

## The Changing of the Bak'tuns

I am able at last to write this report because the Internet seems to be working. It usually works when we have electricity. Of course, the town's electricity tends to crash when it rains. Still, we appreciate a bit of rain. Without it, the water table sinks. When that happens, the whole town can be without running water for days at a time. This makes it very difficult to shave. But since you can't drink the water and have to make your coffee out of purified water, that was one morning pleasure I did not have to sacrifice. Under the circumstances, you can probably understand why Momostenango isn't a big deal on the tourist circuit. But this is also why Momos remains what it is – one of the most deeply traditional of all Mayan towns, a place where the Sacred Calendar of 260 days is still a vital way of life, the center of spiritual and ritual activity for many citizens.

So when my friend Anita romped off to Izapa for the changing of the *bak'tuns*, I found myself the only foreigner in the whole town. (Well, not exactly.... there were a couple of Mormon missionaries, but they didn't seem especially interested in the fire ceremonies.)

If you had come here ten years ago and asked a Momostecan what she or he thought about Dec 21, 2012, and what was supposed to “happen,” they would have stared at you as if you were nuts. They didn't know anything about it. Why should they? The last Long Count date was carved in 910 AD, so I think it's safe to say that it lies far beyond the grandfathers' grandfathers' tales of even the oldest living midwives and shamans. They only knew about it because of occasional curious Westerners who passed through town and pestered them for information. They became curious, did some research, pondered what their ancestors had meant by it all, and decided to celebrate.

The traditionalists (*costumbristas*) developed a program for the end of Bak'tun 12 (which is actually the 13th *bak'tun* because the ancient Maya counted from 0 rather than 1) and the beginning of Bak'tun 13. Since the “planning committee” for the celebrations was meeting at the house of a close friend, I got to sit in on most of it. I can't claim to have understood much, since the Maya speak... well, they speak Maya. I don't go much beyond “*Saqarik, tat, utz wach la?*” Fortunately, the statements to the public were issued in Spanish.

In addition to the adherents of the ancient ways, there are also many Catholics and Evangelists in Momos, and the program was designed to reach the whole community, not just the traditionalists. In Mayan culture, a sense of community is of vital importance. So there were celebrations to honor the community spirit for everyone. There were also films, programs, and discussion groups about ecological issues. This was what the Maya regarded as the most important issue facing the world during this new cycle of time – the fate of the earth itself. All together, I guess you could say they were “thinking globally but acting locally.”

They also issued some other advice to their citizens for the days surrounding the changing of the *bak'tuns*:

- Turn off the computer
- Turn off the cell phone
- Turn off the TV

Experience the power of silence

Despite the focus on the total community and the emphasis on meditation, they still couldn't



resist having a ceremony or two. The first one was held in the late afternoon of Dec 20 on the sacred hill of Paklom at the center of town. Some of us arrived early to prepare the offerings. I was set to work plucking flower petals that would mark the four directions of the altar – red for east, purple for west, white for north, and yellow for south.

Preparing the Flower Offerings

When the time had come, a group of *costumbristas* approached the altar and formed a circle. They blew on conch shells to open the ceremony. Four shamans called upon the four directions – or as we say, they “opened” the four directions. The Aj Q’ij Rech Tinamit lit candles of blue and green (sky and earth) at the center of the altar. The word *aj q’ij* means “Daykeeper” and *tinamit* means “village” or “community.” The Daykeeper of the community is the high priest of the region.



Opening the Four Directions

Then the shamans who stood at the four directions called out the names of the day signs as the great fire was lit and began to blaze. Each shaman calls out the names of five days, beginning and ending with a day that corresponds to the direction in which they are standing. Offerings of copal, *agua de florida* and sesame are cast into the fire.



#### The Fire Blazes High at Paklom

When the day signs of the 260-day calendar had all been invoked, the community leaders danced around the fire with their staffs of office. Then the women danced. Then the men. As it grew dark, it was announced that the next ceremony would be at the town's highest altar, Nima Sabal, and that it would begin at 4:00 AM so as to welcome in the dawn of Dec 21, the end of the old *bak'tun* and the beginning of the new one.

A large crowd showed up not-so-promptly at four. Once again the ceremonial fire was lit; once again the four directions were opened and the names of the 260 days were recited. As the young women danced around the ceremonial fire in the pre-dawn light and people called out joyously to the music of marimbas, I noticed one young woman carrying a copy of the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred Mayan creation epic, in her hands as she danced.



Nima Sabal, Before Dawn, December 21 2012

I was reminded of the scene in the *Popol Vuh* that describes the first moment of dawning on the newly created Fourth World. The “original people,” migrating through darkness, have found their way to the top of a mountain. They light fires and burn incense. Light begins to glow on the dark horizon. When the first sun rises on the new creation, they all call out with joy.

I joined the men as they began their dance around the fire. The sun began to rise behind the distant mountains. As the shouts of joy continued, I realized what the civic fathers had designed during those planning sessions in which I drifted off, unable to understand their K’iche’ conversations. They had built a fire on the highest mountain. They had made offerings. They called out with joy as the sun rose. They were re-creating the renewal of the world in accordance with their ancient myths. We were re-envisioning the world.



Dawn at Nima Sabal with Ceremonial Fires in the Distance

“There were countless peoples, but there was just one dawn for all tribes.”

-- Popol Vuh (trans. Dennis Tedlock)

When the dancing was over and the sun fully risen, we were served a very ancient type of tamale called a *tayuyo*, with layers of white and black cornmeal to represent sky and earth. We were also served a variety of ancient *atole* whose bland taste made me thankful that spices had been introduced to the world at large during the Renaissance.

But the opening of the new cycle wasn't finished yet. The well-known Daykeeper Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac came to me and pointed to a pick-up truck that waited by the side of the road. “Go with them,” he told me. “There is a stone.”

A stone? Okay, cool. As I climbed into the back of the truck with four or five other men, I noticed something that distinguished all of them. They were the largest men in the community. I am not particularly big or tall by U.S. standards, but I tend to tower over the local Maya. The pick-up truck brigade had been chosen for size. Whatever it was, it must be a rather large stone.

We traveled through the center of Momostenango, then past the cemetery and up into the hills where Momos ceases to look like a town and begins to look like a village. Our bumpy dirt road ended in front of a collection of fences enclosing flocks of sheep and goats. We knocked on the door of a farm house; a young man in his early twenties answered and motioned for us to enter.

In the central courtyard of the farmhouse lay an object covered with a cloth. The young man removed the cloth and I found myself gazing at a stela, a standing stone monument of the type found all over Classic Mayan cities and erected to mark important changes in the cycles of time. The only difference was that this particular stone was not weathered with age but still dusty from the sculptor's chisel. The young man was a stone carver. The stela was marked with hieroglyphs that read Bak'tun 13, 13 No'j (the name of the K'iche' solar year, the day sign equivalent to Yucatec Caban), and 4 Ajpu (4 Ahau, the *tzolk'in* or *ch'ol q'ij* date of December 21).

It took seven of us to lift and carry the stela to the pick-up truck. We bumped back down the hill and across town to the central plaza. Vendors were setting up their booths for the town market. Their gazes told us that they were not in the mood to take the booths down again just so that our pick-up truck could drive a bit closer to the town hall. So we had to carry the stela again, this time through the market square and to the town hall.

At noon, the stone was raised in the garden of the town hall.

Five hundred years after the conquest, the Maya remain the Maya.

