

The Politics of Maximón in Zunil.

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Abstract

Maximón is an important figure in the religiosity of Guatemala. He makes his appearance in various towns of the country and much has been written about his presence in Santiago Atitlán. However, this literature is not always representative of what happens in other towns where Maximón is present. A recent debate over Maximón's presence in the Highland town of Zunil gives way for comparison on the politics and complexities of a post-colonial idol today, it examines the various stories of origin as well as how these influence current perspectives of Maximón today.

Methods

The following research was done through the month of February 2006 in the highland town of Zunil, a *municipio de* Quetzaltenango (Xela) in Guatemala. Zunil is a Maya town of about 13.000 inhabitants. Here it is rare to see a woman or girl that is not in *traje*, although younger girls have lost the use of the use of their *shaq'ab* (headwrap) and the men of the town have left their *traje* for western clothing. Yet despite the loss of some dress, the town of Zunil is still very traditionalist and localist. Like the majority of Mayan towns in Guatemala, Zunil has been influenced by religious syncretism that dates back to colonialism and continues until this day. At first, my initial idea was to arrive to Zunil and perform a comparative study of the post-colonial religions (mainly catholic and evangelical) and analyze the syncretism that exists with Mayan cosmovision. However, when I arrived in Zunil and found out through professor J. Levi that the controversial image of Maximón or San Simón that we had read about from Santiago Atitlán also had a place in Zunil, I became interested in finding out more.

Initially, I hoped to establish close relations in the *cofradía de San Simón* and write an ethnography about the everyday life of Maximón and cosmovision that surrounds this "idol", but after inquiring with my family over the image, I realized that Maximón did not play part

of their religious spirituality and that it might be difficult to explain what I was doing in the *cofradía* most of the day, I especially did not want to offend anyone after the very welcoming hospitality that they had offered not only myself, but the other two girls that were placed in the town with me.

A day after my arrival I was walking with Ventura, a relative and neighbor of my host family, to water her flowers on the other side of town. On our way there we came upon some caves where I could see some candles burning and copal smoke coming out of the darkness. I inquired what they were and she replied that it was where the *brujos* were. My confused face inclined her to explain that people went there to ask for money, business and health, but that she did not know the name because “we don’t do that (field notes February 2nd 2006).” I asked if they were brujos because they did bad things and she explained that it was not bad it was just that “we don’t do that.”

The day after, while sitting in Ventura’s kitchen I asked about San Simón and was offered a similar response to that of the brujos question: people go there to ask for money, business, and health. But my surprise came when she told me that Simón *was* evil, because he drank and smoked, but mostly because the catholic priest in town did not like him. Perhaps this is why despite their hospitality toward me it was not until the 13th of February that they finally agreed to take me to where one of Maximóns in town was currently living.

My first visit to the *cofradía* served to clarify that my initial idea to do an ethnography was at this point not as feasible as I thought simply because it would take more time to create rapport with those in the *cofradía*, because I was a woman, and because they were not too eager to answer my questions. My interview with the catholic priest a couple of days later was crucial establishing the topic of my paper when he explained to me that this past October some of the *cofradías* that were originally working with the church were given an ultimatum: leave San Simón or leave the church. This drove my original interest to do a full ethnography

of Maximón to analyzing different perspectives of the “idol” among different community members. I also resorted to the complex literature written on Maximón such as in Robert S. Carlen’s *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town* (1997), E. Michael Mendelson’s “Maximon: An Iconographical Introduction” (1959), and in Allen J. Christenson’s *Art and Society in a Highland Maya Community: The Altarpiece of Santiago Atitlán* (2001) in order to attempt a better understanding of the politics of Maximón in Santiago Atitlán where most of his literature derives from..

Due to time constraints I opted to continued visiting the *cofradía* and observe some of the everyday life their, but not on a daily basis. At the same time I was able to speak with some of the *trabajadores* of Maximón and get their input on the controversy. The rest of the interview where conducted formally where I asked various questions to different individuals about the Maximón. The formal interviews are listed as follows.

