

DEATH AND LIFE IN A MAYAN TOWN

By Kenneth Johnson

DEATH

Today they are burying Don Gabriel. The procession begins at a funeral home near the center of town; cars and trucks will slow to a crawl as the mourners walk down the main street, solemnly and with an air of silent determination. I don't know how many times I have seen the madcap progress of a chicken bus come to a grinding halt when it encounters such funeral processions. The Maya walk with a slow, shuffling trudge and are typically accompanied by a brass band which marches along to the same shuffle, playing sad, wildly out-of-tune music. One can be forgiven for plunging momentarily into a kind of time-and-space warp and imagining oneself in New Orleans rather than Momostenango.

Today is 12 Kan, at least in K'iche'; it would be 12 Chicchan in the more familiar Yucatec. This should not be confused with the preceding day-sign, called Kan in Yucatec but K'at in K'iche'. I agree that it really is a bit confusing. Don Gabriel, however, would have suffered from no such confusion, for the pure and simple reason that he didn't speak a word of Yucatec, only K'iche' and Spanish.

Instead, Don Gabriel was confused by the essence of the matter. He was never quite certain where he stood in matters of spirituality. His parents were at least nominally Catholic, but this fact never prevented his mother from making offerings of candles and frankincense at the graves of her own parents every time a 9 day rolled around. She spoke some prayers which had been taught to her by her brother, Don Elizario, a traditional *sacerdote Maya* or Mayan priest. Don Gabriel had always been fond of his uncle Elizario, whose theology often made more sense to him than that of the *catecistas*. Santiago is the patron saint of Momostenango, and there are always a number of Catholic festivities that take place in front of the church on Santiago's feast day or upon the feast days of the three female saints for whom the districts of Momostenango are named (and who are cheerfully described by anti-Catholic traditionalists as "Santiago's three little hotties"). And it was upon these days that Elizario, up until the end of his long life, took perverse delight in conducting traditional ceremonies at the Altar of the Earth Mother which lies directly across the plaza from the town church, and thus right in front of the eyes of the Catholic priests.

Don Gabriel never got the chance to follow in Don Elizario's footsteps because his wife Dona Maria took a very dim view of such practices, being herself a staunch Catholic. And in fact Don Gabriel, if left to his own devices, would probably not have chosen to be interred on 12 Kan, since it is a "forceful" day on account of its high number as well as being a day somewhat connected with the darker side of magic. But of course Don Gabriel, being dead, had nothing to say about it, and his wife planned the funeral in consort with the priest, paying no heed to the ancient Calendar. It was a Saturday, and more people could attend.

This mixture of religious influences in Don Gabriel's life explains why the mourners are carrying two different types of crosses. The Catholics carry crosses with the horizontal arms somewhat higher than the center of the vertical. The Mayan traditionalists carry crosses with all four arms of equal length. Some of these crosses are entwined with sprigs of evergreen; to the ancient Maya, the cross represented the World Tree. This idea is still very much alive; the crucified Christ in the church at Santiago Atitlan is blossoming with flowers rather than with spouts of blood.

Now the procession is passing the Ramirez home, one of the town's largest and most prosperous houses. But since the Ramirez family is Seventh Day Adventist, no one is at home. They are all at church, with the exception of Adelina, who lives with the Ramirez family but cannot leave the house because she is caring for an elderly bed-ridden relative. As a Seventh Day Adventist herself, she ought to have no patience with these traditional burial rites, but K'iche' was her mother tongue, and she was raised as a traditionalist before converting to the *evangelista* path in adulthood, and it must be admitted that the shuffling mourners and tuneless brass band do in fact create a kind of resonance in her soul which she finds it difficult to deny.

Because there are so many rooms in the Ramirez house, the family takes in lodgers. Typically there are (naturally) a few Seventh Day Adventist missionaries staying there. But the family also plays host to any number of well-known anthropologists and even a few unregenerate pagans who have come to Momostenango to study the Calendar, like the American woman named Jill and (occasionally) me. Somehow this unlikely assemblage of human beings manages to co-exist as a rather companionable unit.

