

INITIATION OF A DAYKEEPER

by **Kenneth Johnson**

As astonishing as it might sound, there are over a thousand Daykeepers (K'iche': *aj q'ijab*) in Momostenango – in a town of 40,000 souls, that's one out of every 40 citizens. Under the circumstances, then, it ought not to be all that surprising that Anita and I found ourselves being greeted with great enthusiasm by an *aj q'ij* as we were walking down the street doing a great deal of nothing.

It was the afternoon of 7 Tz'i (Yucatec: 7 Oc), the day before the all-important Calendar ceremonies for 8 B'atz' (8 Chuen), the day when new Daykeepers are initiated.

And that was the whole point. Don Miguel Vicente was about to begin the initiation ceremonies for one of his apprentices and was inviting us to come along. The apprentice himself was standing next to a beat-up pick-up truck and motioning for us to hop in the back. We did. Don Miguel got into the front with his student and off we went.

It was a ride of about half an hour through the mountainous terrain surrounding Momostenango, and the truck was entirely without shock absorbers. All the same, it managed to ascend a number of steep, kidney-crunching inclines and round some hairpin curves to arrive at the apprentice's family farmhouse, where we were ushered into a small building containing the family shrine.

A Mayan altar can be many different things. Some, like that of don Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac, contain no Christian symbolism whatsoever, though most are a colorful mixture of Native and Christian elements. This one initially appeared to be thoroughly Catholic, without any specifically Mayan symbolism. But that was about to change.

Opening one of his several bags, don Miguel scattered fresh pine needles over the altar and upon the floor surrounding it. Offerings to the *nawales* (the same word as Aztec *naguales*) or spirits of the days consisted of packs of cigarettes, small bottles of liqueur, and candles, which were likewise placed upon the altar. Most importantly, the initiate's *vara* or bag of divining seeds occupied the central place on the altar, for a Daykeeper's initiation is to a large extent centered on her or his consecration or "marriage" to his "sacred bundle."

Potsherds were set upon the floor among the pine needles, along with a small vase of “holy water.” This was not, however, the kind of holy water to be found in a church. Its sacredness arose from the fact that it had been gathered from a stream flowing next to the public shrine dedicated to the number 1 – the place where Daykeepers do ceremony on days numbered 1, to welcome in the lord of the new *trecena*. Don Rigoberto has often remarked that the holy water is the ink in which one’s destiny is written, and the pine needles are the paint brush with which we write the script.

Reaching into his bag again, don Miguel drew forth a scarf which he wrapped around his head. It is customary for Daykeepers to keep their heads covered during ceremonies. After the lighting of candles and an opening prayer, don Miguel proceeded to deliver a speech to his apprentice, a kind of spiritual pep talk –spoken in a rapid-fire blend of K’iche’ and Spanish -- in which the novice is reminded of his personal and communal responsibilities as a Daykeeper and enjoined to lead an honest, decent and upstanding life as befits his profession.

Though the subject matter was serious enough, I do not want to give the impression that this was a moment of great solemnity (though it is true that everyone was wearing their cleanest shirt). A small child crawled on the floor and explored the pine needles. The family dog poked his head in the door to see what was going on. Don Miguel’s speech was twice interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone; after a brief conversation, he put the phone back in his pocket and picked up where he had left off. When he was finished, the young man’s father gave a similar speech. Not satisfied with everything the men had said, his mother decided to put in a few words as well. Only then was it time for the next step.

All of us knelt amidst the pine needles in front of the altar. Don Miguel carried two large candles, unlit and still in their wrappings. He touched the candles to the top of the heads of each participant, and prayed over us.

Then it was time for the counting of the days. Fires were lit in two of the potsherd fragments on the floor. Don Miguel produced bundles of copal incense wrapped in corn husks, and scattered the chunks of copal into the fire a few at a time as he called upon all 260 days of the *tzolk’in*. He began the count with B’atz’ (Chuen), as is customary among the contemporary Maya. I will try to give a brief example of what it sounded like, using the days I’x and Tz’ikin (Ix and Men in Yucatec) as examples.

“Ahau (Lord) I’x! 1 I’x, 2 I’x, 3 I’x, 4 I’x, 5 I’x, 6 I’x, 7 I’x, 8 I’x, 9 I’x, 10 I’x, 11 I’x, 12 I’x, 13 I’x.... for the strength and power of Mother Nature, Mother Earth, and the energy of our sacred altars, Ahau I’x!

“Ahau (Lord) Tz’ikin! 1 Tz’ikin, 2 Tz’ikin, 3 Tz’ikin, 4 Tz’ikin, 5 Tz’ikin, 6 Tz’ikin, 7 Tz’ikin, 8 Tz’ikin, 9 Tz’ikin, 10 Tz’ikin, 11 Tz’ikin, 12 Tz’ikin, 13 Tz’ikin.... For our fortune, our financial well-being, and for our vision, all that we ask for and cry out for, Ahau Tz’ikin!”

And so on, through all 260 days....

Then the father of the family, seated on a stool, opened a small black book. In it were the names of several generations of family members who were among the departed – those who had now become the Ancestors. As the father intoned the name of each family member, don Miguel flicked a bit of alcohol from one of the liqueur bottles onto the fire with his fingers. (It was a neat trick; I wish I knew how to do it.) Some of the ancestors seemed especially lively, blazing up in enthusiastic tongues of flame when their names were called out and they were fed with the alcohol. Thus family members who have passed from this world also took part in the ceremony, side by side with the living, giving their blessings to the young man who had chosen the Daykeeper’s path.

When all was finished, food was handed around. In Mayan culture, food and spiritual teaching seem to go together. While Daykeepers may abstain from food or sex briefly for ritual purposes, the turning away from ordinary life, so powerfully emphasized in some spiritual traditions, is not a part of Mayan spirituality. It might even be considered anti-social behavior. Our participation in the totality of human existence helps to feed the gods. Feeding is a metaphor for.... Ah, but that’s another article.

Now we piled into the back of another pick-up truck. I already felt the blessing of the Ancestors upon me, for this was a newer truck with better suspension. The whole family was going to town, so we were packed in tight as we rocked and rolled down the mountain toward Momostenango. By this time it was dark. Looking up, I could see that the night was crystal clear. Gemini and Orion were shining above me. I recalled that the Palenque Creation Myth names these constellations as the places where creation began. The Palenque inscriptions were carved over a thousand years ago, and the same stars that inspired the scribes of King Serpent Jaguar II

continued to shine down upon the initiation of a new Daykeeper. I felt a sense of the vastness of time, I felt the whole of eternity inherent in the present moment. And then we reached town.

Anita and I stepped out. Unfortunately, we would not be able to follow the young man on his all-night journey; we had made a commitment to attend a pre-dawn ceremony at the shrine of Nima Sabal. The young Daykeeper would travel, in company with don Miguel and his family, to the five major altars of Momostenango, all except one of which are dedicated to the energy of the numbers. The circuit would begin at the shrine to the number 1. Then the group would progress to the 6 place, the 8 place, and the 9 place, ending up at the fifth altar, which is in the center of town in front of the Catholic church. At each shrine, the new initiate would be presented to the spirits. After sunrise, everyone would go home for some much needed sleep.

But before that, there would, of course, be more food. There is always more food.

Maybe even a beer or two.

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