- 1.) Mario Tobar- February 16,2006- current priest of the Catholic church, originally from Zalcaja.
- 2.) Martin (pseudonym, chose to remain anonymous) -February 22,2006- *trabajador* at the *cofradía* of San Simón, resident of Xela.
- 3.) Armando Lopez- February 22,2006- resident and community leader of Pachaj, municipio de Cantel; *Ajq'ij*.
- 4.) Francisco Quiet- February 23, 2006- *Presidente del Consejo Pastoral* and resident of Zunil.
- 5.) Roberto Poz- February 26, 2006- *Ajq'ij* and community leader, resident of Zunil.
- 6.) Tomas (pseudonym, chose to remain anonymous) -February 27,2006- *trabajador* at the *cofradía* of San Simón.
- 7.) Vilma Poz- February 28,2006- *Ajq'ij* (describes herself as *guia espiritual*), owner of one Maximón and resident of Zunil.

8.) Félix Pérez- February 28,2006- mayor and resident of Zunil.

The rest of the information used to complete this paper derives from personal experiences that include informal conversations with other *trabajadores* and people from the community. It is also noteworthy that a week before I left and about 5minutes after I had visited the *cofradía* that same day there was a murder there which somewhat hindered my research as I was unable to interview the *alcalde* of the *cofradía* and one of the *trabajadores* that had agreed to speak to me for various reasons. Also, although I did visit the *cofradía* after the murder I decided that it was best to stay away for a bit after this visit. I should also point out that my time spent at the *cofradía* was affected my level of comfort at the house, which was not enough to allow me to stay there day by day.

Introduction.

On February 21, 2006 the town of Zunil was nervous and confused. For the first time since the Guatemalan Civil war someone had been murdered in Zunil. According to the first accounts that my host family told me about the murder, someone was shot at the *cofradía de San Simon* around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Certain details were missing from the story as the news was still very recent (I found out about the murder about two hours after it happened). Six days later on February 27, *Hoy en Xela* published a mini article "En Zunil: Iglesia y Cofradías se Divorcian." On this day the head of the *cofradía de Corpus Christi* had agreed to meet with representatives of the local Catholic church in order to return certain objects that he still possessed that belonged to the church.; unfortunately, that same day one of his family members was to be buried after being murdered in Guatemala city.

As it turns out, the Catholic Church and the *cofradías* were not divorcing on that day, but were simply attempting to finalize a problem that has for decades tainted the town of Zunil. The subject of discourse: Maximón. A life size mannequin whose existence has posed

a problem to the Catholic Church, not only in Zunil, but in many towns where he is venerated as a saint, or messenger of God. The following paper analyzes the politics of Maximón in Zunil especially with recent discourse that has arisen within the church and compares them to those written about Maximón in Santiago Atitlán. The main goal is to understand the complexities of the idol in Zunil and Santiago Atitlán and to see what this means for a highland Mayan community in terms of solidarity, discord and identity.

The Origins of Maximón

One of the most complex topics surrounding the image of Maximón is his story of origin. Over the years there have been various stories or legends about how and when exactly the image of Maximón came to be, although most literature written points that Maximón was first “found” in Santiago Atitlán those who praise him in Zunil do not necessarily know this. It was explained to Michael Mendelson in various ways by various people:

In this context, Maximon appears as Judas Iscariot but he is not, as elsewhere in the area, reviled in any way or destroyed at the end of Holy Week. One informant had it that the present cult of Maximón had begun only in the time of Sojuel. Before that it was a Judas of straw with thrown into the cemetery... Sojuel had thought that it should be made of wood like other saints. All other informants held that Maximon had been created in the beginning of the world and for most of them association with Judas was tardy or irrelevant. (Mendelson 1959:58)

Mendelson also gives an account in which married and unmarried ancestors were having a conflict because of the former's wives and these decided to search for a tree that would keep the land in order. They found this tree and the suitors became maddened due to the clothed image's power to turn into the shapes of the beloved followed by the breaking of the image to render it powerless and finally the calling of the image (Maximón) to punish the ajkun if they refused it (Mendelson 1959: 58).

Another account of Maximón's origin comes from Nicolás Chávez in Christenson's book where he explains the origin of Maximón in some similar terms as those told by Mendelson except that in his account goes more into detail than Mendelson's iconographical description.

He explains to Christenson that great *nuwals*, among them Francisco Sojuel were merchants in Antigua and would leave periodically. One of their companions was told that his wife was committing adultery and Francisco Sojuel went into the mountains accompanied by other ancestors to find a tree that would be willing to look over the town during their absence.

