves are longer and narrower and come to a fine point at the end. *Xi'imche'* leaves are often used to cover a *mesa* before laying out offerings

and to dip into and sprinkle holy drinks during ceremonies. All along the way from Chac Neh to Coba Don Mech stopped frequently to show me shrubs and trees whose leaves had medicinal and spiritual properties. Nighttime came as we reached the town.

A concerned father, sitting on a low bench in back of his house, cradled his sick baby girl as Don Mech set to work. By candlelight he fashioned a rough basket from strips of bark and into this he placed his bundle of *siipilche'*.

Someone passed him a live chicken. Deftly holding the chicken's body in one hand and its neck and head with the other, he struck the child with the chicken nine times sharply on the head (Figure 18). Then he went inside the house and, moving in the dim candlelight, struck each of the four main support posts another nine times. As he brought the chicken back outside, it died in his hands and he passed it over to a waiting family member. He repeated this with a second chicken and then he took two raw eggs and tapped them on the child's head, again nine times, and did the same with the house posts. This time when he emerged from the house he put the eggs in the bark-strip basket with the bundle of leaves (Figure 19).

In the darkness of the yard family members began the process of cooking the chickens, all by candlelight, setting a large iron cauldron over an improvised three-stone hearth, kindling a fire underneath. Don Mech focused on the child, who desperately needed a cleansing of evil winds. An elaborate *santiguar* was in order.

Into a small ceramic cup Don Mech poured *aguardiente*, that clear cane liquor with power to cleanse. Then he broke open a cigarette and stirred tobacco into the cup with the liquor, making a dark brown solution. He sprinkled some of the tobacco and liquor mix on his bundle of leaves, then he and the father each took a small drink of straight liquor from the bottle. The father held the child while Don Mech lit a cigarette and began a long low murmuring prayer, brushing the child down with the anointed leaves,

42 frequently sweeping the bundle down the length of the child's right arm.

From his bundle of *siipilche*' he then selected two or three leaves, dipped them in the tobacco mix, and rubbed the damp leaves in the sign of tiny crosses all over the child's body; first on her chest, then her arms and hands, in the crooks of her elbows, behind the knees, on the ankles, the bottoms of the feet, and on her back (Figure 20). Intermittently he blew puffs of tobacco smoke at various places on her body. This process of sanctification he repeated three times, then the crumpled leaves went back into the basket.

The atmosphere relaxed, bottles of Coca-Cola were passed around, and preparations got under way for the next phase of the *k'eex*. The basket became the central focus of activity as one of Don Mech's helpers brought in a large unopened flower from a nearby banana tree. It was about ten inches long, somewhat pear-shaped, a light lavender color. Don Mech carefully wrapped it in newspaper and nestled it among the leaves in the basket. This, he told me, was the baby—an effigy in our terms. Then he wrapped fourteen coins, *reales*, he said, and put them in the basket. He cut a candle into seven pieces, wrapped them up, and likewise placed them in the basket (Figure 21).

Don Mech carefully explained to me, in his broken Spanish, that the coins and the candles are payments to the ancient ones who live in the earth, so they will allow us to pass on the trails and roads. The ones who came before, he said, were bad people. They did not have God's mandate, they did not believe in God, yet still today they are the proprietors of the underworld. We need to make invocations to them, we must offer them food. If we do not do this, we will encounter spirits in the night and they will cause harm to our bodies.

After finishing our Cokes, Don Mech, two other men, and I got up and walked out back, away from the yard and into the forest about fifty yards. By candlelight, at Don Mech's direction, the two men dug a hole



Figure 18. A chicken, tapped nine times on the head of a protesting young girl, draws sickness out.



Figure 19. A basket of offerings is prepared for keepers of the underworld.



Figure 20. Don Mech crosses the young girl's feet with *siipilche'* leaves, performing *santiguar* as part of a larger, nighttime healing ritual.



Figure 21. Seven small candles go into the offering basket.

in the ground about a foot and a half wide and one foot deep, for what purpose I had no idea. We returned to the house where the *aguardiente* was passed around before he added some more to the little cup with tobacco. The chickens were cooking in the outdoor pot and the pat-pat-pat from inside the house told me tortillas were taking shape.

I asked Don Mech to describe a *báalam*, a spirit protector. They are four in number, he said, and they reside in four places. They make whistling sounds. They guard us and care for us and provide us food. They are powers of God. I asked about ceremonies and sacred breads. *X-noj waaj*, “great bread,” is for *jaanlil kool* and *ch’a’ cháak*. *Chok’ob* is the breadcrumb soup, and *jo’oche’* is the main offering to God in the *ch’a’ cháak*.

I talked to Don Mech about a *waajil kool* I had witnessed some years before in Becanchen and how the offerings were all laid out in numbers of thirteen. But there should have been fourteen, he said. “The fourteenth one is for the *aluxo’ob*,” the forest goblins and caretakers of the ruins. I read him some prayers I had transcribed from Becanchen as he listened intently. By around 9:30 the food was done and preparations began for the main event.

Attention focused once again on the basket with the effigy child. It contained the “child,” the fourteen coins, the seven candles, and the eggs that had been tapped on the child’s head. To these he now added a can filled with all the inedible chicken parts. Don Mech and his helpers carried this along with a number of other items back out the trail behind the house.

About halfway to where we had dug the hole, we stopped. He tied a rope across the trail from one branch to another about five feet off the ground, from which he suspended four pairs of food offerings, each pair consisting of one bowl with boiled chicken and a stack of tortillas, and a second bowl with the white corn drink *saka’*. A single long-pointed leaf of *xi’imche’* protruded from the rings holding the bowls (Figure 22).

48 He counted the stacks of tortillas carefully. Facing the offerings, with one's back to the house, the tortillas from right to left numbered twelve, thirteen, nine, and eight (Figure 23). First is thirteen, Don Mech explained, for God; then nine is for the Virgin. Twelve is for the apostles, and eight is for Kanul, or Báal, Báalam. I found out later that each pair of bowls was for a world direction. In his mind, he was placing the offerings to the east, north, west, and south. To the outside observer they hung in a line.

Don Mech laid the basket on the damp, leafy ground, not directly below the food offerings, but a little to one side. He unwrapped the seven candles that were in the basket and carefully arranged them around the basket, four on one side, three on the other. He put the eggs in the can with the chicken parts and set it at the head, to the south (Figure 24). The cup of liquor and tobacco sat on the other end, to the north.

Underneath the hanging food offerings he laid down a small board to serve as a candle holder, arranging five full-sized long candles so that four stood in a row, along the same line as the offerings hanging above, and one candle stood to the south, by itself. Four candles for God, he told me later, and one for Kanul, Báal, to the south.

Don Mech dipped his bundle of *siipilche'* in the tobacco and liquor solution and started to pray over the basket. He called up the father of the child to stand by him. In a low, almost inaudible murmur, he finished praying over the basket and then stood up, moving very close to the hanging offerings, facing them. Standing motionless with his head down, his lips barely moving, he prayed continuously for the next thirty minutes, a remarkable feat of non-stop oration (Figure 25).

As the candles burned low in the deep forest darkness, the praying finally stopped. At the food offerings suspended across the trail Don Mech took a single leaf of *xi'imche'* and dipped it in each bowl. He took down the bowl with the eight tortillas first, handing it to a helper. He took down the others in order, from right



Figure 22. Long, pointed *xi'imche'* leaves protrude from each ring, where offerings will soon be seated.



Figure 23. Don Mech carefully arranges food and drink for the ensuing prayers.



Figure 24. The child effigy wrapped in newspaper is laid on the ground with the eggs and chicken parts in the can at its head.



Figure 25. When all is arranged, Don Mech recites a long set of quiet prayers.

to left, or north to south. He pulled out the *xi'imche'* leaves, one at a time, and squeezed them together, putting them in a bundle under a tree.

His helpers untied the rope and carried all the bowls back to the house, leaving Don Mech and me alone on the forest trail with barely flickering candlelight allowing me to record the scene. When the men returned, Don Mech gave us all a good brushing down with *siipilche'* freshly dipped in *aguardiente*. One at a time, he motioned us to step forward, where he gently turned us around counterclockwise as he counted the number of turns and passed the cleansing leaves over our bodies.

He instructed each of us to light a cigarette as he kneeled down and gathered together the basket with the effigy child, chicken parts, eggs, coins, and the remains of the seven short candles. Carrying the basket, Don Mech led our small procession through the darkness, with cigarettes burning, to the spot in the forest where we had previously dug the hole. Into the hole, unceremoniously, everything went (Figure 26). Within a blink the men pushed the dirt over the whole assortment, burying it forever as sacred payment to the lords of the underworld.

Quietly, without fanfare, we left our offering to the earth spirits and traveled back toward the house. The remains of the five tall candles were still burning at the trail site. As the men blew them out and picked them up, they talked fervently about how they burned, which ones were shorter than the others, and which ones burned evenly. These were signs in their own right, full of significance and meaning.

At almost midnight, our task accomplished, we went to the house where bowls of delicious chicken soup and piles of tortillas awaited our consumption. The same food that just minutes before had been offered to the spirits was now providing human sustenance (Figure 27).

Did the child get better? I do not know. I never returned to that particular household, and my work with

54 Don Mech was coming to a close. But I suspect she did. So much had been done for her. First Don Mech drew bad winds out of her and gathered them in the basket. Then he cleansed the entire house by tapping the four supporting posts with chickens and eggs. He sanctified the child with leaves and signs of the cross. He made food offerings to the night spirits on the trail and payments of candles and coins to the earth. All that was harmful in the house and in the child's body was transferred—the true meaning of *k'eex*—back to the earth, accomplishing a thorough and properly executed cleansing of destructive energies. How could she not improve?

I began this chapter by saying that Don Demetrio was a great and humble *j-meen*. Wide-ranging was his knowledge and famous were his skills. I say humble because he gave all credit to God.

He talked to me one night at his home in Chac Neh. "A little *chile*, a little *jicama*, a little *calabasa*, *camote*, and *macal*: all that I plant multiplies," he said. "Plenty is my food, rich is my life, because every day I work for God."

Don Mech passed away in the early 1990s. He had moved back to Coba by then, leaving his homestead on the old Maya causeway. His contributions were vast.

There are many simpler forms of *k'eex*, but they almost always involve a transference of sickness from the patient to chickens or eggs. One *j-meen* explained to me that when he used eggs they served the same function as chickens, taking their place in the ritual. A point of high drama occurs after circling or brushing the patient with the chickens. The bird expires, dying right there in the hands of the *j-meen*, after having absorbed the sickness from the patient. Then the chicken or chickens are boiled and prepared as food offerings, often set on *mesas* with variously numbered stacks of tortillas. As for the eggs, they are thrown



Figure 26. Sickness extracted from the child, and offerings to the underworld, are buried in the forest floor.



Figure 27. At midnight, after the healing rites are completed, the participants dine.

into the forest, smashed against the ground, or buried, as in the case at Coba.

The simplest *k'eex* I ever saw was in fact done on me. At one point during an elaborate rain ceremony in a forest clearing, a shaman motioned me to come over to the *mesa* and he brushed me down with an egg. Then he gave it to me to throw away. As I reached out my hand to take the egg, he said “No! Use your left hand.” The right hand is for sacred things, the left hand is for contaminated objects. I took the egg in my left hand and inquired what to do. He pointed, “Just go out into the forest and throw it away,” which I did. What he had accomplished was in fact a minor *k'eex* imbedded within all the complexities of a rain ceremony. He did not want me tainting the event with bad winds I might be bringing to the service.

