

HAPPY NEW YEAR, MAYAN STYLE

by Kenneth Johnson

Ever since the Maya gained the right to practice their traditional spirituality (in 1996), the “ancient ways” are becoming more and more common. The Maya have begun to celebrate the beginning of their ancient solar year (*haab* in Yucatec or ‘*ab* in K’iche’). There are usually a fair number of fire ceremonies and other events going on. The men wear their *traje* or traditional garb, perhaps for the only time in the year, since they do their daily jobs in ordinary clothes. Women wear *traje* all the time, but for New Year’s they like to put on their most colorful *huipiles* and get all decked out.

This year they will celebrate the arrival of the year 1 Iq’ (Yucatec: Ik) on Feb 21.¹ Though there will no doubt be plenty of partying, there is also likely to be a bit of trepidation as well, for Iq’ is the most turbulent of the Year Lords.

The year Kej (Yucatec: Manik) is said to be powerful and forceful, but for the most part in a very positive way. The word *kej* means “deer” in K’iche’, but it also means “horse.” If you try to ride a wild horse, you’d better have the gods on your side. It is said that powerful leaders who are honest and true will rise to the forefront in Kej years, but those who are dishonest will be thrown down, like someone thrown from a horse. 1974, the year of Watergate, was a Kej year.

After Kej comes E’ (Yucatec: Eb). This causes everyone to relax and smile. E’ is the mellowest of the Year Lords. Since E’ represents the Road of Life, it is said that one may travel the road with joy in E’ years. Many Guatemalan business people look forward to E’ years because they are believed to be good for tourism!

Then comes No’j (Yucatec: Caban). In K’iche’, *no’j* literally means “thought.” If one says, “Let’s put our *no’job* together,” they mean “Let’s put our ideas together.” In these years, inspiration is possible, since at its best No’j symbolizes the mind turned towards heaven. But the mind can be a trickster as well. In Mayan folklore there is a character named Juan No’j who makes a lot of promises but who just might end up selling your soul to the devil. Yes, the mind changes its direction easily, so we must be careful to put our intentions in order. Interestingly enough, US presidential elections are always held in No’j years.

Iq’ is the hurricane, the whirlwind. Thus it can be the most “tempestuous” year of all. 2001 was an Iq’ year. Four years later, in the next Iq’ year, came the literal hurricane called Katrina. A bit of trepidation is therefore understandable. All the same, when the hurricane is under control, it becomes the sacred Breath of Life, so Iq’ can, in contradictory fashion, be the most spiritual year of all!

¹ I am aware of a different *haab* count which places the New Year date in April, thus resulting in this year being 2 Iq’ rather than 1 Ik. This variant count is common all over the English-speaking Internet but it is not practiced in Guatemala. I am aware of where this variant year count originates, but would be quite grateful if someone could explain to me the mechanics and rationale behind it.

In older days, the celebration of the new solar year was less festive, more quiet and family oriented. I passed the New Year of February 2010 in traditionalist Momostenango. During the five “dead days” of the *uayeb*, the Aztecs of ancient times used to extinguish all fires and pass the time in silence. Similarly, in Momos we tried to do as little as possible, saving those five days for meditation and reflection.

When the evening of the New Year arrived, there were celebrations at home among family members. In fact, the local elementary school had staged a colorful festival and talent show in honor of the New Year. When I arrived at the home of my friends, the Itzep family, on the evening of Feb 21 (the New Year was still being held on Feb 22 at that time), Don Rigoberto was still engaged with the events at the school, so I sat in the fading light and chatted with his wife Dona Maria.

As we spoke, we suddenly heard the sound of rain pounding and rattling on the tin roof of the house. This was highly unusual, since February is the height of the dry season in the mountains, and any precipitation at all is rare. Maria found it amusing, since the previous year had been 10 Iq’ (Ik in Yucatec). She laughed and said, “Lord Iq’ is the year of wind and rain, so as you can see, he is departing from us in his own special way.”

Soon Don Rigoberto arrived, and I gathered with the family in the main room. Don Rigoberto was not prepared to begin the festivities until the sun had completely set. Many Daykeepers in Momostenango assert that the energy of the coming day does not begin to make its presence felt until after sundown. The energy of the new day grows during the night, and comes into its full glory with the next sunrise.

So we waited until dark. Then the candles and the incense were lighted in the shrine room. We sat down to dinner. In the K’iche’ language, the Lord of the Year is called the Mam, which is the common K’iche’ word for “grandfather.” Any mature man may be addressed as *tat*, while *mam* refers specifically to one’s grandfather. There are several traditional foods served during the arrival of the Mam. One of them is a special tamale called the *tayuyo*. This rather impressive-looking dish was made of alternating layers of black corn and white corn. According to the Maya, there are four colors of corn – red, black, white and yellow. These also correspond to the four directions, the four elements, and the four races of humankind. In this particular ceremony, the white layers symbolized heaven, the sky, or the male principle, while the black layers symbolized the rich loam of earth, the spirit of Mother Earth, the feminine principle. The food itself was a kind of cosmogram uniting heaven and earth, male and female.

We were also served a cup of a cornmeal drink called *atole*, though the special recipe used for the Arrival of the Mam is a very ancient one, and not much like ordinary *atole*. It is made entirely without spices, and can “take some getting used to” for many Western palates.

When dinner was done, we made our way into the shrine room. With Rigoberto and Maria, their four children, and their housemate with her young child, as well as the visiting outsider (me), it was a bit of a tight squeeze.

Now it was time for another mixture of masculine and feminine energies. Don Rigoberto sat in his chair while all the women in the family lined up. One by one they approached him. He tied a red thread around their right wrists and another one around their left ankles. Then Dona Maria took the shaman's chair, and the men lined up. One by one, we approached her and were tied with a red thread around our left wrists and another one around our right ankles. Since red is the color of life and vitality, this little ritual has the effect of providing us with special power at this most powerful time of the year, as well as mixing the night and day, yin and yang, female and male polarities of the universe – the men are tied off by the shamaness and the thread goes around his left wrist rather than the right, while the women are tied off by the shaman, once again reversing the polarities with the thread on the right wrist.

After we all succeeded in squeezing close to the altar for prayer, the evening ritual was nearly finished.

The final touch in the proceedings was “setting a chair for the Mam.” An empty chair is left sitting overnight in front of the family shrine, so that the Grandfather or Lord of the New Year may enter, sit down, and make himself comfortable. (Have you ever heard of the ancient New Year referred to as “the seating of Pop”? Now you know why.)

By the time I walked home to my lodgings, the last traces of Lord 10 Iq' had disappeared altogether. The rain was gone and the stars were shining.

Kenneth Johnson

www.jaguarwisdom.org

ken@jaguarwisdom.org