After searching they found that the *Palo de Pito* tree was more than willing to help them. The rest of the story follows Mendelson's account in that disguised tree drives the suitor insane.

However, in Chavez's account the image grows out of control and the only way in which he is finally detained is when Francisco Sojuel cuts away the image's head, hands and legs, a to make him more obedient. Later on he ties the pieces together hence the name Maximón (he who is bound), but his real name is Mam (Grandfather) (Christenson 2001:180-81).

In Zunil the accounts of Maximón are different although they involve similar characteristics.

The following are the stories of Maximón as told to me by various people:

According to Roberto Poz who sometimes works with Maximón and "has nothing against him," the story of Maximón that has been written in the books is very misconstrued. His sister Vilma Poz, also an *Ajq'ij* and owner of the second Maximón told me the same story. Their account of Maximón goes as follows as gathered from my fieldnotes:

During the time of the conquest in Santiago Atitlán the military and the church were unhappy because they were not able to conquer the Mayan community. The leader and spiritual guide of these was Francisco Sojuel, *Alaj Mam*, an *Ajq'ij* who did a lot of good, agreed to latinize his name to Francisco Sojuel and made three very important predictions for man: 1.) Man would be able to talk through air. 2.) Man would be able to walk through air. 3.) The Mayan man would lose his traditional wear. The church and the military didn't like that the people believed in him and they didn't accept his predictions, so in an effort to get rid of him and be able to conquer the community they took *Alaj Mam*, tied him and burned him. However, this stop the people from believing in him and they picked up his ashes and tied them in a bundle which is what makes the essence of Maximón today. His name is now Maximón because he was tied when he was burnt and because his essence is tied in the bundle. Maximón comes from Mam (grandfather) and shimom (tied, to be tied). After the death of *Alaj Mam* and the creation of Maximón, the church and military were confused because they still could not fully conquer people of the community until they realized that *Alaj Mam* continued to live through Maximón. The church then decided to accept Maximón in order to conquer the people and use it in other towns for the same purpose. They took the ashes of the bundle and distributed them to different towns so as to distribute the same energy and that is what you will find in the Maximón of Zunil under everything else and in Maximóns in other towns (Fieldnotes February 26th and 28th, 2006).

Although I was told other versions of the Origin of Maximón these were the most concrete explanations that I found. Other explanations included that an ancestor used to do good and was burned and therefore Maximón was created, but any details beyond that were never given. Armando Lopez admitted to not knowing much about the origin mostly because he did not praise the image, but that what he did know was mostly from what he had read in books. The four *trabajadores* that was able to chat with at the *cofradía de San Simón* varied in their responses. One *trabajador* said that San Simón was simply a saint that represented Judas Iscariot and who was celebrated on October 28th and was created by a man. Martín could only tell me that he Maximón had been around probably for about 450 years, but could not give me more information than that. Don Jacinto, who I met on my first visit to the *cofradía*, said I could ask somebody else and Don Francisco was unable to sit down and talk to me after various attempts for different reasons.

All in all the real origin of this “saint/idol/ancestor” becomes even more misconstrued if we begin to ask different people with different points of view. But as it turns out the origin of the idol does not seem as important to his followers who believe that faith and energy is really what feeds into the powers of Maximón, nor to his opposer who believe him to be the essence of evil and compare him to the devil or Xibalba.

History of Maximón in Zunil.

Like in Santiago Atitlán, Maximon has existed Zunil for quite some time now. Although no one knows the exact dates of when he arrived some have an idea. Roberto Pox is not sure of when he arrived in Zunil, but he believes that the plastic mask that Maximon in Zunil wears was made around 1945-50. According to him, some years ago he lived in the mountain, but was brought into town. Shortly after, the governor of Quetzaltenango demanded that the *cofrades* deliver the image to Xela where he would be left in prison.

Despite dreams that warned the governor's wife to ask her husband to free the image, the governor was persistent until one night he dreamt, or experienced, that someone dragged him out of bed and the next day he asked the cofrades to return for the image and granted them a document in which he stated that Maximón indeed had supernatural powers (Fieldnotes February 26th, 2006). But this document was not enough evidence for the mayor of the town which once kicked the image because he was jealous of his power and got an infection in his leg until he apologized to the image.