Wajil kool/jaanlil kool: feast of the corn field

My first opportunity to witness an indigenous Maya ceremony, as mentioned in the dedication, was in 1978. I recorded the event and published it in 1984 in *Estudios de Cultura Maya*. Later, at the University of California at Los Angeles it became my Master's thesis. I am describing it here again because it is an excellent example of Maya agricultural ceremonies known as *wajil kool*, or *jaanlil kool*, “bread of the *milpa*” or “food of the *milpa*.” *Milpa*, as mentioned earlier, is the corn field—*kool* in Mayan. These rituals are also sometimes called *primicias*, or first fruits ceremonies, in which food from the corn field is given to the gods. They are a form of thanksgiving.

I wish to take this opportunity to correct a very serious error I made in my 1984 publication. I said the shaman was responsible for conducting “non-Christian agricultural ceremonies.” I mistakenly thought there was a clear dichotomy between the Catholic rituals and the indigenous ones. I am sure Don Ramón, the town shaman and a devout practicing Catholic, would be aghast if he heard his ceremonies described as

58 non-Christian. I was wrong to call them that.

The *waajil kool* I am about to describe took place in Becanchen, in the southern interior of the state of Yucatan, near the point where Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatan all come together. On the day before the ceremony Don Ramón, the town *j-meen*, made a pot of *báalche'*, a sacred drink of fermented honey that has come down from ancient times (Figure 28).

First he filled a pot half-full with water, then he broke up some cinnamon and dropped it into the water. Then he added anise seeds and more cinnamon, followed by about a liter of honey, almost filling the pot. He stirred the mixture with a piece of *báalche'* bark and added three pieces of bark to the mixture. He brought it to a boil on his gas stove, then covered it and allowed it to cool. He informed me that fermentation now began. The brew sat until used the next day.

As I began observing at 7 AM on the day of the ceremony, preparations were under way in both the house and the yard of Luis Xool, a young corn farmer who was hosting the event. In the back yard three men were clearing brush with their short, hooked machetes (Figure 29). In one cleared area a table had been set to serve as the *mesa*. It was placed against a young tree so that the thin trunk was on the east side of the table. To this tree, facing the *mesa*, a crucifix was tied. On the table was the pot of *báalche'*, a cup, a pack of cigarettes, and two candles.

From the cleared area around the *mesa* a short path led to a larger clearing where the pit oven would be located. Someone brought in a domestic turkey. Don Ramón poured *báalche'* down its throat, thus sanctifying it before hanging it from a nearby tree (Figure 30). Two men cut out its tongue and as it bled to death they collected its blood in a small pail containing half a cup of salt. Helpers brought over four chickens and gave each one *báalche'* before wringing its neck. The sacred drink purified the offerings,



Figure 28. *Báalche'* is prepared with *báalche'* bark and other ingredients the day before the *waajil kool* ceremony.



Figure 29. Early in the morning, ceremonial space is cleared in the family yard.

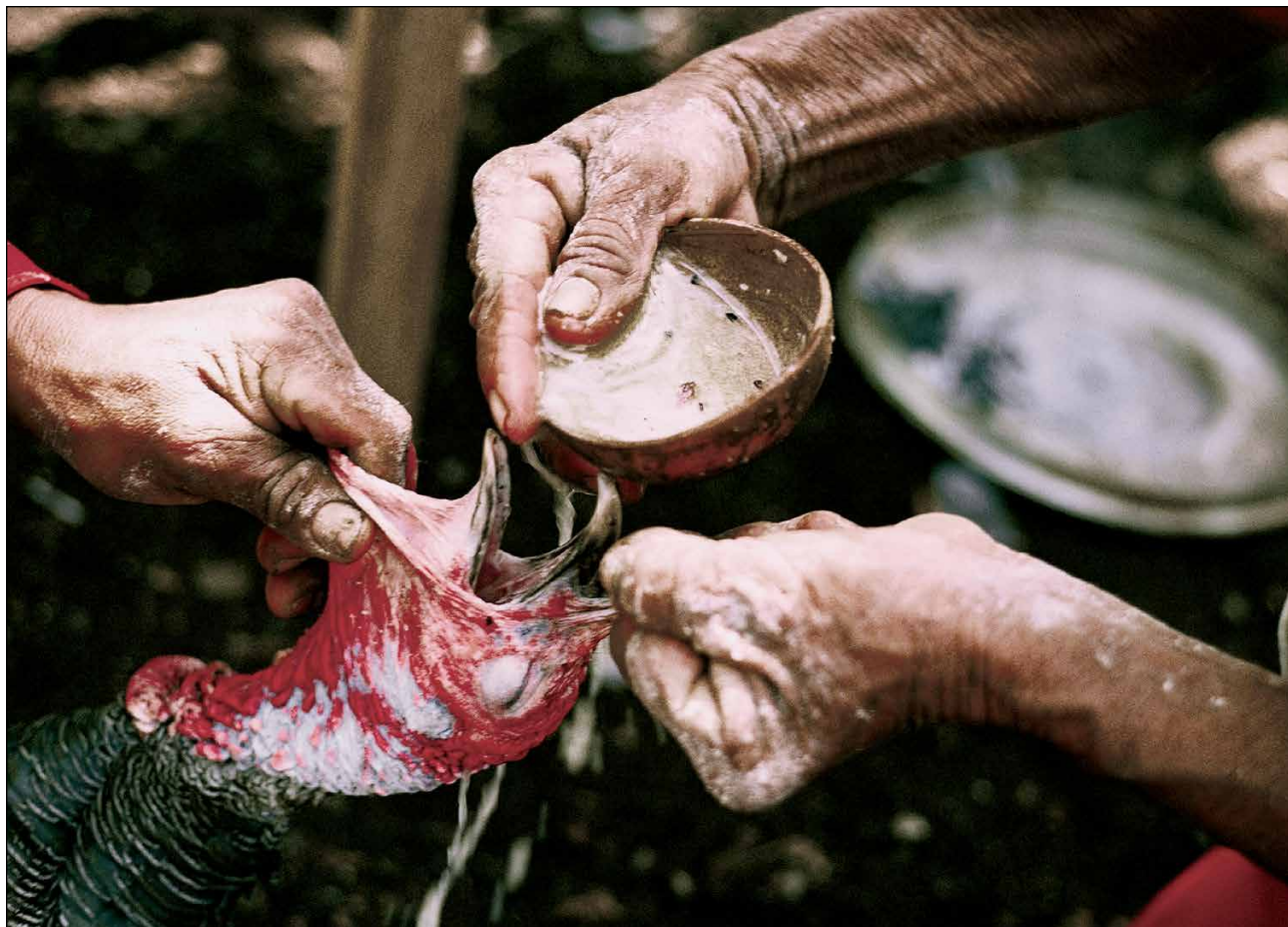


Figure 30. Turkeys and chickens are purified with sacred drink prior to sacrifice.



Figure 31. The turkey's blood, in the red pail, is used in the food preparation.

making them fit for the gods, or holy beings. The fowl were then taken to the house to be prepared for butchering.

For the next couple of hours about twenty men and women were involved in preparations (Figure 31). I could not observe all the activities, but some of them were as follows: they dipped the fowl in boiling water, plucked them, singed them over an open fire, then skinned and butchered them. They collected the feet of the birds in a pile and put the heads in a pot.

As the men continued digging the *piib*, or pit oven, they made a pile of stones as they removed them. Other men brought kindling and large logs to the area. Others brought green leafy branches. Women were busy at the house rolling up balls of *masa* and preparing the soup (Figure 32). They were also making *saka'*, the ritual corn drink.

Don Ramón took thirteen cigarettes from a package on the *mesa* and placed them in a pile under the crucifix. He made thirteen rings out of vines that would support cups on the *mesa* and arranged them in order. Frequently Don Ramón went to the various centers of activity to direct and instruct the participants. He also supervised the placement of my tape recorder under the *mesa* and fastened the microphone to the front, where he would be standing.

In the house area some men were heating long thick leaves over an open fire. They flattened the warm leaves and stacked them to be used later to wrap breads (Figure 33). Others were pulling long strips from other leaves to be used for tying the wrapped breads. At about mid-morning a pot of *saka'* was brought to the *mesa* and Don Ramón put cups in all the rings. He poured *báalche'* into the four corner cups and *saka'* in the remaining nine, making a total of thirteen. A few men came and sat near the *mesa* while others continued their work.



Figure 32. Chickens and turkeys go into the soup—key food offerings in the upcoming ceremony.



Figure 33. Special leaves are heated and flattened to be used later.



Figure 34. Lighted incense marks the opening prayer.

Don Ramón instructed a man, his assistant throughout the day, to light two candles and set them on the ground near the thin tree that held the crucifix. The assistant then lit incense that he held in a small open pan (Figure 34) and I was instructed to turn on the tape recorder for the opening prayer (Figure 35).

As the first prayer of the day began, the men in the area removed their hats; but otherwise there was no apparent attitude of solemnity or special reverence among the several men casually squatting or sitting in the area of the *mesa*. They chatted informally and smiled at my picture-taking while Don Ramón prayed.

He prayed standing before the *mesa*, facing east. His assistant moved the burning incense all about the legs of the *mesa*. At one point Don Ramón dipped the *báalche*' drink from the pot and sprinkled it in the air in four directions. At the end of the prayer he kneeled and spoke silently with his head bowed. Then he leaned forward and gently kissed the *mesa*.

After praying, Don Ramón distributed *báalche*' among all the men present and we all drank a little. The candles remained lit and soon the second prayer began. At a point during this prayer Don Ramón sprinkled the corn drink in the four directions (Figure 36). The incense was always burning, and again at the end there was the kneeling, the silent prayer, and the kiss. After this, he passed the corn drink around.

There was no formality. Men came to drink and left. Don Ramón poured the cups of *saka*' and *báalche*' from the *mesa* back into their respective pots, then invited me down to the house. Someone brought the pot of corn drink for the women and children to drink.

Near the back patio the soup was boiling and gaining color. Inside, the women were rolling balls of *masa* and flattening them into tortilla-like patties, but thicker (Figure 37). They passed them to the men who were making the ceremonial breads on clean mats. They made them as follows: First, they laid out four leaves (from the pile of leaves that had been heated and flattened) on the floor in an interlocking manner.



Figure 35. *Báalche'* in the corners and nine cups of *saka'* make thirteen drink offerings.



Figure 36. Don Ramón tosses drink offerings to the four directions.



Figure 37. Women prepare the corn dough patties to be assembled by the males into bread offerings.

Onto this they laid the first patty. They covered it with a spread of squash seed paste, *sikil*, made from the seeds of the calabash gourd (Figure 38). Over this they laid another and also covered it with the brown paste. In this way they built up the bread with layers of flattened *masa* and squash seed paste.

The first bread had thirteen layers. This was special, they said, it was for Dios. All the other breads consisted of twelve layers. After all the layers were in place one of the helpers made four depressions in the form of a square with his finger on top of the rounded mass. They called these *u yich waaj*, “the eyes of the bread” or “the face of the bread” (Figure 39). Into each hole they poured a little sacred fermented honey (Figure 40). Then they plugged the “eyes” with *masa* and spread squash seed paste over the top.