The Seventh Day Adventists are the most successful of the various *evangelistas* who have come here with the express purpose of wooing the Momostecans away from their remarkably stubborn adherence to that ancient pagan relic called the Mayan Calendar. But the

most noticeable are the Mormons. They would stand out from the crowd simply because of their short-sleeved white shirts and monochromatic neckties; the crew-cut blond hair makes them look even more like cultural anomalies. The way they speak Spanish is a painful indication of the fact that they have been shipped here directly after completing a three-week language immersion course in Provo or Salt Lake.

All the same, their doctrine regarding the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel is enormously popular here in Momostenango. The Maya have always felt a deep kinship with Hebrew mythology. Their own creation epic, the *Pop Wuj*, states that the K'iche' people migrated to their present location from a place called Tula which was "somewhere in the east." Many local folks theorize that this was, in fact, what we now call the Holy Land. Still others would prefer to place Tula in Atlantis or even the Pleiades. It is also commonly said that Tula lay "somewhere round about Copan and Esquipulas," which is what the archaeologists think too.

But let us leave the days of mythic migrations and return to the present, for Don Gabriel's funeral procession is now entering the cemetery.

If we have forgiven ourselves for imagining that we have been in the midst of a New Orleans funeral march, we must now forgive ourselves for imagining that we are in Haiti. While there are a few standard graves with crosses, the rows of burial places more often consist of small family mausoleums. These crypts may be anywhere from five to seven feet tall, and about six or seven feet in depth and in width. The Maya are a small people; you can fit about four coffins in one of these family crypts. They are made up to look precisely like real houses, complete with gabled roofs, front doors, windows, and perhaps a bit of a garden. The "windows" of these "houses" are little glass niches in which photographs of the deceased are often placed, along with perhaps a candle. All in all, it is intended to give the impression that one's departed relatives are still all living together in the family home, even sitting next to a friendly candle and gazing out their window just as they did when they were alive.

One can easily identify the mausoleums of traditionalist families. Somewhere near the "front door" may be found a small stone shrine, blackened by smoke, at which offerings are made to the ancestors. These rituals typically take place on days numbered 9 in the Sacred Calendar, for this is the day of the ancestors. The day-sign Ajpu (Ahau) is also associated with the ancestors. On 9 Ajpu, the cemetery comes alive with what looks like a slightly smaller version of the Days of the Dead. (Actually, the Days of the Dead are celebrated very colorfully

in Momos, thus giving traditionalists the chance to throw an “ancestor party” twice a year, once on 9 Ajpu and once in early November.)

But there will be no offerings made for Don Gabriel today in deference to Dona Maria’s strict Catholicism. However, Dona Maria knows perfectly well how to count the days of the Mayan Calendar, just like everyone else in Momostenango. (Even Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists know how to count the days. And yes, I am perfectly serious.) If Dona Maria is smart (and she is), she will avoid visiting her late husband’s grave on 9 days, when more traditionally minded members of his family will pay their respects after their own fashion.

LIFE

The stillness of mid-afternoon siesta settles over the town, but Adelina is still the only person at Casa Ramirez when Jill, the American woman, comes home. Adelina takes one look at her and says, “You’ve been doing those rituals again, haven’t you?”

Jill admits that this is true. There’s no point in denying it. A traditional Mayan altar is square and made of stone, sometimes bearing a bit of a whimsical resemblance to the National Forest Service barbecue pits so often seen in American campgrounds. You have to kneel in front of the altar and use wood or newspaper to get a fire lit so that you can make offerings of candles and copal. This, in and of itself, makes for a pretty smoky environment. But copal burns with a thick black smoke; the greater the offering, the more black smoke you get. Tourists who come to Momos for a few hours on market days to buy the famous Momostecan blankets are often shocked to see people walking around town with smoke-blackened faces. But any local person knows that this simply means they’ve been doing ritual.

Adelina goes about her business without comment. One standing rule among our eccentric multi-national family at Casa Ramirez is that one never argues about religion. Never. Not under any circumstances.