But Maximón's powers is not the only reason why this image has an important place in community of Zunil. According to Polanco et al. Maximón is part of the cultural make-up of Zunil, but also gives way to tourism in the town and in turn brings a lot income to from donations to the community. In fact, Polanco credits the image with making potable water possible for the community (Polanco 1990: 50).

Maximón: Debate and Divisions.

So if Maximón has played an important role not only in history, but in the zunileño community as well, what are we to make of the current debates and divisions that have plagued the town? Is this image truly powerful enough to divide a community that has for so long been at peace? On February 27th, a significant amount of members from the catholic church attended the meeting between the cofrade of Corpu Cristi and representatives of the Catholic church. As I was told by my friend Pascuala, the cofrade had long been leader of the community and had performed the festivals that occur during *Semana Santa* in Zunil for some years now. However, with the split that occurred in October resentment from the church led them to ask for the crown of Jesus Christ and other valuables that he possessed to be rightfully returned. Threats were made to report a robbery and finally both parties agreed to meet. However on this particular day the cofrade also had bury one of his family members

which had been shot in Guatemala city, therefore delaying the return of the relics for about an hour and upsetting the catholic zunileños that were on time and waiting. Unfortunately I was unable to stay for the whole meeting, but I was told later that the community members were upset and yelling obscenities to the cofrade during and after the return of articles. How and why is that a former community leader is all of a sudden shunned by so many people from his community?

In October the cofradías were and ultimatum regarding the “pagan idol” of Maximón by the catholic church: either you give him to the *sacerdotes mayas* in the mountains or you leave the church. As it turns out five of the original seven cofradías opted to separate from the church if it did not accept Maximón as part of an important part of the community and their beliefs. According to Father Mario Tobar, the Catholic church in Zunil has been very supportive in helping the Zunileño community maintain their spirituality and traditions, but he draws a line when it comes to Maximón for various reasons.

He doesn't know where he comes from, but he feels that more recently people that follow the cofradía of Maximón have simply become interested in the economic benefits of idolizing the “pagan idol.” Worst of all is that people can ask him to kill amongst other things because they don't believe he judges and they view him as a God.. He also claims that they have become Protestants who only hide behind the municipality which establishes them as a “cultural” entity in Zunil. He also establishes that the ignorance and superstition of the community only feeds into the lucrative business that is Maximón. However, he informs me that after the split, Zunil still continues to be about 98% Catholic and about 60% true catholic (if you don't count those who still go to the mountains and perform rituals outside of the church.).

Maximón is currently living in the residence of Don Francisco Quixtan and his family. Here as you walk in you are met with an abundace of candles which lead your view up to the

back of the room where you are met with what seems to be a life-size mannequin dressing in a full suit, scarves, boots and aviator glasses. It sort of reminds you of something you might encounter at an American retail store if wasn't for the candles and people that sit and watch him and come to praise and hug and kiss him and as for favors. During all of my visits to the *cofradía* I was able to find that many people come to see him and he is now more than a local saint, Maximón has become an international saint. So much that not only does he get visits from different parts of Guatemala, but Mexicans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans also come to visit him and make him offerings as well as the occasional American who is not just here to take a picture. There are now online *cofradías* to Maximón and even another life-size Maximón in Santa Fe, Dallas, Texas (Fieldnotes February 26th, 2006).

Apart from many devotees Maximón also has nine *trabajadores* (two women and seven men), or *sacerdotes mayas/ Ajq'ij* who work for him and come almost everyday from Nahuala, Totonicapan, Quetzaltenango and other parts of the region to perform different *trabajos* for many devotees. They are also there in case someone needs their tarot cards or *tzité* (red beans) read for about Q10 or Q20. And in case you might need some materials for a *trabajo* or simply a candle to offer to Maximón you can get this in the *cofradía* de San Simón which offers anything Maximón may ask or need and you want to buy him; this also includes Quetzalteca "because he drinks" I was told once by one of the *trabajadores*. This is where many of the *trabajadores* make their living (As Don Francisco a *trabajador* for 18 years now with Maximón tells me) and the reason many have pointed to the *cofradías* involved that they only want to get the money that Maximón brings in and don't care about the saints which they must first take care of before finally being able to have Simón in their house.