They wrapped the leaves tightly around the bread and tied it with the strips they had previously prepared (Figure 41). Making the bread loaves lasted about an hour and a half. The women were busy rolling the balls of *masa*, flattening them, and passing them to the men. The pile of wrapped, uncooked bread grew to about three dozen loaves.

Occasionally Don Ramón passed around small quantities of *báalche'* to drink. During this same period a man made what he called a *j-weech*, or armadillo, from thirteen balls of *masa* wrapped in leaves in such a way as to resemble an armadillo with protruding ears and a long thin tail, tied together with leaf strips (Figure 42). I found out later that the armadillo was a perfect instrument to carry offerings to the spirit world because it has nine stripes on its body, a sacred number. Thirteen and nine are the two most powerful and holy numbers in Maya counting, still true today as it was a thousand years ago.

Final preparations were under way at the pit oven. Into the pit men put kindling, then larger branches of dry wood, then logs. Onto this they placed all the stones they had removed when they dug the pit. Just before noon Don Ramón lit the fire. As it burned and consumed the logs the heated stones settled into the



Figure 38. *Sikel* paste is spread between each layer.



Figure 39. The “eyes of the bread” are pressed into the final layer.



Figure 40. *Báalche'* goes into each depression, which is then plugged with *sikal*.



Figure 41. The breads are individually wrapped.



Figure 42. An armadillo holds thirteen balls of corn dough, a special offering.

pit among the glowing coals (Figure 43).

When all the breads and the armadillo were wrapped and ready, the men took them to the pit and placed them among the hot stones (Figure 44). Then they covered the breads and the hot rocks with branches of green leaves. On top of this they laid some corrugated steel roofing sheets. The soil that had earlier been removed from the pit was then shoveled onto the sheets, sealing the pit, creating an airtight oven.

There followed a period of relaxation as the breads baked and the soup simmered. As people came and went they shared the corn drink, passing around the cup. Most of the men sat in the area of the *mesa*, chatting and smoking cigarettes, but people also came and went freely in the yard and the house.

An hour and a half later, when Don Ramón decided the bread was done, the yard got active again as men began to uncover the pit oven. Don Ramón removed the vine rings from the *mesa*, hung them on a nearby tree, and began rearranging the table. His helper brought three more candles and arranged them with the other two on the ground under the crucifix. Men removed the breads from among the hot rocks with the help of long wooden poles. They unwrapped them on the spot and spread them out to cool on a large cloth. They collected the thirteen balls of *masa* from the armadillo in a pail and carried everything over to the *mesa*.

Don Ramón placed the special bread with thirteen layers on the east side of the table under the crucifix, a little south of center (Figure 45). He piled the thirteen balls of the armadillo on top of a twelve-layered bread near the crucifix a little to the north. On top of this pile he put certain turkey parts. He put the severed feet of the turkey near the center and placed the thirteen cigarettes beside them.

Six ceramic bowls were set on the *mesa* into which Don Ramón put cooked turkey and chicken meat.



Figure 43. As flames consume the firewood, heated rocks collapse into the pit.



Figure 44. The wrapped breads go in among the rocks.



Figure 45. The large thirteen-layer bread sits at the head of the *mesa*.

The large pot of soup was carried over from the house. Don Ramón then poured soup into each bowl over the meat and arranged the bowls on the *mesa*, three on the north side, three on the south.

Several men gathered around the pile of cooked breads on the cloth on the ground and began breaking them up, creating a large pile of crumbs. Don Ramón's helper lit the five candles and began passing burning incense around and about the *mesa*. I was instructed to turn on the tape recorder and the third prayer began. It was 3:10 PM.

Men continued working on the breads on the ground as the praying proceeded. Again at the end of the prayer Don Ramón kneeled, spoke silently, and made a kissing motion toward the *mesa*. Following the prayer, the men finished breaking up the breads, after which they poured the large pile of crumbs into the pot of soup (Figure 46). Hearts, livers, and heads from the butchered fowl were added and the mixture was thoroughly stirred with a pole, making a very thick soup known as *k'ool*.

Don Ramón filled seven cups with the newly made *k'ool* and arranged them on the *mesa*, adding them to the six bowls left in place from the previous prayer, again making a total of thirteen. Then he set another bowl of *k'ool* in front of him to use for sprinkling to the four directions. The candles were still burning. Don Ramón's helper once again lit the incense and the fourth and final prayer began.

Part way into this prayer Don Ramón gestured to the pile of thirteen cigarettes, then paused and distributed them to those present. Some lit them, some did not. Near the end he kneeled for a short time while praying, then stood up again and sprinkled *k'ool* in four directions about the *mesa* (Figure 47). At the conclusion, he called over Luis Xool, the *milpa* farmer and head of the household, and instructed him to say his *promesa*, or pledge (Figure 48). Luis repeated the words of Don Ramón, gesturing over the *mesa*, offering himself and the foods on the table to the great right hand of God. When Luis finished, the praying was



Figure 46. The unlayered breads are broken into crumbs and added to the soup.



Figure 47. Bread crumb soup goes out to the four directions.



Figure 48. Luis Xool, the young head of household, stands by as Don Ramón says his final prayers.

done.

The food on the *mesa* was passed out to the men gathered in the area. The remaining *k'ool* in the pot was taken to the house area and distributed. There was plenty to eat for all. An estimated forty people, including women and children, consumed the food prepared that day. Don Ramón ate along with everyone else.

As people were finishing their meal, Don Ramón went to the dying fire pit and sprinkled *báalche'* in the form of a cross on the cooling stones. Then he went back and briefly gestured and spoke silently over the *mesa*. As people began cleaning up in the house and the yard, Don Ramón took down his crucifix and motioned to me to get my tape recorder and notebook.

As we left the yard of Luis Xool late that afternoon, Don Ramón bade me good-bye and departed up a side street to his house. His work for the day was done. Corn, squash, honey, chickens, turkeys, incense, and tobacco: the fruits of nature and the products of agriculture had been offered to the spirit beings—both Precolumbian and Catholic—as gestures of thanks and payments for protection. The Xool family had completed its obligations to the supernatural world, thus assuring a good harvest and a year without sickness.

Several years later I went to Hopelchen, in the state of Campeche on the west side of the peninsula, for the express purpose of learning how widespread these agricultural ceremonies were. I knew they were performed in Yucatan and Quintana Roo, but I had not heard of any in Campeche.

Within three days of arriving in Hopelchen I was attending a *waajil kool* in the nearby town of Ich Ek. I observed some interesting variations there. When they made *saka'*, the white corn drink, for instance, they added nine ground-up cacao beans. They wrapped the loaves in palm leaves, suggesting that perhaps the

86 leaves for wrapping the bread did not have to be a particular kind, that people could use whatever worked.

I witnessed the shaman at one point striking his own bare legs with sharp thorns (I did not get an explanation for this). They made no *báalche'* for this *waajil kool*, and early in the morning, before the *aguardiente* arrived, the *j-meen* used bottled beer to sprinkle over the pit oven.

In one of the most unusual variations, when some of the first breads were laid out on the *mesa*, the shaman lined up four girls on the south side and four boys on the north side and tapped their heads with a small bundle of previously-mentioned *ruda*, a medicinal plant. The children left before the main prayers began.

The variations on the *waajil kool* or *jaanlil kool* are endless, but they revolve around the central theme of food offerings to the gods in exchange for protection. Unlike the *santiguar* and the *k'eex* that are for individuals, these ceremonies are for families and households. Spirits of the sky, forest, water holes, and sacred shrines are invoked and supplicated. Offerings are laid out on *mesas*, arranged in patterns based on sacred numbers and world directions.

The shaman, the specialist who knows the proper prayers, invites the spirit beings to partake. The corn farmer, thus fulfilling his duty, feels assured and protected during the months ahead as he benefits from the help and sustenance provided to him by the invisible forces that shape his life. The shaman, as the practitioner who best understands these forces, entreats and appeases them on the farmer's behalf, providing security and contentment in an otherwise risky and often menacing world.

***Ch'a' cháak*: bringing rain**

Ch'a' cháak means to get rain or acquire rain. The *cháako'ob* are some of the most enduring gods in the ancient Maya pantheon. They date back at least 2000 years in Maya art and have their antecedents in Olmec religion. Today they survive as the personifications of thunder, lightning, and rain. Thus there are many *cháako'ob*, and only the shaman knows how to address them and petition them.

A misconception widely held by outsiders is that the Mayas perform ceremonies only in times of drought. During one of my visits to Yucatan a non-Maya local told me I was out of luck as far as rain ceremonies were concerned because there had been plenty of rain that year and the Mayas would not be performing the *ch'a' cháak* that summer. In actuality, based on my experience the *ch'a' cháak* is an annual event held during the summer rainy season, drought or no drought.

The rainy season begins in late May or early June, and as the first signs of rain appear the Maya farmers plant their *milpas* in corn, beans, squash, and numerous other food crops. The quality of life in a Maya village absolutely depends on the health of the corn field, and without irrigation of any kind, good rains are essential. The rain ceremony is a village-wide affair performed for the well-being of the whole town.

One early morning in July, 1991, I left Valladolid for the site of a *ch'a' cháak* at a cattle ranch near Yalcoba. We traveled by pickup truck east out of Valladolid for several kilometers, then turned north, arriving at the ranch about 8:30. The *j-meen*, Don Mario, immediately set about choosing a spot for the ceremony under some trees.

His helpers brought a wooden table from the nearby ranch house to serve as the *mesa*. Then Don Mario constructed arches from twelve branches of *xi'imche'*, three fastened to each leg of the table. He made an arch on each side of the *mesa* and two more crossing in the middle, six arches in all. The green leafy arches



Figure 49. Banana trees grow at the bottom of a limestone sinkhole.

represent the sky, and offerings suspended from them are specifically for the sky gods, the *cháako'ob*. Arches of leaves are one of the hallmarks of *ch'a' cháak* ceremonies. 89

Don Mario sent some of us to a nearby *k'o'op*, a deep sinkhole where a steep winding trail took us to the bottom (Figure 49). There we cut bundles of banana leaves and carried them back to use for wrapping the breads and sealing the *píib*, the pit oven.

At the *mesa* Don Mario was covering the surface with fresh green branches (Figure 50) and arranging cups of *saka'*, the white corn drink. He placed a crucifix on the east side. Two cups hung from the arch on the east side “in the sky,” and one sat on the ground by the northeast leg of the table for the *jobon piixo'ob*, another name for the *aluxo'ob*, the forest goblins.

Using a large dipper, Don Mario poured *saka'* into the cups, saying a short prayer for each one. All together there were thirteen cups, ten on the table, two in the air, and one on the ground. A fourteenth cup was filled and sent along with a sprig of *xi'imche'* to the ranch house to be placed in front of the patron saint of the ranch. A large pot of *báalche'* arrived—*vino* Don Mario called it—and was set on the ground. Someone had made it in advance of our coming.

