

LIVING WITH THE MAYA

A Personal Reminiscence

By Kenneth Johnson

[NOTE: Most Internet readers are familiar with the Yucatec names for the day signs. I learned the names and terminology in K'iche'. I don't want to be inaccurate by pretending that my sources were speaking Yucatec – in fact some of them have never even heard the Yucatec names of the days. So I have written the names in K'iche' but with the more familiar Yucatec names in brackets for easier reference.]

It's pleasant to relax and enjoy the sunlight down in the Maya lands. You can hang out forever in expatriate centers like Lake Atitlan or Antigua. You can meet local sages in colorful clothes who will use their best "school" Spanish to "speak New Age" with you. They will use familiar words like "harmonic," or "resonance." And of course they will be familiar with everyone's favorite word, "galactic" (and I hate to rain on anyone's parade, but that word cannot be found in any dictionary for any of the thirty existing Mayan languages).

You know you are entering a different world altogether when you travel to a place where the only way to reach your destination is the chicken bus. Stuffed like sardines into a rickety old American grade school bus, hanging onto the luggage rack for dear life but unable to move due to the sheer number of human bodies, one races madly around blind mountain curves. You will be thoroughly convinced that the elaborate shrine the driver had constructed upon the dashboard is an absolute necessity for survival.

At last you reach your destination. The first thing you notice is that now no one is approaching you and trying to sell you trinkets, beads, or native clothing which won't fit anyone you know. In fact, no one is approaching you at all.

I remember when I first arrived in Momostenango. It was a market day. Even as I trundled through the town square with my luggage, I was quickly aware of the fact that no one was speaking Spanish anymore. There was only K'iche'. From the very beginning, you're lost, without an anchor. Not a single word makes any sense to you. Children hide behind their mothers' skirts and stare at you with wide eyes. The mothers themselves turn away and won't look at you. You know that they are from the villages and have only come into town for the market; they are completely unaccustomed to the sight of foreigners.

The rigors of life in the mountains take a bit of getting used to. There is a rainy season and a dry season. During the dry season, we had running water from about 7:00 PM until sometime around dawn. The women at the boarding house where I lived would keep the faucet turned on in the large stone sink called a *pila*. As soon as the water began to run, they could hear it splashing into the heavy stone sink. At that point, everyone would leap into action. Every single bucket or container in the house was immediately pressed into service. We filled up the sink, then we filled up every container. Sometimes the "bucket brigade" took hours.

More often than not, I would rise in the morning and go into the bathroom in hopes of a shower. A thin trickle of water soon disappeared into nothing. When I asked about it, I was told, “You have to get up early to get the water.” I began to leap out of bed at 5:30 or 6:00 AM and dash to the bathroom. The result was the same disappearing trickle. As I stood there sighing with disappointment, one of the household Mayan women would walk by, combing out her long, black, freshly washed hair, smiling at me as if to say: “Silly gringo... Did you think 5:30 was what we meant by *early*???”

In time I had to surrender to pouring buckets of cold water over my head in the back yard. The Maya girls thought I was thoroughly amusing and laughed out loud. But they started to like me a lot better.

Of course, you could always go there in the rainy season. There’s plenty of running water then. But it’s hard to walk down the street even for such necessities as a tube of toothpaste or some shampoo, because the streets have turned into raging rivers. Shortly after Hurricane Agatha, the water was so high that my twelve-year-old neighbor was washed away to her death. I lived near the cemetery and can still remember the day they all carried the little white coffin down the street, accompanied by an out-of-tune brass band that made me think of New Orleans.

Assuming you can get anywhere in the rainy season, you will have to put up with frequent power outages. The formula is: Dry season = no water, rainy season = no electricity. If your friends happen to be Daykeepers or Calendar shamans, this is typically not a problem. All Mayan ceremonies require an abundance of candles, so a Daykeeper will always have plenty on hand. The lights go out. For a moment you are sitting in the absolute dark. Then you hear the crackle of a match, you see the flame, and the candles begin to go on all around you. The conversation resumes as if it had never been interrupted.

