

Ajaw Does Not Eat Quite Like He Used To:
Ceremonial Practice in the Modern Population of San Andres Xecul

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Abstract

A recurring theme in studies of Maya cosmology and religious practice is that ceremonial actions and products serve as food for the sacred. This paper uses the metaphor of feeding Ajaw to discuss syncretism and continuity in ceremonial practices in San Andres Xecul, a municipio in the department of Totonicapan, Guatemala. Ceremonial sites, the products used at those sites, those served during the course of a "meal," and the language use of practitioners are discussed. This discussion leads to the conclusion that those practicing costumbre in San Andres show themselves to be a modern population that has adopted and adapted Maya cosmology and ceremonial practices to meet their own needs.

Introduction

I sat under the north staircase leading into the interior of the market building in San Andres Xecul. Next to me sat Celso Delfino Saquic Chan, the guard and janitor of the building and a well known, well-respected day keeper, or *ajq'ij*. As we concluded our conversation regarding the imagery of the *kootzij*, or ceremonial fire, Delfino stood up and pretended to spill something on the floor. He explained that if *pom* (the primary ingredient in a ceremonial fire) is spilled on the ground, one must not step over it but rather stop and gather it up. I was reminded that the same rule is said to apply to corn. The connection that I expected was immediately confirmed as Delfino explained that Ajaw, being a spirit, cannot partake of bread or tortillas as humans do; instead, he pointed out, Ajaw eats the *pom*, incense and other products that are offered to him in the course of a ceremony carried out by an *ajq'ij*.

The concept of feeding the sacred creeps up in many places across Mesoamerica - Carlsen notes the feeding of the Flowering Mountain Earth (1997: 52) and Carrasco points

out that the creation of humans was to create nurturers of the gods (1990: 109). Yet, in San Andres today, Ajaw does not eat quite like he used to. The place setting is much the same, though it has been embellished with a touch of cement and Catholicism. The entree has much the same flavor, but the side dishes have changed somewhat in character. There are a few new guests at the table and the dinner conversation revolves around current events. In the end, the meal is quite reminiscent of meals long past, but those preparing and serving the food do so in a style that reflects themselves and their situation in life.

Ajaw eats quite well in San Andres Xecul and has done so for some time. As Thomas Veblen points out, San Andres was an important settlement center prior to Spanish influence in the area (1977: 496). This heritage shines through in the modern lives and of Trixeños (residents of San Andres) and the ceremonial practices of many of them. Each day (and night) one need only stand in the central plaza of town and scan the surrounding mountains to see the flicker of ongoing *kootzij* and the soot stained rock faces of the *taab'al*, or ceremonial sites, recalling past meals served to Ajaw.

Methods

My methods of research for this paper consisted of speaking with religious specialists in San Andres and visiting the *taab'al* as an observer when there was a ceremony in progress, when there was no activity, and as a participant in ceremonies. My original idea for a research project focused around place names and was less interested in the activities that occurred at the sites or the products used in ceremonies. For that reason, I did not start talking to *ajq'ij* until late in my research and much of my information comes from outsiders to the community who visited in order to perform ceremonies. Having observed a number of themes during my visits to the *taab'al* and to the *cofradias* of San

Simón, I focused my conversations with daykeepers around the significance of various aspects of the ceremonial environment.

The Table Setting

The place settings for the meals that Trixeños serve to Ajaw - the *taab'al* - dot the landscape of the mountains and *milpas* surrounding San Andres. There are several dozen *taab'al* within the bowl created by the mountains surrounding San Andres, though each *ajq'ij*, or Maya priest, makes use of only 15 or 20 of them. They range in size, importance, and use and can be divided into two distinct types based on their construction.

By far the most common of the two types is not truly “constructed” at all but is simply a natural formation in the mountains. This type consists of a vertical rock face and a minimum of a few feet in front of the stone on which to build a *kootzij*. Some of these sites are adorned with a wooden cross decorated with corn leaves or flowers, but this is the extent of adornment. It is important to note here that not all such rock faces are used as *taab'al*.

The second type of *taab'al* occurs in sacred locations where there is no vertical rock face. It consists of a cement or stone box-like shrine which is generally two or three feet in each dimension. The shrine, often referred to as a *cueva* or cave, is closed on top on three of four sides. The open side constitutes the front of the *cueva* and faces an open space for building *kootzij*. The inside of the *cueva* is generally reserved for candles, though several other products are occasionally burnt in this space as well. Behind or on top of the shrine are found one or more cement crosses constructed in the Christian style (taller than they are wide). This type of site is also occasionally adorned with the wooden crosses mentioned

above. Patorb'al, which represents an elaborate example of this type of *taab'al*, is found at the peak of a mountain to the northwest of the town (Figure 1).