The *mesa* now had cups of *saka'*, a burning candle, a smoking incense burner, and the crucifix on the east side (Figure 51). Standing facing the *mesa* Don Mario began a long prayer during which he sprinkled *saka'* from each of the cups using leaves of *xi'imche'*. He scattered the holy droplets all over the *mesa*, wetting the leaves until they glistened (Figure 52). A few minutes later he began a second long prayer, again sprinkling *saka'*. After this he and his assistants collected the *saka'* from all the cups in a pail. He put a fresh candle on the *mesa*, replacing the used one, and filled the cups with fresh *saka'*. The cup from the ranch house was brought out, refilled, and taken back.



Figure 50. A mass of *xi'imche'* leaves covers the *mesa* during early preparations for a day-long rain ceremony.



Figure 51. The crucifix of Catholicism, covered to protect it from the rain, and the green leafy arches of the sky with suspended drink offerings, come together in the annual rain ceremony.

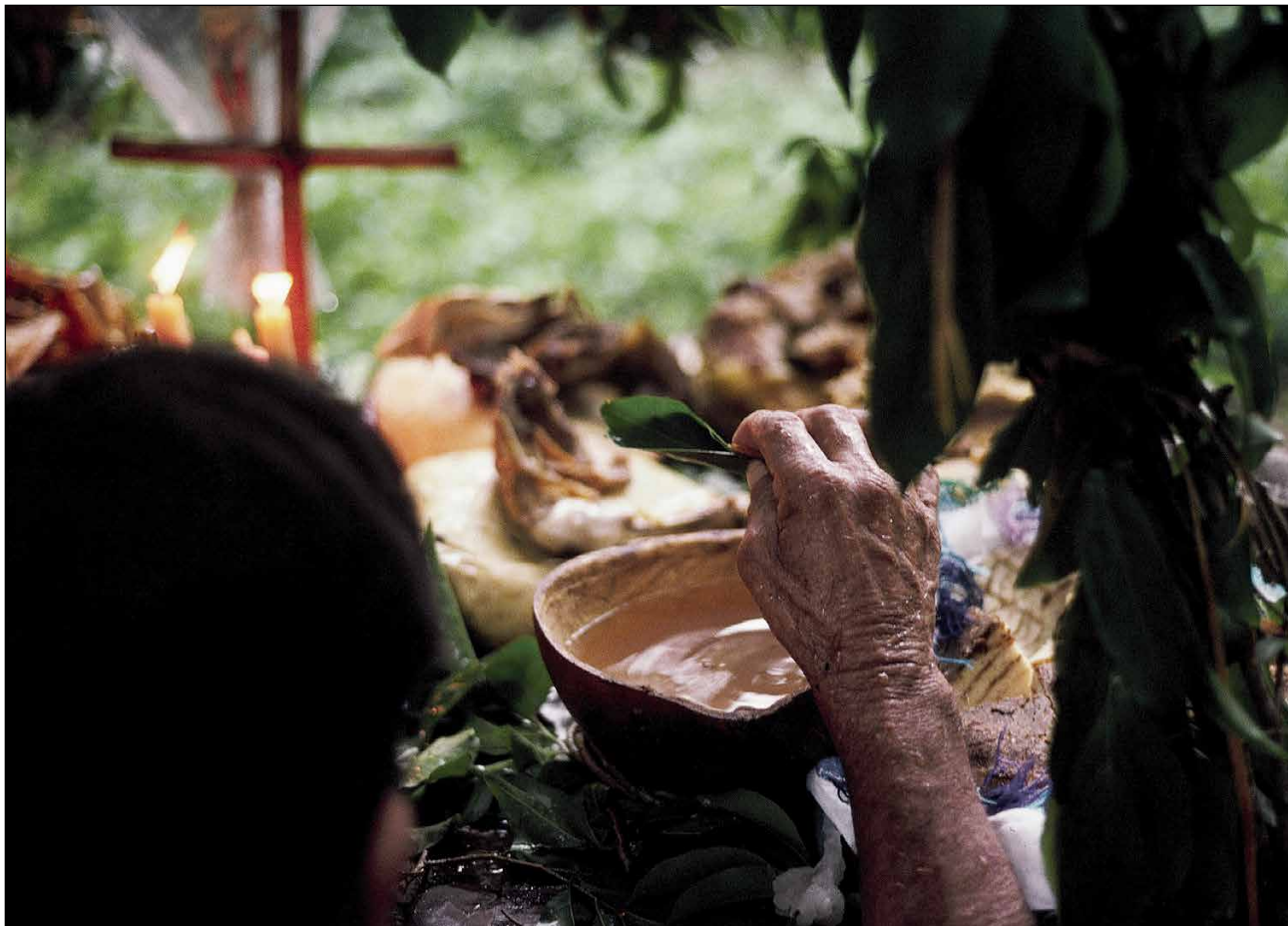


Figure 52. Throughout the prayers Don Mario sprinkles the *mesa*, making the leaves glisten.

Then began Don Mario's third long prayer, but this time he knelt in front of the *mesa* and did no sprinkling. While he prayed, the small group of men around the *mesa* drank the corn drink from the first round of prayers. Afterwards, shortly before noon, they moved their activities to the bread-making area. The pit oven was already dug, a short distance away.

From a large tub of *sakan*, or *masa*, the men rolled handfuls of dough into balls, but before flattening them they pushed dry *sikil*, ground squash seed, into the center (Figure 53). Then they flattened the balls in the usual way and began constructing the loaves, spreading thin *sikil* paste between each layer. The first bread was thirteen layers, *jo'oche'*, with a cross, an arc, and a point below the right-hand end of the arc pressed into the soft top of the loaf. This one was for *ki'ichpam jaajal Dios*, "beautiful true God."

The second bread had twelve layers with a cross and an arc, but no point (Figure 54). It was for *ki'ichpam ko'olebil María*, "beautiful Virgin Mary." Then they made eight breads with eight layers, with a single point on top in the center. Finally, a single bread had seven layers and nothing on top.

After they made these, Don Mario poured *sikil* into the tub with the remaining *masa* and mixed it thoroughly. With this he proceeded to construct one huge loaf, not with layers but just pushed and shaped into a very large round flattened mass. He made one large hole on top and filled it with squash seed paste. Then they made a second bread the same way, from *masa* in another pail. By this time someone had lit the *píib* fire and women at the house were preparing chickens.

Don Mario began constructing cigarettes from locally grown tobacco that he had brought from town. He wrapped them and tied them in the middle with thin bark strips (Figure 55). "*Chamal yuum cháak*, *yuntsilo'ob*," he explained, "cigarettes for lord *cháak*, the lords." He made thirteen of them, of course.



Figure 53. Squash seed paste is pressed into the “heart” of each maize ball.



Figure 54. Arcs pressed into the breads mark the sky, abode of the rain gods.



Figure 55. Native tobacco wrapped in corn husks—cigarettes for the rain gods.

After the breads and the cigarettes were made he went back to the *mesa* and uttered another long prayer. The same *saka'* was still in the cups from before. He sprinkled as he prayed, again wetting down the leaves. About 1:30 he and his assistants emptied all the cups into a pail and washed them in clean water.

He then filled each cup with *báalche'*, the fermented honey, praying as he poured, and carefully placed the cups one at a time on the *mesa* following the same arrangement as before; the two sky cups first, then the ten cups on the *mesa* and the one on the ground. A fourteenth cup went to the house. He put one of the hand-rolled cigarettes in each of the rings, *ch'uyub*, supporting the thirteen cups.

Over at the pit, men were removing hot rocks in preparation for putting in the breads. Don Mario went there and sprinkled *báalche'* in the form of a cross over the smoking pit. Then he went to where the women were boiling the chickens and sprinkled the cooking pots. Men began placing the breads in the *píib* as Don Mario returned to the *mesa*, now arranged with cups of *báalche'* and offerings of cigarettes, and began to pray. The sky grew very dark and distant thunder rumbled.

As he finished his prayer the breads were being sealed in the *píib*. He left the *báalche'* on the *mesa* with the burning candle when we began preparing for the coming rain. Don Mario pulled a sheet of plastic out of his bag, as did the other men, and together we huddled near the front of the *mesa* as thunder, lightning, and a short heavy rain engulfed us.

As we chatted under the plastic cover Don Mario told me Sak Babatun, the white rain god of the east, was angry. Then he asked me about other ceremonies I had seen. I told him about the *waajil kool* I had attended years before in Becanchen. "*Jaanlil kool*," he corrected me, "and it is different than the *ch'a' cháak*, right?" "Yes," I answered, "for one thing they do not have arches." "Yes they do," he corrected me again, "but just one arch on the east side, not like here with arches on all four sides plus across the center."

98 He listed the principal rain gods: Kuumk'uh Lak'iin, the chief rain god, in the east, followed by Sak Babatun Lak'iin, Yuum K'an Babatun Xaman, Chak Babatun Chik'iin, and Yuum Éek' Báalamtun Nojol—white in the east, yellow in the north, red in the west, and black in the south. Báalamtun resides in the south, confirming what I had learned years earlier at the *k'eex* ceremony in Coba, where offerings to Báal or Báalam were placed to the south.

Babatun is undoubtedly the modern-day rendering of the very ancient and sacred *pauhtun*, the sky gods of Precolumbian and Colonial-period times that preside on the four sides of the quadrangular sky. The rare and venerable painted books show their likenesses and their associated colors, spelling their names in the hieroglyphic script.

As the rain ended we came out from beneath our covers, shook off the plastic sheets, and went back to work. Don Mario added a new homemade wooden cross to the *mesa* and then said a short prayer. *Báalche'* was still in the cups. He instructed the pit oven to be opened, the breads were done. He sprinkled *báalche'* on the loaves as they came out of the oven, then together the men unwrapped them and took them to the *mesa*. Don Mario began arranging the altar.

The thirteen-layered bread went to the upper right-hand corner, to the southeast. The twelve-layered bread went to the upper left. The eight-layered breads were grouped four on the left, three on the right, and the last eight-layered bread went underneath, for the *aluxo'ob*. The various participants brought extra candles, making five in all, and then relit the incense, bringing over the pots of chicken from the house yard. Men began breaking up the two large unlayered breads into crumbs, to be mixed with the chicken broth.

The single bread of seven layers still lay on the mat on the ground where the breads had been

unwrapped. “*Ma’ tia’al jaajal Dios,*” Don Mario said, “Not for God.” He put pieces of chicken on the various breads. His assistants made *chok’ob*, very similar to the *k’ool* I observed in Becanchen, made by mixing bread crumbs and chicken soup.

Don Mario sent one set of offerings—a bottle of *báalche’*, an eight-layered bread, a cup of *chok’ob*, and some leaves—to a house at the other end of the ranch by pickup truck. Another bread with meat on top went to the patron saint in the nearby ranch house. The cups of *báalche’* were rearranged and gathered near the center of the *mesa* with four in a row in front of the candles. He put a large bowl, *leek*, filled with *chok’ob* in the center of the *mesa* near the front and managed to find space for an entire pail of chicken meat. Another bowl of *chok’ob* went on the ground for the *aluxo’ob*. Finally, the lone seven-layered bread was cut into pieces and joined the others on the *mesa* (Figure 56).

Getting ready for the climax of the afternoon, Don Mario called over two boys from the house. He sat them down, one at each leg on the east side of the *mesa* (Figure 57). He gave them pails half-full of water and put a plastic bowl in each pail, inverted so they floated with their bottoms up with air trapped inside. He instructed the boys to knock on the bowls with sticks, making a kind of “tunk-tunk” sound.