Since 12 Kan is both a high-numbered day and a day-sign associated with magic, it is not the sort of day upon which Jill would ordinarily make offerings. But today marks the initiation of Don Jorge into the very highest level of the Mayan priesthood. And since Jorge is a dear friend of Jill’s, she is lending him a little bit of extra energy.

Daykeepers (*aj q’ijab*) are initiated on 8 B’atz’ (Chuen). Ever since Barbara Tedlock published her landmark book, *Time and the Highland Maya*, back in 1982, a few adventurous

foreigners have made their way into the mountains to visit Momos on 8 B'atz'. In the last few years, even more have begun to show up – ever since a respected community elder and Mayan priest began extending his invitation to serious seekers to join him in Momos for 8 B'atz'. He hopes that exposure to the authentic Mayan tradition will help them get beyond their passion for the plethora of self-styled 2012 gurus whose “contact” with the real Maya doesn't extend much farther than tipping the bellboy or pinching the barmaid's behind at their five-star resort in Cozumel.

But there are other initiation days as well. A Daykeeper or *aj q'ij* is the most fundamental practitioner of Mayan spirituality. Several levels above this is the institution of the *chuchq'ajaw*. Literally, this means “mother-father.” A *chuchq'ajaw* serves her or his community with the nurturing soul of a mother and the powerful authority of a father. These individuals are initiated on 8 Kej (Manik).

I am not sure how many levels of hierarchy there are in the Mayan priesthood; it seems to go on virtually forever. Priests who reach extremely high levels of initiation are regarded as magicians after a fashion because they have become masters of the powerful inner energy which is called *koyopa*, the “lightning in the blood.” This energy is symbolized by the Feathered Serpent, and Kan is the day of the Feathered Serpent; hence individuals who reach such a level – like Don Jorge – are initiated on high-numbered Kan days.

Part of the initiation is, of course, secret, but there will be a nice rousing party afterwards, as usual. Jill is trying to get ready for the event by dressing in the traditional Momostecan women's *traje*, a black-and-white skirt of the same pattern as the well-known blankets which draw shopping tourists to Momos on the market days, Wednesday and Sunday.

Adelina says, “Can't you ever get it right? The way you tie it, you always end up looking pregnant.”

Adelina helps Jill get her *traje* right, and she walks down the street in the late afternoon until she has passed beyond the central part of the community and reaches the outskirts. The pavement vanishes. Momostenango now looks like a village rather than a town.

Don Jorge's family compound is perched on top of a hill. In addition to three generations of family members, there are chickens and goats in abundance. By the time the general public has arrived, the priestly ceremonies are over. Don Jorge removes his robes; underneath, he wears the traditional white garments of Momostecan men, with the red sash.

The party begins in a sober fashion with the plaintive music of marimbas – what many townspeople call “real Mayan music.” The older couples dance around the main room of Don Jorge’s house in a dignified and stately fashion.

Jill is unhappy to see that Don Silvestro is present. He has a reputation for abusing the priesthood for his own purposes. He hunts down the very few Western women who come to Momostenango for more than just a few hours’ worth of blanket shopping on the market days. He informs them that his mystic Mayan vision has allowed him to see that they are afflicted with evil spirits. He promises to help them with a “traditional exorcism” ceremony. Of course, Silvestro’s version of an exorcism for Western women consists primarily of skirt lifting – hunting for evil spirits, no doubt. But since Momos is not a tourist destination, the few women travelers who visit the town on their own tend to be intrepid, canny, and fiercely independent. No one knows precisely how many times Silvestro has had his lights punched out by athletic American and Scandinavian blondes who easily tower over his slender five-foot frame. All anyone knows is that even the humiliation of walking around town with bandages on his nose will never stop Silvestro from hunting for the girl of his dreams (blonde hair, slutty disposition, you get the picture). As unpalatable as his behavior may be, there is nothing to do but put up with him. Everyone’s family has been here for hundreds of years; it is terribly unlikely that anyone is going to go anywhere else. So there is no choice but to accept everyone, even if they’re a bit weird.