And what conversations there are! Daykeepers tend to hang out with other Daykeepers, and knowledge is regarded as the same thing as food, so talk around the dinner table is likely to center upon esoteric matters.

In the beginning, it all sounds very formal. Just as you might have expected, the knowledge is conveyed in serious and sonorous tones. When an elder speaks, everyone else is silent. The same thing is true of the ceremonies. At first, you are afraid to approach. And in fact, it is unlikely that anyone will invite you to do so – that is, if they don’t really know you. You might imagine that they wish to keep their ancient ways strictly to themselves. But that isn’t really the case. The truth is – they’re shy. They have heard rumors about Western ways, about our wealth, our extravagant lifestyles. They are curious, but they regard us as creatures from a different world. Even in their best Spanish, they still don’t quite know what to say to us beyond “hello.” And the ceremonies themselves are so replete with ritual formulae and ancient prayers that they initially give one the impression of something very serious, very formal.

It takes time for things to change. It can take months of sitting in the homes of Daykeepers and sharing the essence of their ordinary lives. I used to sit with families around television sets which were so ancient they could not even be given away for free up here. Everyone watched re-runs of Mexican television shows which had been showing over and over again for the past ten or fifteen

years. My dear friend at the boarding house was particularly fascinated with *telenovelas* (soap operas). Of course she knew precisely what would happen – she had seen each and every episode countless times before. But life there was made of simple pleasures – what is already well known is friendly and familiar. No one needs to be constantly bombarded with the new and the different.

In the course of time, one comes to see that life in such traditional environments is just that – it's traditional. One day is pretty much the same as another. The men rise early and go to work, whether performing manual labor for an overlord or farming their own cornfields. The women rise even earlier; they cook and look after the children. There are no hospitals. There are only a few doctors. The most respected citizens in town are the midwives. Changes in the daily routine consist of births, marriages, and deaths.

Thus, in time, one begins to move to a different rhythm. The rhythm of the *ch'ol q'ij* [tzolkin].

One begins to wait in anticipation of favorite ceremonial days. It's 8 B'atz' [Chuen], so now we will initiate the shamans. There will actually be some guests at the local hotel! Maybe even foreigners!

Tomorrow will be 13 Tz'ikin [Men]. The shops that sell magical supplies have already laid in their stock of sugar dyed green in anticipation of the prosperity ceremonies that are held on that day!

Soon, the esoteric talk and the ceremonies begin to seem less formal. It all begins to feel more like a family party. That's how you will know that you have entered the flow of sacred time which is the *ch'ol q'ij*. Perhaps you will even be able to catch some of the local dialect, the common mix of Spanish and K'iche' as the women talk while working in the kitchen:

“Pablo really likes Angela.”

“All the boys like Angela. She was born on an Aq'ab'al [Akbal] day. You know how romantic *they* are!”

“Yes, but Pablo is Kan [Chicchan]. And you know how silent those serpents are. He will never tell her how he feels!”

Now, not suddenly but gradually, everything has become different. The ceremonies, the teaching conversations, the rhythm of sacred time – it is no longer a distant and formal affair but has become a part of your everyday life.

Sometimes you know what day it is even if you have forgotten to count. I can remember walking outdoors on certain mornings and seeing plumes of smoke rising from behind the walls of the nearby cemetery as traditionalists lit fires at the graves of their ancestors. And you say to yourself: “Must be an Ajpu [Ahau] day.” And you know this because you know that Ajpu is the day when they honor the ancestors.

Finally, it reaches the point where the difference between “ordinary time” and “sacred time” disappears altogether. One of the advantages to being a Mayan traditionalist is that you always have two birthdays every year – your Gregorian birthday and your *cumpleaños cosmico* – your “cosmic birthday” or Mayan Calendar birthday. (If you’re lucky, you can sometimes get two *cumpleaños cosmicos* in a single year for a total of three birthday parties.)

What did we do when someone’s *cumpleaños cosmico* rolled around?

Just what anyone else would do on a birthday. We invited all the friends and relatives, gathered at the local pizza parlor, ordered several large pizzas and pitchers of coke, and partied till the restaurant closed its doors.

Sacred time, ordinary time, timeless time....

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