Thus began the final and longest prayer of the day, with the water-pail drums reverberating throughout. Well into the prayer he tossed four cups of *vino*, the four that were in a row in front of the candles, to the four world directions, first east, then north, and so on. The prayer ended and the drumming stuttered to a finish. Done.

Time for holy communion. Don Mario poured the remaining *báalche’* from the *mesa* into a bowl, then he put a little *chok’ob* in a small *súul*, a tiny cup with a white cloth over it (Figure 58). The ranch owner kneeled first and Don Mario administered *k’aam*, communion (Figure 59). He circled the *súul* over the kneeling man

100 and counted in Mayan, *hunp'ej, ka'p'ej, óoxp'ej, kanp'ej, ho'p'ej, wáakp'ej, bolonp'ej, óoxlajun*, “one, two, three, four, five, six, nine, thirteen.” Then one by one all the men, and then the boys, received *k'aam*, communion. Afterwards we ate the cut-up seven-layered bread from the *mesa*. Finally the *j-meen* kneeled and his assistant administered communion to him.

Next a rather elaborate *t'oox*, “distribution,” took place. Don Esteban passed out all the food to the men around the *mesa* and then had them line up on either side, all facing east. He tossed *báalche'* in the air so that it rained down on the participants while he recited yet another prayer (Figure 60). He repeated this for the four directions, instructing all the men and boys to face each direction in turn. Finally, around 5:00 PM it was over and we feasted on delicious bread, *chok'ob*, and chicken. One by one the men slowly departed for their homes, carrying large quantities of food for their families.

The young boys represented croaking frogs and their water drums imitated thunder. Frogs are an integral part of all *ch'a' cháak* events that I have seen or read about, but the variations are numerous. In some cases four boys are tied to the four legs of the *mesa*, sometimes dozens of boys are grouped together, but in all cases they emit sounds like frogs.

Sometimes *cháak* impersonators brandish wooden swords representing lightning. Another standard element for a *ch'a' cháak* is the sprinkling of *báalche'* in imitation of rain. In the case just cited Don Mario tossed cups of the sacred liquid high into the air, sprinkling the participants. Another variant has the cups of *báalche'* hanging over the *mesa* and the actors pulling on the arches with thin ropes, shaking the cups until they spill over the offerings on the tabletop below—rain from the sky watering the four-cornered earth.



Figure 56. Don Mario is barely visible through the densely adorned *mesa*.



Figure 57. Young boys as frog imitators help bring the rain.



Figure 58. A small homemade cup holds *vino*, a term used for the *báalche'* drink when given as communion.

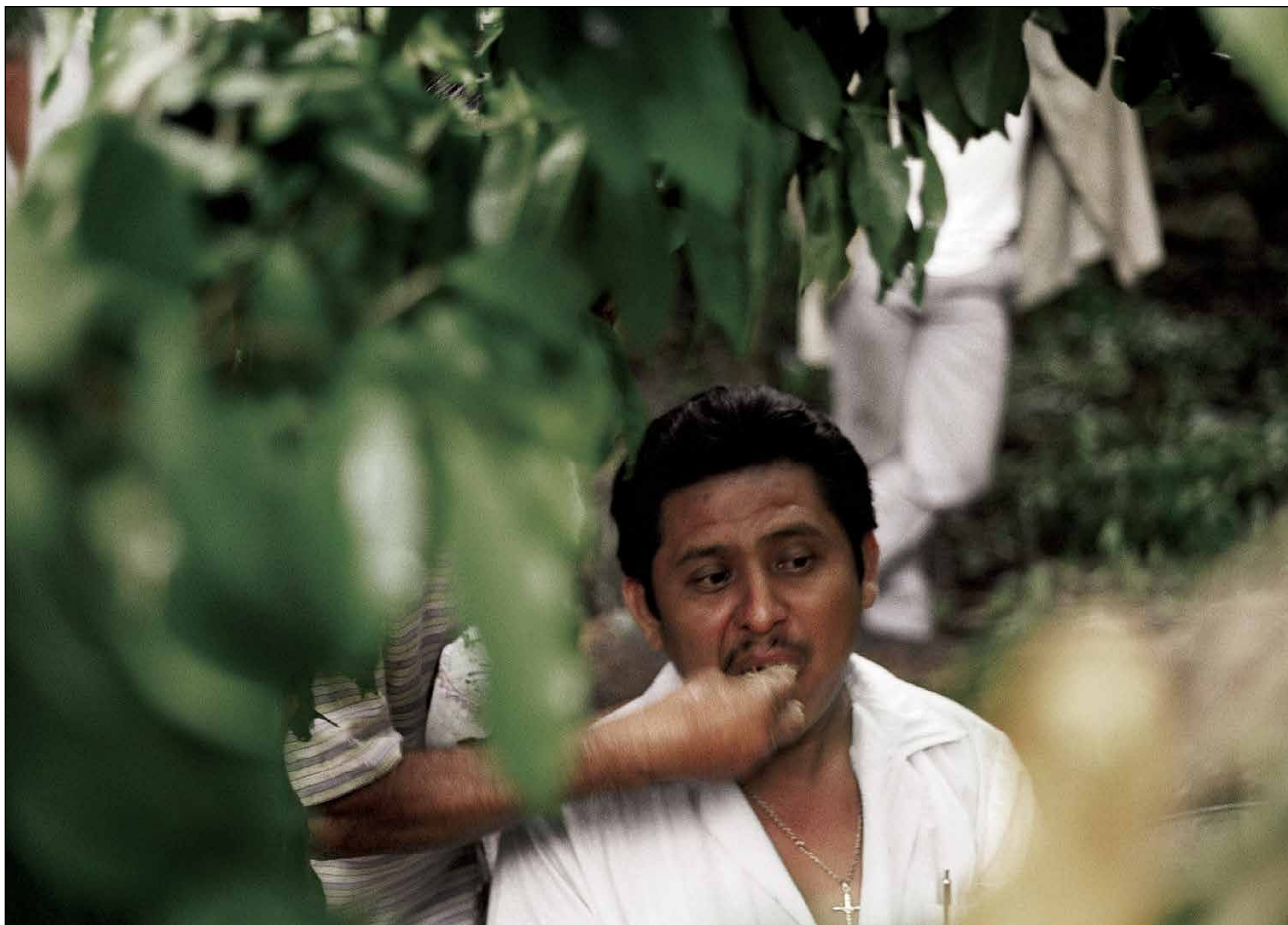


Figure 59. Near the end of the rain ceremony, holy communion is administered by the presiding shaman.



Figure 60. Sunlight catches the *báalche'* that Don Mario scatters over the lines of participants, simulating rain.

The reason for the croaking frogs and the sprinkling became apparent during a field trip I made in 1987. I was moving into the small town of Ticimul, southeast of Chichen Itza, to begin a six-week stay. On my second night in town, around June 1 of that year, the first rains arrived. It was nighttime and I was settling into my newly rented thatch-roof house when thunderclouds rolled in from the east. Lightning flashed and thunder crashed and rain poured down in torrents. The rainy season had begun.

After the first front rolled through and the sound of thunder retreated to the west, the rain turned to a heavy drizzle. Then I heard the frogs. The noise became deafening, coming from all around. I took my flashlight, opened the back door of the house, and peered into the darkness.

There all over the rocks and mud and tree branches littering the yard I saw tiny glistening frogs hopping about and croaking. They were only an inch long, but their cries were loud and piercing. The entire town reverberated with this cacophony late into the night. I realized then why rain ceremonies use croaking frogs. It is perfectly clear to any objective observer of the natural world: when frogs cry out, the rains come.

***Lóoj kaajtal*: taking back the land**

Loj, in the verbal sense, means “take back, redeem, rescue.” As the noun *lóoj* it usually translates as “redemption.” In Maya ritual it often refers to redeeming a piece of land, as in *lóoj corral* for a fenced-in cattle pen, *lóojil kool* for the corn field, or *lóoj solar*, for a person’s house lot. Even archaeological sites can be purged, as was done in the mid-1990s at Chichen Itza. In *lóoj kaajtal* an entire town is cleansed and reclaimed from evil winds, an expensive and complex ceremony rarely performed. Many towns make *lóoj kaajtal* perhaps once every five to ten years, in many more towns not at all.

On Friday, July 12, 1991, the town of Xuilub, southeast of Valladolid on the Quintana Roo border,

launched a full-scale cleansing of bad spirits from the entire community under the direction of Espiridión Dzib, village *j-meen* and grandfather of my friend and consultant Damiano Dzib Abán. My own good luck was beyond reckoning. I had come for two weeks hoping to view a rain ceremony and instead witnessed a ceremony performed only once every five years!

I followed Don Es that morning along a well-used foot trail leading west out of town. We came to a fork in the trail, at which point Don Es showed me a neat little trick—which has nothing to do with the *lój* ceremony but illustrates how field observations for the anthropologist never cease. There are always fascinating details to notice, to enrich our understanding of local culture.

Don Es laid a thin branch across the trail to the right. Anyone following later—that is, any local attuned to the fine points of jungle traveling—would see the branch laid perpendicularly across the path and would know to veer left. (I am sure I would have just stepped over it, or on it, and not even seen it.) A short way past the fork, a clearing in the woods opened up, where a number of men were busy making ritual preparations.

From appearances, work had begun at daybreak: cutting bush to make the clearing, digging the pit for tomorrow's baking, and erecting *mesas*. Arriving around 8:00 AM, I knew immediately this ceremony was going to be bigger than anything I had previously witnessed. No fewer than three freshly made *mesas* stood ready, constructions of recently cut poles; only bare wood now but soon to bear offerings and artifacts where humans and spirit beings alike would receive sustenance.

In the center of the clearing stood the *mesa mayor*, the “principal altar,” also called the *noj mesa*, or “great altar,” roughly two meters square, oriented to the east. To the southeast side, at the edge of the clearing, stood a small low *mesa* about one meter square, referred to as *chan mesa*, “little altar,” and in the trees, also

108 to the southeast, hung *k'atalche'*, which translates as “sticks laid crossways,” made of just two long poles tied together and suspended about two meters off the ground. I saw a half dozen freshly carved wooden imitation machetes leaning against a nearby tree trunk.

Don Es had come to make *báalche'*—so integral to Maya ritual since Precolumbian times—but here there was no honey. Perhaps honey was too scarce that year, or the townspeople had recently sold their harvests for dearly needed cash. Whatever the reason, the lesson is important for the outside observer, having to do with substitution and improvisation. *Báalche'* without honey is still *báalche'*.

Don Es poured three kilos of store-bought sugar into two-thirds of a pail of water, mixing it with a cup. Then he poured one pail of clear water into a hollowed-out log, after which he added the sugar water from the pail. He prayed quietly as he thoroughly mixed the solution dissolving the sugar. He added large pieces of *báalche'* bark (Figure 61), spreading the pieces and pushing them down with his fingers to start them soaking. Since the bark tends to float, he put clean rocks on top to keep the pieces submerged. “All done,” he gestured.

The rest of the day was spent in leisurely fashion—preparing the *mesas*, leaving and returning with supplies from town, and sitting around chatting. Around 4:30 PM the *báalche'* began bubbling around the edges of the submerged bark, creating a white foam on the pale brown liquid. It was getting “hot,” according to Don Es (Figure 62).