If Jill is displeased to see Don Silvestro, she is happy to see that Don Victorio and his wife Esperanza are present. Don Victorio is a jovial and jolly Mayan priest whose good humor enlivens every occasion. A great deal of his jollity is due to his extraordinary capacity to consume large quantities of alcohol. Now he is beginning to raise his glass and make toasts. Let’s toast Don Jorge. Let’s toast the priesthood. Let’s toast the whole town.

Now the party-goers are starting to get drunk. Traditionalists who dislike alcohol will take this as their cue to leave.

Young Rafael replaces the traditional marimba music with the pounding beat of Latin pop. Now it’s a real party. He even manages to sneak a dubbed-in Spanish version of “Oops, I Did It Again” into the tape player. He does this in hopes of impressing Catalina, whose musical laughter and soulful eyes have caused every young man in the town to fall madly, hopelessly in love with her. (She was born on an Aq’ab’al day, which is famous for its romantic predilections).

Catalina loves to dance, and Rafael is hoping she will favor the crowd with her “locally famous” Britney imitation, especially since she has a captive audience that is much too drunk to be critical.

But Catalina is busy. She is sitting in a corner with two of her girlfriends. They are all taking an English class together, and Catalina has at last succeeded in using her cell phone to record Jill reading passages from T. S. Eliot’s “Preludes” in her perfectly correct, well schooled English. The girls are listening intently.

Despite her predilection for cutting edge technology and outdated pop music, the much-loved Catalina is in fact a hard core traditionalist. The “catch” of the town will have to be “caught” on an Aq’ab’al (Akbal) day and wedded on a B’atz’ day. She has already begun the regimen of training which will lead to her initiation as a Daykeeper some four months hence, on the next recurrence of 8 B’atz’. This will be the first of several initiations leading her to the destiny that came to her in a dream – that of becoming a full-fledged Mayan priestess. It’s a great deal of work to keep up with her ritual training while at the same time taking an English class and one of those free classes in computer skills that they give down at the Civic Center. But she’s trying.

It is past midnight now, and Don Victorio’s unquenchable enthusiasm for toasting everything under the sun and moon has now led to him actually staggering around the room. He seems to have some notion of raising a toast to each and every one of the 260 *nawales* or spirits of the *chol q’ij*. Fortunately, he falls asleep in his chair before he is able to attempt it. Apparently the *nawales* are looking after his welfare.

But now Esperanza will have to figure out how to cart him down the hill to his home. Since she is only five feet tall, and her husband a man of admirable girth, this is problematical. Jill, who has enjoyed several *copas de vino* in her own right, offers to help out. Together, they are hauling him along the path that leads downhill. But Jill herself is the size of a Mayan woman rather than a typical American, so even the two of them together are having trouble carrying him.

Catalina shows up and offers to lend a hand. After all, she is a student of the Sacred Calendar, and Don Victorio is a respected priest – even if, at the present moment, an egregiously drunken one. But halfway down the hill, Esperanza slips on a rock in the darkness, and Don Victorio goes tumbling down the path, rolling and rolling. This awakens him to the point where he can actually sit up, only to find himself sliding downhill again, this time on his backside. He

lands with a crash near the bottom of the hill. When the three women catch up to him, a bit of prodding and poking, followed by grunts from Don Victorio, convince them that he is unharmed, although clearly falling back asleep again.

Upon establishing that her husband is safe (if not sound), Dona Esperanza remarks cheerfully, "I guess that was the quickest way to get him down the hill."

The three women shoulder the besotted priest once more and begin walking, slowly and with determination, the final quarter of a mile to Victorio's home.

It is the gray time before dawn. The roosters are crowing madly and the dogs are beginning to bark. There is a haze hanging coolly over the valley. Soon, the sun will rise upon 13 Kame (Cimi). It has been doing so since the beginning of time. It will continue to do so long after the 13th *bak'tun* has come to its appointed end in 2012. It will continue to do so even after the present *p'iktun* comes to an end in 4772. Human life is short, but sacred time is forever.

As the three women finally unload their burden in Don Victorio's parlor, his dogs jump up and down. They are happy to see him.