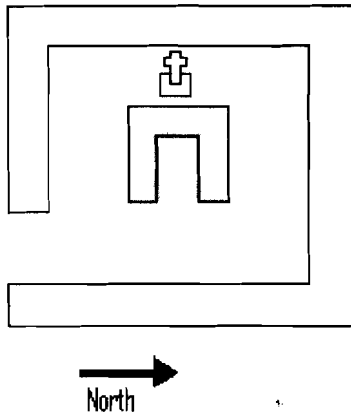


Figure 1: Patorb'al

The wall around the site is constructed of stone, about 2'6" wide and approximately 12' along each side. The shrine is also constructed of stone and about 4' along its external dimensions. Behind the shrine stands a 5' cement cross mounted on a cement base. This site is used for ceremonies to open ones eyes and mind to studies as well as to clear the path before leaving on a journey. It is often used by those who go to the United States for work to guarantee that they will have a safe trip and not have problems with immigration officers or other officials while they are gone.

The *taab'al* themselves demonstrate aspects of adaptation to the modern as well as strong connections to pre-Columbian cosmology. This is best demonstrated by discussion of several specific sites. Among the most prominent *taab'al* are: Pakootzij, Xemuxux, Pakajah, K'oyab'aj, and Patorb'al. Pakootzij, Pakajah, and Patorb'al number among the second type of *taab'al* described above and demonstrate the modern population of San Andres and its resources. Each sports at least one cement cross constructed in the Christian style, which is to say that it is not the equilateral cross of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, but rather, the vertical component is longer than the horizontal component. Still, a connection to the equilateral cross exists in that the cement cross found inside the *cueva* at Pakootzij is carved with flowers, recalling the foliated cross found at Palenque and other flowered crosses discussed by Freidel, Schele and Parker (2001). Nevertheless, *ajq'ij* directly relate these crosses to the equilateral crosses that they draw in sugar as the first step of preparing a *kootzij*. The shrine at Pakajah is built of cinder blocks, yet like those constructed of stone at Pakootzij and Patorb'al, it is still called a *cueva*, which as a symbol of cosmological

importance, reaches back to the writers of the Popol Vuh (D. Tedlock 1996) and others during the first years of Spanish occupation (Butler 1934).

K'oyab'aj and Xemuxux demonstrate physical connections to the heritage of the ancestors in quite another way: they each look like something important. K'oyab'aj translated, means Monkey Stone, which is exactly what it is to those who visit the site for ceremonial purposes: it is a large stone that looks like a monkey. The cosmological importance of monkeys can be found in the Popol Vuh. The second attempt to create humans resulted in monkeys, and one of the main characters carries the day name of 1 Batz, or 1 Monkey as his own name (D. Tedlock 1996). To underscore the significance of such a name, K'oyab'aj lies in pine forest in the highlands surrounding San Andres. This is an environment where even in the modern population, which has access to modern transportation, few Trixeños have ever seen a real monkey.

Xemuxux, to the northeast of town, is so called because the *taab'al* lies beneath an enormous rock formation that is said to look like a bellybutton. The name means: Beneath the Bellybutton. Though the bellybutton cannot be said to be exactly in the center of the population center, as David Freidel found to be the case in the archaeological site that he studied (Freidel, Schele and Parker 2001: 125-126), the choice of such a name for a rocky bump on the mountainside creates a strong connection to both modern and pre-Columbian sites throughout the region which have bellybuttons of their own. Freidel mentions the navel of the world in Zinacantan (2001: 124) and the ancestor is fed by those living in Santiago Atitlan through an umbilicus on their land (Carlsen 1997: 52).

Name plays an important role in connecting the modern to the ancestors at other *taab'al* as well. Though rather unremarkable for its physical appearance, Xeb'alb'atun is quite remarkable for its name. When asked to translate this name into Spanish, locals find

themselves at a loss. Some pick out the initial syllable “xe” and guess that it means “below something.” Xeb’alb’atun, however, lies at the top of a ridge to the north of town; it is below nothing but sky and clouds. More likely is that this is a reference to Xib’alb’ah, the name of the underworld in Maya cosmology and a word which few Trixeños recognize.

Tzamporta' represents the other side of ties through nomenclature to the ancient. *Tzam* means "on the edge of" in K'iche' and *porta'* is a borrowing from the Spanish word *puerta* and means "door." Less literally, the name translates to mean "doorway." One can hardly argue that the use of *porta'* in a name defines the site as modernized, as this use is the result of nearly 500 years of linguistic contact between Spanish and K'iche'. Still, this *taab'al*, in use since the time of the ancestors according to current inhabitants of San Andres, reflects the modern population in terms of their language use.