By dusk, the *mesas* were all in order, ready for a night of prayer and sanctification (Figure 63). The main *mesa* had a freshly carved and constructed wooden cross on the east side. In front of it, closer to the center but still on the east side, stood a holy green cross dressed in a white cotton embroidered shirt. It came from the altar of the rustic palm-thatched church in town. In the center a glass supported an unlit candle.



Figure 61. Stacks of *báalche'* bark await immersion in the amber liquid.



Figure 62. Limestone rocks, carefully scrubbed clean, hold the bark down as the liquid begins to ferment.



Figure 63. A bundle of bark strips prepared the previous day will be used tomorrow for wrapping the sacred breads. Tonight the clearing in the forest must be occupied by the shaman and his assistants, who will keep the incense and candles burning and offer prayers at midnight.

112 At the front, where the shaman would pray, were two large cups of *saka'* each sitting on two small branches of *xi'imche'*. On the right side (when facing east) were four cups on seven *xi'imche'* branches, and on the left side were three cups on six *xi'imche'* branches. Counting the branches on the left and right sides, there were thirteen; counting the cups, there were nine. Numerology permeates Maya ritual.

On the little *mesa* sat one large cup in the center and one regular cup at each corner. Each of the five cups had its branchlet of *xi'imche'*, and near the center lay an incense burner, *p'uulut* or *p'uutil*, made from a cut piece of banana tree trunk—wet and juicy to resist fiery coals that would burn the incense during the multiple upcoming prayer sessions.

The *k'atalche'*, the two-stick *mesa* suspended in the trees, also had one large cup in the center and four regular cups, but in this case they were arranged two on each side in a row along the narrow poles, not quadrangular like the other *mesas*. Each cup had its *xi'imche'* leaves, and the incense burner sat to the right.

“What is this raised *mesa* for?” I asked. The answer was a classic lesson in Maya complexity. It was for the *báalamo'ob*, *santo wiiniko'ob*, *yéetel santo cháako'ob*; *kan túuts' k'uh*. This translates as “*báalams*, holy beings, and holy *cháaks*; four gods.” “What are the four gods?” I asked, hoping for clarification. “They water the earth,” Don Es said succinctly, as if that should explain it. Enough said.

Three other cups set in hanging rings hung from tree branches, two together on the east side, one on the south. The two together were the *jo'oché'* (the principal offering) and the offering to Virgin Mary; the one on the south was to Jesus.

As night fell I began to experience eager anticipation mixed with underlying fear as I realized I was about to spend the night in the forest. To me this would be a breakthrough in doing field work, away from my house in town where a sense of security comes from having walls and a roof between me and the wilds.

In an open hammock I had to trust Don Es and a few other townspeople who would stay all night in the clearing.

As darkness fell, a large animal raced through our camp. To me it was a dark shadow, ominous. The men recognized it and excitedly identified it to each other, chuckling lightly. I felt assured. Then I wondered what I would do if it rained.

Just before midnight I awoke to the stirrings of Don Es. He was getting out of his hammock and tapping his small flashlight to encourage its long-spent batteries to give up one more flicker. He shuffled over the damp leaves in the darkness, approaching the main *mesa*.

From a large covered pail he scooped *saka'*, the white corn drink, and filled the cups, softly calling to his assistant to light the candle and burn *cháal*, a native incense. (The incense bought in town is not for the work of the *j-meen*, according to later interviews.) *Cháal* is a resinous substance made by wild bees to close the entrance to their hives. There are at least two varieties, *ya'axich* and *k'antsak'*, according to my notes. To use *cháal* instead of store-bought incense is more Itza, I was told, more in line with the ancients.

Don Es picked up one of the large cups from the front of the *mesa*, along with the *xi'imche'*, and knelt on the ground holding it aloft. He commenced to pray. At the end of the prayer he used a single long-pointed leaf of *xi'imche'* to sprinkle *saka'* to the four world directions, repeating as he sprinkled, *óox tées kulen kaab*, “three times seated over the world.” This was for the three holy ones, Damiano told me later. It was pure Itza, he said.

Finishing, he moved to the *k'atalche'* where his assistant brought fresh coals from the dying campfire, put them in the incense burner, and sprinkled incense on the coals. Don Es said a prayer and moved on to the little *mesa*. He kneeled there, picked up the freshly stoked incense, and passed this native incensario



Figure 64. At midnight, the hour of silence, Don Es burns incense, scatters drink, and prays.

over, around, and under the *mesa*, thoroughly cleansing it while praying all the time.

That complete, he went back to the *mesa mayor*, where the incense was still smoking, and one at a time he picked up the big cups, now partially filled with *saka'*, and passed them around and through the smoke. Putting the last cup down, he again sprinkled *saka'* to the world directions with a leaf of *xi'imche'*. It was five minutes past midnight (Figure 64).

Don Mech, from Coba, had explained to me some eight years previously that midnight was the hour of silence, when prayers go straight to God. Damiano, here in Xuilub, told me the same thing. It is the time of least interference from man or beast. Even the birds are quiet. It is a calm, holy hour. We went back to sleep in our hammocks, awaking at first light. It had not rained.

The first task of the day was to change all the offering cups from *saka'* to *báalche'*, from the white corn drink to the amber fermented sugar water. From the *noj mesa*, *chan mesa*, two-sticks *mesa*, and the hanging offerings, the cups of *saka'* were emptied into a common pail, replaced by *báalche'* that had been fermenting all night.

Recharged incense filled the air and a new round of prayers began as Don Es held high the two large bowls with their *xi'imche'* leaves. Two assistants re-hung the *jo'oché'* cups in the trees, but now with *báalche'*. More prayers, and then cups of *báalche'* were passed around for all to drink.

The population in the clearing was growing by the minute as people appeared on the path from town. One man came with a small pail of coffee and crackers for Don Es and me and said he would return later with food. Another round of prayers and sprinkling commenced at the three *mesas* as new coals and incense were stirred together. A man came from town with a bundle of new candles and replaced the spent one on the *mesa mayor*. Someone else showed up with more bark strips. Two guys went off to work on the fire pit.

116 Others left to go back to town. At 7:00 AM there were twelve men in the clearing.

New people showed up carrying wooden benches and a wooden table. A fresh supply of *xi'imche'* arrived and Don Es removed the old branches from under the offering cups, placing fresh leaves in their stead. The exhausted leaves were piled on the east side of the clearing, at the edge. A plucked chicken, tied up and ready for cooking, arrived, then another. Then a new round of prayers. More *báalche'* was distributed, and men arrived with bundles of fresh green branches for the pit oven.

Four sacks of *boob* leaves appeared, very large, thick, round leaves used for wrapping food—then two more carved wooden machetes (Figure 65). Pails full of ground corn were dumped into a large steel tub. *Sakan* they called the corn, *masa*. Packaged *sikil*, ground squash seeds, was mixed with water and salt in a small pail making a brown paste. Two small plant bundles now decorated the *mesa*, *ruda* and *nicte'* (May flower).

When our breakfast arrived, Don Es and I ate sitting in our hammocks while a number of men began preparing breads on the wooden table. They rinsed the *boob* leaves in clean water and laid them on the table. A flattened ball of *masa* went on the leaves, then a thin spread of *sikil* paste, then more *masa*, and so on, until reaching the specified number.

Don Es had little time to eat. As soon as each loaf was patted into shape, he needed to make the proper signs on top, and he continually answered questions from the bread makers: How many of this kind? How many of that kind? How many layers?

They made one bread of thirteen layers, the biggest one. Then five breads of twelve layers. Don Es, with his forefinger, pressed the shape of a cross with an arc into each one (Figure 66). Four breads had nine layers onto which he made a cross with no arc but with two green leaf stems pushed into them. These, I



Figure 65. In preparation for the upcoming events, bags of leaves for wrapping breads and freshly carved wooden machetes are brought to the forest clearing.



Figure 66. Only Don Es knows the number of layers and the proper markings for each of the breads.

found out later, were to mark the breads so they could be differentiated when taken from the oven. Seven-layered breads had a single cross but no stems. They made about thirty six-layered breads with a single indentation on top, in the middle.

Don Es poured *báalche'* into the markings on the tops of the breads over which he and his helpers spread *sikil* paste prior to wrapping the breads with leaves (Figure 67). I began to lose count as the breads were wrapped, tied, and stacked in mounds.

After reaching the proper number, a new phase began. They combined the remaining squash seed paste with the remaining *masa* and mixed them thoroughly together. From this new mix the bread makers put together piles of shaped dough, but not with layers. They were wrapped in the same way and Don Es marked the tops, but they were clearly different. The breads with layers are *túut* or *x-túutil waaj*, while the breads without layers are the *hostia* used for *k'aam*, the “host” for communion.

By 9:30 the breads were all made and Don Es and I rested while someone lit the fire in the *píib*. Others busied themselves making vine rings with bark strip hangers, preparing for events to come. In about an hour the oven was ready, the hot rocks were removed, and the breads went in, to be sealed by green branches and soil for an hour and a half of baking (Figure 68).

Now, in a new development, the shaman began to include the whole town in the ceremony—not just the people of the town but the physical, geographical community. Don Es put little cups of *báalche'* in numerous vine rings hanging from bark strips and instructed people to take these offerings, one to each *jo'ol kaaj*, or entrance to the village. On ten trails, all around the town, there are flat rocks placed to mark the entrances, each with a wooden cross. There was one right there near our clearing that I had not noticed until one of the young men hung an offering of *báalche'* over it (Figure 69).



Figure 67. *Báalche*' and *sikal* finish off the top layer.



Figure 68. Wrapped breads go into the oven.