Tomas a self-identified *sacerdote maya* and *trabajador* at the *cofradía* of San Simón tells me that people in the community have forgotten the good deeds which Simón has performed in the community and look down upon those who still believe in him. He also

claims that it is not that people can ask for anything they like from him because he is not a God, but simply a messenger from God that serves as a medium between God and man, sort of like a saint in the Catholic church.

His views reflect those of Vilma and Roberto, two *Ajq'ij's* which although they do not interact with the main *cofradía de Maximón* perform rituals with Vilma's Maximón on the other side of town. However, their view also states like Father Mario's that the *cofrades* and *trabajadores* that currently stay with that Maximón that it has become more of business for them with fixed rates for a job and tourist who want to visit or take a picture of the image.

Armando does not work or like Maximón, because he considers that he is representative of Xibalba, the Mayan underworld, and goes against everything that Mayan culture stands for. One of his strong arguments being that the ancestors would never charge for any sort of *trabajo* performed to *Ajaw*, but instead accepted any offering that the person might want to donate to him and his family.

Vilma's Maximón is a little darker than the Simón of the *cofradía* and although she would not reveal why she began working with her own image about 9yrs. ago she would tell me that she is more than happy to have "papito" as part of her and her daughters' life. She also said she does not charge for visiting or asking Simón and although she also owns a store (*Ajpom: la casa de las velas*) she never forces anyone to leave a donation or has fixed rates for any job down, but instead it comes from the people themselves. Vilma also receives visitors from different parts of Latin America and on October 28th her family hosts a party in Simón's favor.

All those in favor or with a bit more knowledge of Maximón usually claimed that Maximón was not viewed as a God because only one God exists. Instead they saw him as a messenger of God who just like saints was able to speak to God for them and ask for favors. However the debate remains as to whether the *trabajadores* at the *cofradía* of were in fact

guaranteeing a job well done by charging high rates and not letting God judge the problems as they claimed they did.

Conclusions.

My stay and work of Maximón during Zunil was interesting in that I expected to get less of an eclectic stance on this controversial image. It was most helpful to be able to gain guidance and knowledge from different people and perspectives of Maximón as was the case with all my interviewees. Even amongst siblings, there were differences in how they viewed the image. I found that Roberto analyzed it through much more of a historical and traditional aspect while Vilma made more reference to spirituality and guidance.

I found that Maximón has not yet divided the community despite the incident of the 27th of February as it might seem, but one of Zunil's most important values is respect for each other. This is manifested when walking down the street and everyone greets (or says goodbye) to each other without caring whether or not they go to church. When I was doing my research my family was most helpful in helping find and speak to those that might be of any help to me, and despite their beliefs even pointed me toward Vilma and the *cofradía* of San Simón. And every interviewee always had great things to say about *zunileños* and their hospitality and amiability.

Perhaps it might be that Don Francisco Quiet is correct when he speaks about his stance on the Maximón debate. Despite his Catholic views, he still believes that people are very traditionalist and their views should not be easily cast aside. He believes it's not enough to push those *cofradías* from the church, but rather embrace them and show them the right path. He was somewhat upset this suggestion had humored the Catholic church representatives, especially since the Father has only been part of the community for 3 years and is not yet familiar with the community. He wishes that the community was not divided

especially since he loves Zunil so much (so much so that he wrote a song for his beloved town). But he also understands that Maximón represents evil and must be shunned.

It's not quite certain what will happen to Zunil now that the *cofradías* and the church have been divided, but it is definitely an important event in the history of the community. As the mayor explains, he wishes he didn't have to play referee in the whole debate, but he hopes that his community will come to an understanding.

Meanwhile Maximón continues to have his own *capilla* which changes every 1st of November and no one know what will happen to *Semana Santa* this year. It's most impressive how two communities with similar debates can take two different turns. Where in Santiago Atitlán, the catholic priests were run out with threats (Carlsen 1997), in Zunil it seems that the catholic priest might be gaining his way soon. But perhaps its not the locals that can decide whether Maximón stays or goes, but rather the thousand of faithful believers that travel days to ask for an offering, and more importantly their faith.

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