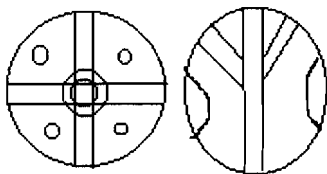
There are few in San Andres who do not speak K'iche', but the language is heavily influenced by Spanish. The norm in the course of a conversation carried out in K'iche' in San Andres is that conjunctions and some prepositions are said in Spanish. This is a widely held preoccupation for Trixeños. It is not uncommon for a Trixeño to express regret at not being able to speak Spanish or K'iche' fluently, and an important point of consideration in the judging of the Reina Indigena competition held during the patron saint's celebration is the skill and fluency with which the candidates speak K'iche'. Tzamporta' reflects this blending of languages in the live of modern Trixeños, and Patorb'al gives a second interesting example. The name Patorb'al is used here because it is the name used by *ajq'ij*, but there are other, non-experts in town who refer to the *taab'al* as Torb'al Mundo. This rendering preserves the essence of the name, but still allows Spanish to creep into the mix.

The Entree / The Side dishes

While much has changed over time, the basic unit of the meal served to Ajaw in San Andres has remained largely unchanged. The ingredients of the entree consist of a figure drawn in sugar as the base of the *kootzij, pom (copal)*, small disks of chocolate, and paraffin candles. Each of these demonstrates quite direct links to historically rooted beliefs and practices.

An *ajq'ij* in Chichicastenango explained that the figure drawn at the base of a ceremonial fire was historically made with honey rather than the processed sugar which is in use today. The use of sugar is explained by the rarity of honey in the mountains today (interview Jan 21 2006). Despite change in the product used, these figures reveal a wealth of cosmologically significant imagery in their form. Basic to each drawing is a large circle with a cross that divides it into four quadrants. This circle represents the Mundo, or world as a whole (see B. Tedlock 1982: 41). The cross is aligned so that its axes point to the four cardinal directions, forming the four quadrants which represent the four corners of the world. With these two figures alone, the *ajq'ij* creates a map of the Maya cosmos. Other figures may be added according to the *ajq'ij* or to emphasize different parts of the figure. The *ajq'ij* might also add figures that transform the drawing into a day glyph from the sacred Maya calendar.

Figure 2: Sugar Drawings



On the left is the figure that Don Delfino uses when preparing a ceremonial fire. The small circles in each quadrant emphasize the four corners of the world and the center circles emphasize the center of the world. On the right is a glyph for the day E. This is sometimes incorporated into the basic drawing for a ceremony that takes place on that day.

The use of copal for ceremonial purposes was central in the practices of the first inhabitants of the Maya Cosmos. The Popol Vuh tells us that Xmucane burned copal in honor of her grandsons and the first fathers did the same before the first dawning of the sun (D. Tedlock 1996: 139, 160).

The disks of chocolate are perhaps less linked to cosmogony but seem to be quite historically important to the Maya. Pre-Classic and Classic Maya artisans and sculptors devoted enough attention to cocoa and the god associated with it that the Pop Vuh museum of archaeology in Guatemala City has devoted a whole room to the subject.

The candles that make up part of the *kootzij* are significant not for the material of which they are made, as is the case with the other ingredients of the entree, but for their colors. Generally, four colors of candles appear in a ceremony. Red represents the east and is connected to red corn. Black is found to the west and represents black corn. Yellow is to the south and recalls yellow corn. White represents north and the fourth color of corn. Each color has other significance as well and may be used more than other colors in ceremonies devoted to specific problems or subjects.

The products that accompany the entree, on the other hand, have clearly changed more drastically since the first fathers made their offerings. Not until quite recently in the history of the Maya people were products such as bottled soda, canned chilies, hard candies, or potions imported from Mexico available to Trixeños. Here, the *costumbristas* of San Andres prove themselves to be a modern population. At the same time, continuities and connections can be drawn between products used by *ajq'ij* today and those of their predecessors.

The products used in a ceremony performed for a person who is ill illustrate all aspects of change and continuity. The *kootzij* is built with the same basic products used for

ceremonial fires built for other purposes. These are sugar, copal, chocolate and candles; each of which demonstrate strong connections to the practices and beliefs of the ancestors, and are discussed above. Specifically for the ceremony in question, the *ajq'ij* must use agua florida or agua de retiro, agua bendita, and three plants: ruda, rosemary, and chijka. Other products such as bottles of soda, hard candies, other herbs, and a multitude of other products might be added depending on the *ajq'ij* performing the ceremony and any secondary purposes that the client has in mind.