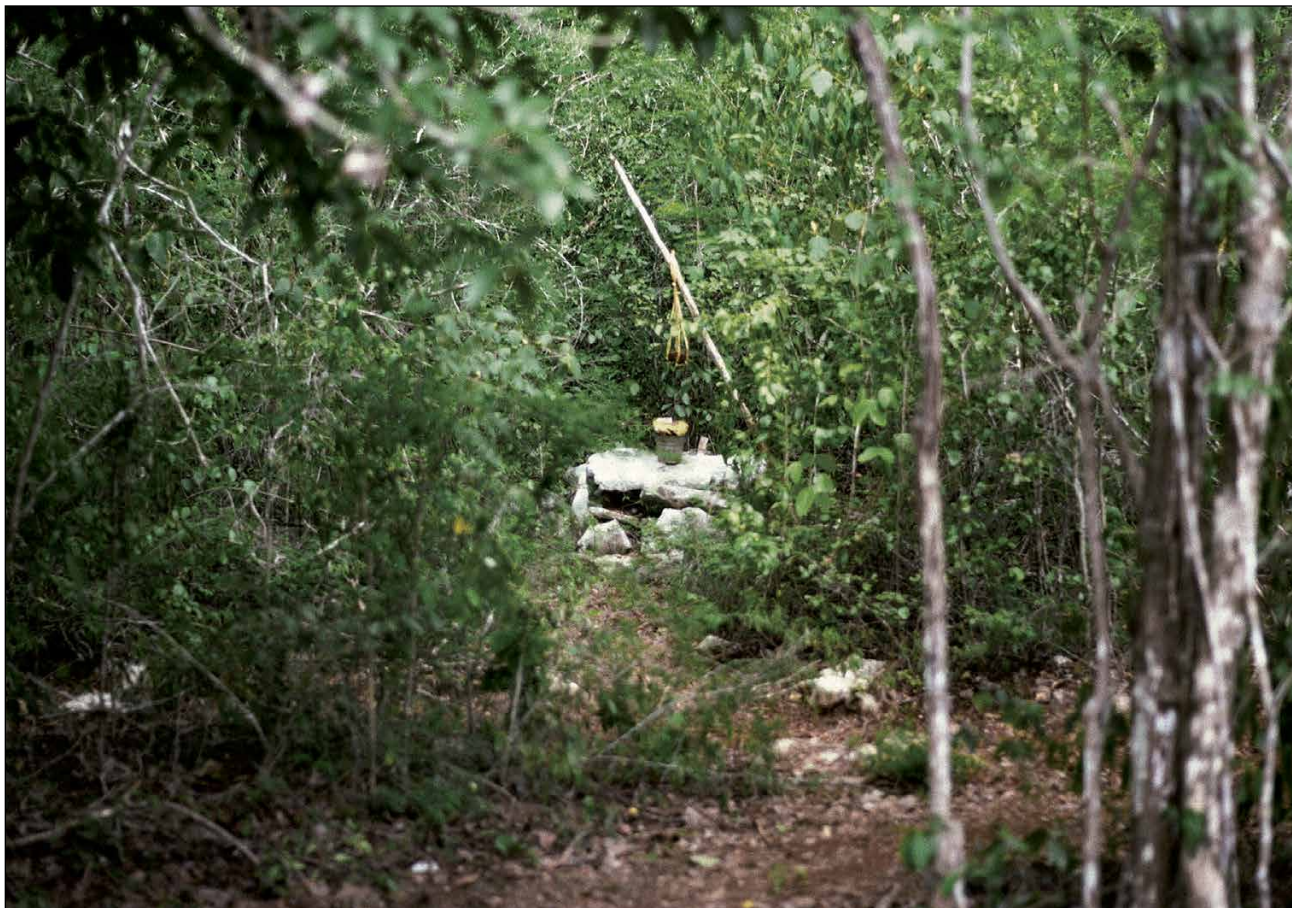


Figure 69. Almost invisible to the unaccustomed eye, trail shrines mark the entrances to the town. Offerings on these shrines are for the *báalams* that hover over them.

Ten cups of *báalche'* went to the ten entrances and five more went to the town's five water wells. These offerings were for the spirit protectors of the paths leading to and from town and for the guardians of the water wells, entrances to the underworld. After he sent out the *báalche'*, Don Es and his assistant began another round of prayers at the three *mesas* and then passed out cups of *báalche'* for all to drink. The *báalche'* bark had long since been taken out of the hollow log container and laid out to dry, to be used another day.

Don Es returned to the *noj mesa*, or great altar, to read his *sáastun*. Holding the glass ball in front of the candle, peering into it intently, he announced, based on his reading, that it would rain in three days. Then there were more prayers at the *noj mesa*, and as usual he held up high the large cup and its sacred leaves.

What came next, to my knowledge, has never been recorded in the literature on contemporary Maya culture. A group of young males went to the center of town, into the *comisario*, or town hall, and emerged as a mock military unit of soldiers and musicians. The "soldiers" marched with hand-carved wooden rifles and machetes while the "musicians" played snare drums, a bass drum, cornets, and even a conch shell trumpet (Figure 70). This noisy group of a dozen townspeople marched through the center of town to the clearing with blaring horns and beating drums (Figure 71).

As soon as they arrived at the clearing Don Es gave each a drink of *báalche'*, soldiers first, then musicians. Then he arranged them into two groups, with any number of little kids running around as if to join them. The children, in fact, were a crucial part of the whole operation as I would soon learn. They were tying thin bark strips around their waists but I did not know why.

After a long time getting organized, with new members taking up the wooden machetes amidst much talking, horseplay, and playful tugging, the two groups, each with its passel of kids, took off in opposite



Figure 70. A conch shell trumpet announces the coming of mock soldiers, out to rid the town of evil winds and bearers of sickness.



Figure 71. The “soldiers” march from the center of town to the forest clearing.

126 directions—not on the paths or trails, but into the woods.

I followed the group that went south, while the other group went north. As I had learned many times before in Yucatan, the locals travel through trackless bush like fish through water, while I, with my camera, notebook, and tape recorder went crashing and thrashing, collecting a good number of deep thorn scratches; but by the drum beats and bugle calls I had no trouble locating the group ahead of me.

As I caught up with the group at one point I saw the boys chasing around and diving under bushes, coming out with lizards, worms, small snakes, and other critters that they tied up with their bark strips. One boy gleefully displayed three such creatures, holding them high. “Take my picture,” he implored. I did so, not realizing how critical the boy’s part was. I thought they were just playing around (Figure 72).

From a distance across town we could hear the instruments of the other group. We were circling the town, it turned out, one group on each side, moving through the forest, encircling the community. Then we all met together on the main road on the far side of town, joining together into one large group. From there we proceeded to march together directly into the center of town where we paused to rest by an open well under an ancient ceiba tree.

Two men with cups of *báalche’* showed up and sprinkled the opening of the well using a *xi’imche’* leaf. As we started off again, heading back toward the ceremonial clearing, they sprinkled another well along the way (Figure 73). Soon we arrived back at the clearing as the breads were coming out of the pit oven. Some forty people were busy preparing food.

To my surprise and disappointment, the two groups of soldiers and musicians took off once more, again in two directions. I was surprised because I thought we had finished; disappointed because I was too exhausted to follow. My notebook was disintegrating from sweat and my temples were pulsing from the



Figure 72. Young boys gather up bearers of sickness including snakes and centipedes, later to be burned.



Figure 73. Throughout the town, food and drink offerings are placed over well openings for the underworld spirits to partake.

heat. My friend wiped blood from thorn scratches off my forehead.

There in the clearing, around 1:00 in the afternoon, Don Es was directing a very complicated scene. Some fifty or more breads, hot from the *püib*, had to be sorted and stacked on the *mesas*. He personally arranged—or gave orders to arrange—cups of *báalche'*, cups of soup, branches of leaves, and piles of various classes of breads, not only on the three *mesas* but also in the hanging offering bags. On his command cups of chicken and *báalche'* went out to the wells and the trail shrines.

Finally, all was arranged in order. It was time for communal worship. Everyone in the clearing gathered around the main *mesa* and kneeled, encircling the altar (Figure 74). Don Es, at his position in front, facing east, raised up two small cups, *súul*, wrapped together in a white cloth. The cups contained *báalche'* (*vino* according to Don Es) and the white cloth was tied with a bark strip that held two *xi'imche'* leaves, one in front of the other to form a cross (Figure 75). He passed this, held high in the air, to his right.

Each kneeling man took the cups in turn and passed them on. Nine times around the *mesa* they went, counterclockwise, or “to the right hand,” while Don Es’s assistant filled the air with burning incense. When the circling was completed, Don Es carefully balanced the cups, still wrapped in cloth, on the front edge of the *mesa* and proceeded to raise up the large thirteen-layered baked bread. This too he passed to his right and it went around the table nine times. That done, his assistant offered him communion, *k'aam* in Mayan.

Unwrapping the two small cups, Don Es drank the *vino* and then his assistant broke off a small piece from the large loaf and placed it in Don Es’s open mouth. After that they changed places and Don Es, standing, administered communion to his kneeling assistant.

Each of the participants in turn came around to the front of the *mesa* and received communion from the assistant, while Don Es, for his part, went to the *chan mesa* and the *k'atalche'* to pray and sprinkle *báalche'*.



Figure 74. At the final climax men kneel around the great *mesa* as the baked breads are held overhead and incense sweetens the air.



Figure 75. Two *xi'imche'* leaves form a cross on the native communion cup. Stacks of baked breads are arranged based on numerological patterns.

132 When all was done, it was time to distribute the food. The act of distribution is called *t'oox* and is as much a part of the ceremony as any other. Like everything else, it has to be done right.

Don Es stood at the front of the *mesa* and passed out the breads to people around him. Men broke the *x-túutil waaj* into crumbs and mixed it with chicken broth in a large tub to make *chok'ob* or *ya'ach'*, two names for the thick bread soup. They broke the *hostia*, the unlayered breads, into halves and quarters and placed them on the wooden table. Men began to appear, bringing the offerings back from the wells and the trail shrines.

Cups of *báalche'* went back into a central container. Don Es began disassembling the little *mesa* and collecting the *xi'imche'* branches. He sprinkled everything with *báalche'* as he worked. The musicians and soldiers returned just in time to eat.

By now, in this crowded sacred place, some seventy people—almost the entire adult male population of the town—were partaking of holy sustenance and putting large portions in their net bags to take home to their families. The once carefully arranged sacred breads on the great *mesa* were flowing out to the masses.

Don Es made another reading with his *sáastun*. Based on the candlelight sparkling inside the glass ball, he pronounced that four *novenas*, or evening prayer meetings, should be performed during the coming week. His *sáastun* told him when to hold the *novenas* and for how many nights. There followed a long discussion by all present regarding the dates of the forthcoming *novenas*, and as the talk wound down each man in turn made his payment to Don Es (the equivalent of about 35 cents U.S. each). Don Es collected the money in a *boob* leaf and passed it up in the air, saying a prayer to bless the money before putting it in a plastic bag that went into his pocket. But we were still not through.

As the *mesas* came down and the scattered oven rocks slowly cooled, we followed Don Es to the nearby

trail shrine and then turned left, away from town. After a short distance we came to a wide spot on the trail, and there, to one side, I saw a small smoldering fire tended by young boys. They were burning their lizards, worms, snakes, and whatever other assortment of creatures they had captured. I suddenly realized that the boys were not just playing when they chased after and caught these little animals. 133

During later interviews and translations I learned that the lizards and worms were the carriers of evil and sickness. As the mock soldiers and musicians surrounded the town, battling bad spirits, the boys hunted down the little bearers of evil. At the end, they burned their captured prey. In doing so, the townspeople were in fact reclaiming their community from the creatures of the earth. The machetes and rifles were meant to kill anything they encountered, but it was better to capture them alive, Damiano explained to me. The militaristic music let everyone know they were coming.

What were the women doing during this time? Danger lurked everywhere in the form of stirred-up winds. Women must not go to the wells during any of this ritual activity. As long as they could hear the drums and horns they had to stay inside their homes for their own safety.

At the place on the trail where the evil creatures were burning, beyond the entrance shrine, Don Es performed *púus*, another name for *santiguar*. He brushed us all down, one at a time, with a bundle of *siipilche'* dipped in *báalche'*. We had to be decontaminated before going back to town to be assured we were not accompanied by the little creatures of the earth.

After we were all cleansed, a procession formed there on the forest trail. The musicians played, the soldiers marched, the church people carried the green cross and rustic wooden cross, and the whole group walked to drum beats and horn blasts, back to town, through its center, and into the church.

They placed the crosses on the altar and four or five of the regular church singers kneeled and sang a

134 short selection of *novena* songs. The people dispersed, taking portions of food with them to their homes. The church singers put away their song books, the attendant extinguished the candles, and the musicians took their instruments back to town hall, thus ending two days of *lój kaajtal*.

But the village had acquired serious future obligations. In the coming week they must hold four *novenas* in the church, as mandated by Don Es when he read his *sáastun*; and seven days hence they would cut another clearing, this time east of town, and they would once again bake breads, make *báalche'*, and offer prayers to the "holy ones," performing a *lój áak'ab* or night-time *lój* (Figure 76), bringing a final close to this long and complex event. Religious duties never cease.

This was a very involved *lój*, cleansing an entire town. I have seen a much simpler *lój* that was more like the *waajil kool* described earlier: a simple *mesa*, baked breads with specified numbers of layers, food offerings set out in numerical patterns, incense, and prayers. It was referred to as *lój solar*, the *solar* being a Spanish loan word for the Maya yard. One *lój* was even performed for an individual's sickness, very much like a simple *k'eex* but without chickens or eggs.

The boundary lines between classes and types of ceremonies are never clear-cut, and the *lój* illustrates this point perfectly. In the classification scheme used here, rites and rituals are arranged from simple to complex, and I have placed the *lój kaajtal* at the complex end of the scale because it is the largest and longest-lasting ceremony I have ever witnessed.



Figure 76. A nighttime *lóoj*, in a different clearing on a different side of town, completes the week-long event.

From the simple to the complex, the events described here reflect a belief system widely held across the peninsula of Yucatan. *Santiguars*, using sacred leaves, cleanse people of bad winds. Divination allows the *j-meen* to see into a situation and prescribe remedies where needed. A *k'eex* makes payments to the underworld and transfers sickness out of individuals and back to the earth or forest. *Waa'jil kool* or *jaanlil kool* offers the fruits of agricultural production to spirit beings in exchange for health and good harvest. The *ch'a' cháak* ensures bountiful rain for the corn fields by creating a miniature cosmos with a sky of leafy arches over a four-cornered earth and by combining the presentation of offerings with ritual enactments of croaking frogs, thunder, lightning, and falling rain; and the *lóoj* takes back or reclaims land from the bearers of evil winds and sickness.

The gods and spirits of the Maya world are a constant presence in village life. The shaman's work is crucial. He is the expert, the one who knows and the one who does. He serves the people, and when they trust him and when they experience the benefits of his practice, life proceeds with assurance. Fear diminishes and there is a sense of control over unseen forces.

Personal experiences with the supernatural

During my many visits to Yucatan I have experienced a number of happenings that are difficult to explain in rational, logical terms. To me they seem to be—or at least come close to being—experiences with the supernatural.

I was sleeping in my hammock one night in Xuilub. The owner of the house had rented the front room to

me and moved his family into the kitchen, a separate structure in back. In the middle of the night I awoke to a loud crash against the heavy wooden doors in front of the house. It sounded like a rock the size of a baseball had smashed against my door. I bolted upright in my hammock and held my breath, staring at the door.

It was motionless. The light from the street came through the space beneath the door and I looked for any movement or shadow. In that intensified state of alertness I listened. I saw no shadow, no movement, and I heard no footsteps.

The owner of the house came in through the back. The noise had awakened him also. He went to the front door, opened the small wooden window, and carefully looked up and down the street outside. Nothing there, he indicated, and went back to bed without further comment. Eventually, as my heart slowed, I went back to sleep.

The next morning I told Damiano what had happened and he said his brother had already told him the whole story. Damiano explained the event to me. Spirits, human souls, he said, travel around the town at night. They are souls that have not gone to heaven. Typically they visit houses and tap lightly on the door, tap-tap-tap, calling out in an eerie high thin voice, *buenas noches!* According to Damiano this somehow explained the loud crash on my own door. Personally, I have never been able to account for what happened that night.

Another event, even more unsettling, happened in the same house. I always keep my flashlight directly under my hammock where I can reach it in the night if needed. Something woke me up—I know not what. I reached down for my flashlight but my hand touched something else instead. I jerked my hand back, wide awake. Then I heard a very light kind of shooshing sound, and I carefully reached my hand back down until I

138 felt the flashlight. I picked it up, turned it on, and pointed it toward the sound. There was a snake slithering away toward the corner of the room!

I called out to the owner and he woke up and came in. I showed him the snake and he got his machete and killed it. The next morning, when I went out the front door, there were smoldering remains of a small fire where the owner had burned the snake. The family said it was deadly poisonous (but they say that about all snakes!). To this day I do not know if it was poisonous or not.

When Don Es heard about it he performed divination to understand what had happened. The answer was this: someone had sent the snake to my house as a kind of test. Don Es performed *santiguar* to cleanse me and told me that if I remained with him, and worked with no other shamans, no further harm would come to me.

Perhaps the most dramatic event occurred one day when I was recording Don Es doing divination on Damiano's father, who had been sick for some time. It was very dark inside the house and I was using a flash on my camera. I had taken about ten pictures and was taking notes as usual when Don Es began to do a *santiguar* for Damiano's father, but instead of using leaves he carried a heavy object tightly wrapped in a black cloth.

One of the onlookers asked Don Es, "Why don't you show Bruce the object?" He thought about it a second, seemed to agree, and began painstakingly untying the small knots in the cloth, finally showing me the object. It was a rock roughly carved into the shape of a jaguar, with eyes, ears, and mouth; it was a piece of archaeological origin.

"Take a picture," someone said. I aimed the camera, but when I pushed the button nothing happened. I checked to make sure I had advanced the film and tried pushing the button five or six more times. Nothing.

“Come over here,” Don Es indicated. “Kneel down.” He proceeded to brush me down with the sacred object, praying as he did so. “Now you can take the picture,” he said.

I stood up, aimed the camera, pushed the button, and FLASH! The room of onlookers erupted in oohs and aahs, my knees started shaking, and I fell into the nearest hammock to support myself. I was amazed.

Of course all these events could have logical explanations, but why try to explain them away? After living in the bush for any length of time it makes more sense to blend with the people and the belief system that surrounds you. If the locals say these are manifestations of spirit forces, who am I to argue?

One last comment

People frequently ask me, how do you go into a village, how do the Mayas accept you, and are they willing to share this information with you? There seems to be something about the Maya character in Yucatan that makes the people remarkably open and generous to outsiders. If you try to speak Mayan, sit down and eat with a family, and maybe join in a basketball game at night, you will be welcome. Just show up in a town, go to the local store, buy a Coke, and start talking.

The store owner is often one of the more influential persons in town and he or she can make arrangements to rent you a house or a room. I tell them what I’m doing: I’m studying the work of the shaman, *u meeyjul j-meen*, or I am writing a book about Maya customs, or studying *úuchben ts’üib*, ancient writing. In general they seem to be quite pleased that someone would tell the outside world about their lives. In actuality outsiders are no big deal. Foreigners may come and go—the Mayas abide.

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Glossary

aguardiente. Clear liquor.

alux (pl. *aluxo'ob*). Goblin-like being, trickster, and protector.

báalam. Spirit guardian.

báalche'. Ceremonial drink of fermented honey and flavorings.

boob. Large leaf for wrapping breads.
ch'a' cháak. Annual community rain ceremony.
Chak Babatun Chik'iin. Red rain god of the west.
cháako'ob. Gods of thunder, lightning, and rain.
cháal. A special incense.
chamal. Cigarette or cigar.
chan mesa. Minor or small altar.
chok'ob. Ceremonial bread-crumbsoup.
ch'uyub. Vine ring for supporting a cup or bowl.
cuenta. An account or “reading” resulting from divination.
divination. The art of perceiving supernatural forces.
Éek' Báalamtun Nojol. Black rain god of the south.
gremio. Large religious gathering or fiesta.
hostia. “Host” in Catholic communion.
iik'. Wind or spirit, understood to be the cause of sickness.
jaanlil kool. Agricultural ceremony, equivalent to *waajil kool*.
jéetsméek'. Native form of baptism.
j-meen. Shaman, ceremonial practitioner.
jobon piix (pl. *piixo'ob*). Alternate name for *alux*.
jo'oché'. Principal offering in agricultural ceremonies.
jo'ol kaaj. Entrance to a village.

- 142 *joots'ik cuenta*. To draw out a reading, to divine.
jóoyajo'ob. Waterers, rain gods.
j-pulya'aj. Witch.
kan túuts' k'uh. Four-part god.
K'an Babatun Xaman. Yellow rain god of the north.
kanaano'ob. Guardians.
koj kaan. Snake tooth, used in healing.
kool. Cornfield, *milpa*.
kuumk'uh lak'iin. Chief rain god of the east.
k'aak'as ba'al. Evil thing.
k'aam. Native form of communion.
k'atalche'. Altar made of sticks tied across tree branches.
keex. Healing ceremony in which sickness is transferred from patient to forest or earth and payment is made to spirit beings.
ki'ichpam ko'olebil María. Beautiful Virgin Mary.
ki'ichpam jaajal Dios. Beautiful true God.
k'ool. Ceremonial bread-crumbsoup.
k'oop. Large sinkhole.
leek. Large bowl.
lój corral. Ceremony to cleanse a cattle pen.
lój kaajtal. Ceremony to cleanse a village.

- lóoj solar*. Ceremony to cleanse a house lot.
- lóojil kool*. Ceremony to cleanse a corn field.
- masa*. Corn dough.
- mesa*. Ceremonial table or altar.
- mesa mayor*. Principal altar.
- meyajo'ob*. Spirit workers.
- milpa*. Maya cornfield.
- nicte'*. Flowering plant (*Plumeria spp.*).
- noj mesa*. Main or large altar.
- novena*. Catholic service in which songs or prayers are sung or recited, in church or in the home.
- pauahtun*. Precolumbian and Colonial-period sky god.
- piib*. Pit oven.
- primicia*. Agricultural ceremony, offering of first fruits.
- puksi'ikal*. Heart.
- púus*. Cleansing, alternate term for *santiguar*.
- p'uulut* or *p'uultil*. Incense burner.
- ruda*. Plant whose leaves have healing properties (*Ruta chalapensis*).
- saka'*. Ceremonial corn drink.
- sakan*. *Masa*, corn dough.
- Sak Babatun Lak'iin*. White rain god of the east.
- santiguar*. Cleansing or exorcising evil winds, done one-on-one between shaman and patient.

- 144 *santos*. Images of saints, usually on altars in church and home.
- santo wíinklil*. Holy beings, sky gods.
- sáastun*. Glass, crystal, or other light-reflecting object used in divination.
- seña*. A sign produced by supernatural forces.
- sikil*. Squash seed paste.
- siipilche'*. Leaves with special healing properties (*Bunchosia swartziana/glandulosa*), used especially in *santiguars*.
(Note that the *l* in this word is not generally heard in spoken Mayan, where it is usually pronounced *siipiche'* or even *siipche'*.)
- súul*. Small gourd cup used in *k'aam* "communion."
- tepalo'ob*. Spirit rulers.
- tankas che'*. Branch and leaves with special healing powers (*Zanthoxylum fagara*).
- tres personas*. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- túut* (*x-túutil waaj*). Generic term for ceremonial layered breads.
- t'oox*. Ceremonial distribution of food and drink.
- vino*. Alternate term for *báalche'*.
- waajil kool*. Agricultural ceremony of thanksgiving and petition.
- xi'imche'*. Special leaves used in ceremonies (*Asearia nitida*).
- x-noj waaj*. Great bread.
- ya'ach'*. Ceremonial bread-crumbsoup.
- yuntsilo'ob*. Lords.

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