Agua florida or agua bendita appear in most ceremonies and are used prior to the construction of the *kootzij* to repel and bad spirits that linger around the *taab'al*. When applied to a person, they act to remove or repel illness. In this context, agua de retiro can be used as a substitute for agua florida. All three potions are purchased by *ajq'ij* in and around San Andres in small plastic bottles that have been imported from Mexico. This might well imply some level of globalization in local Maya practices, but the use of these items maintains a historic context. *Ajq'ij* and vendors of the potions explain that these are the same potions that have always been used for such purposes, but no one at the local level remembers how to make them.

The three plants necessary to the ceremony come from all parts of the world. The continuity with ancient Maya practices demonstrated by Old World plants such as rosemary lies in the fact that it is used in the same way as its local counterparts. In this case, the plants are soaked in one of the potions named above and by making a cross in front of the patient, the *ajq'ij* saturates the ill person in the name of Ajaw.

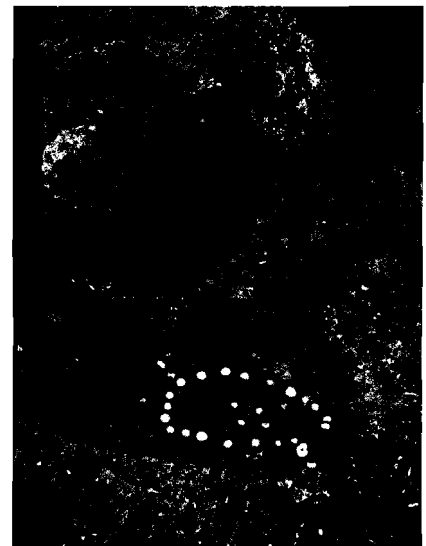
Notable for their modern flavor and character among the non-essential ingredients of this type of ceremony are soda and hard candies. These products, though they appear out of place, are quite closely related to more traditional items. Candies are often used for their

colors (the same as those of the candles used) and are related to the sugar used in the ceremony in that they consist of little else.

Soda, too, has a main ingredient of sugar, but more importantly, the soda that is used in San Andres is almost always lemon-lime flavored. This is significant because of when and how it is used during a ceremony. The soda comes into use at the end of a ceremony and is generally poured on the edges of the fire at the four cardinal points. The soda's counterparts for ceremonial purposes are limes which are often halved and placed in the ashes at the end of a ceremony to represent the world and its four corners.

Figure 3: Limes

Here are seen a total of 26 lime halves (13 whole limes) arranged to recreate the figure drawn of sugar at the base of the fire, representing the Mundo and the four cardinal directions. The half that appears to make the upper right arm of the cross points north. This photo was taken at a small, rarely used site at the edge of a milpa to the northwest of San Andres.



Three levels of continuity can be discerned in the products offered to Ajaw as food in San Andres. The most historically and cosmologically significant products are found in every ceremony and make up the entree of the meal. Those products required for a specific ceremony are somewhat less historically based but show strong ties to those products which are rooted in local history. The products which come across as most modern make up the third level and show weaker ties because they are tied to tradition through other products rather than through Maya cosmogony itself.

Dinner Guests

Don Delfino reflected the consensus among his fellow Trixeños when he adamantly stated that "there is only one Ajaw, one God" (Saquic Chan, Interview Feb 24 2006).

Nevertheless, this fact does not keep Ajaw from having guests at this table. None of the guests that Ajaw entertains in San Andres can properly be said to be new arrivals at the table, but some have certainly arrived more recently than others.

Though there is variation in the specific individuals who are present, seats at the table have been reserved for "the ancestors" for some time. Dennis Tedlock notes that the writers of the Popol Vuh would have been including their ancestors in their prayers (1996: 56). Carlsen touches a similar note when he mentions that in Santiago Atitlan, "dancing sacred bundles, burning copal incense, or praying can feed the ancestral form" (1997: 52). In San Andres Xecul, relatives and friends who have died come to the table on the day Ajmaq. Ajaw is attended to first as human participants ask of Him, then of those who have died, for protection in their daily activities. In a final act of reciprocity, the dead then ask of the living that they continue to be remembered and honored.

San Simón is a more recent arrival at the table, and while his meal is somewhat different, it is quite similar. According to Trixeños, San Simón was a disciple of Jesus and known as Judas Simón. This is the same Judas (Iscaiot) who betrayed Jesus, repented, and hung himself. Because of his repentance, Simón has miraculous power, but due to his betrayal, he is of two spirits: a good and a bad. Given the title San because he was a disciple of Jesus, he is more accurately referred to as Hermano Simón because he is separate from God and is dealt with more like a brother.

According to the caretaker of one of the images of San Simón in San Andres (there are two of them), Simón smokes tobacco and drinks alcohol. Both of these actions are given a single word in K'iche' which also means, "to eat." Simón eats in a much more literal sense than does Ajaw in that his cigarettes are placed in a pipe in the image's mouth and his alcohol is poured directly into his mouth. He also receives candles and is given flowers just as is done when giving food to Ajaw.

At both houses where an image of San Simón currently resides in San Andres, the next room over is devoted to *kootzij* and constitutes a variation on the *taab'al* found in the mountains. Thus, Ajaw and Simón eat just next to each other, which is to say that they are seated at the same table. Significantly, Simón seems to take the place of honor at the table due to the fact that visitors serve him first and it is in his house where the meal takes place.

The Catholic saints stand somewhat in the background as Trixeños serve those seated at the table in Simón's house. San Andres and San Judas Tadeo are placed next to Simón in his room at one of the houses where he is found. They are offered candles but do not "eat" in the symbolic sense that Ajaw eats nor do they eat in the more literal sense in which Hermano Simón eats. Saints have come to the table in other locations, however. As noted above, San Andres appeared at Pakootzij and the Christ of Esquipulas appeared at Patzolojche.

Dinner Conversation

The language use and themes that run throughout the speech of *ajq'ij* during the ceremonies to feed Ajaw, like all other facets of the meal, reveal a modern population in touch with its ancestral heritage. Here, it is quite clear however, that this is a population that is preoccupied with its own problems.

Ceremonies are carried out in two languages: K'iche' and Spanish. If a foreigner is a part of the ceremony, a few words might even be attempted in a third language. This perfectly reflects the everyday language use of those involved. As mentioned above, K'iche' and Spanish are often mixed even in the course of a single sentence, and it is quite common in San Andres for a casual conversation to switch between the two languages several times. Generally, the ceremony is primarily in K'iche' as the prayers that are used have been learned in that language. Prayers that were learned in Spanish, mostly Catholic in origin, are nearly always recited in Spanish.

The dialog and themes contained therein have several sources. Much of the context comes down to the *ajq'ij* who is performing a given ceremony from his or her teacher. This includes full prayers and couplets which often reach far back into historic Maya cosmology; a common and noteworthy couplet "*Uk'ux kaj, Uk'ux ulew*, or "Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth," is found near the beginning of the Popol Vuh (D. Tedlock 1996: 67). Also included are Catholic prayers and verses from the Bible, though these are more likely to be learned as a child or young adult in the Catholic Church.

Books and other printed materials also serve as sources of information and dialog for ceremonies. These come in two forms: academic and governmental studies of Maya culture/cosmology; and books of magic, incantations, and prayers that can be purchased in the market. The former, whether correct or incorrect in the information that they contain, are used by dedicated daykeepers to gain a more complete and deeper understanding of their own beliefs and actions. The latter, most of which are imported from Mexico, are used as sources of meaningful and powerful rhetoric during the ceremony.

The most important determinants of theme in the ceremonies carried out at the *taab'al* are the need of the individual for whom the ceremony is being performed and the

common need that the *ajq'ij* perceives in the community. Thus, the theme that runs throughout the dinner conversation is current events. Many times, ceremonies are performed for those who find themselves in need of money or work and requests made of Ajaw for them make up a part of nearly every ceremony performed in San Andres. Too, the majority of ceremonies include requests to protect one on a journey, often with the specific intention of clearing the path for a man who is headed to the United States to look for work.

Conclusion

The major theme that runs throughout ceremonial activities and environments in San Andres Xecul is that the people taking part in those activities are members of a modern population with modern problems, preoccupations, and resources. Yet despite the “modernity” that they embody, the actors maintain a very strong connection to their spiritual predecessors through the places, items, and words that they utilize to address the issues with which they are presented as such a modern population. They visit the same sites to speak with Ajaw and maintain and adorn them with the resources that they have at their disposal – just as their ancestors did. They speak with the host of powerful religious entities that creep up in their daily life – just as their ancestors did. They give offerings of local items as well as those imported objects for which they have found a space in their practices – just as their ancestors did. The *ajq'ij* and those they help use the lessons that they have learned from the ancestors to address the issues at hand – those of a modern population; this is exactly what their ancestors must have done.

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