



I N T R O D U C T I O N :
L O O K I N G F O R H O M E

Like a Mayan girl caught by surprise out on a well-worn village path, Guatemala is small and beguiling with a soul larger than most big powerful countries. Short and shiny, neatly coiffed with frangipani flowers, she stares back at the rest of the world with suspicious and hopeful eyes.

Located at the top of Central America, south of Yucatan, east of Chiapas, west of Honduras and San Salvador, Guatemala is a treasure hoard of cultural diversity. Fashioned by centuries of isolation, external and internal exploitation, misunderstanding, violence and suffering, her people are many and mixed, unique, and full of human beauty. Though the Western world categorizes Guatemala as a Latin American country, over 80 percent of her population of 11 million is comprised of Native Mayan peoples. Guatemala is a Native American country.

The landscape is even more diverse than her people: she has dry climates, wet places, surging giant rivers, little creeks, high-altitude cloud forests, lowland jungles, savannas, lakes, marshes, swamps, black sand beaches, talc-fine white sand beaches, hard crashing oceans, calm shallow gulf bays, mossy waterfalls, a tangled underground world of caverns, underground streams and tunnels, cultivated land, cities, villages, hamlets, wilderness, snowy peaks, tropical piedmont, and on and on.

In the southwestern highlands a great gathering of tall heavily forested volcanic mountains, molarlike ridges, and mouthlike craters hold up a brilliant turquoise sky that every fall throws a hurricane down upon the earth. The volcanoes answer with a trembling series of eruptions that turn the sky red with the cinders. Every spring when the rainy season begins, the earth quakes and a multitude of landslides come crashing down to the bottom of the hills, rerouting roads, rivers, burying villages, changing lives. Up in these dramatic mountains lies a large crater filled with some ancient jade-colored water, called Lake Atitlan. This crater's edge consists of a pile of still more volcanoes. Rising above the lake, these peaks mark the territorial boundary of a people called Tzutujil Maya.

Resting right on Atitlan's southern shores, at the mouth of the world's most magnificent freshwater bay, this large Tzutujil village was named Santiago Atitlan, by invading Spaniards four hundred eighty years ago. The villagers, however, called this place Rumuxux Ruchiuleu, the "Umbilicus of the Universe." They were a proud Mayan nation; open-eyed, mistrusting, jealous, funny, and magical—a people whose language had a future tense that was the imperative of its past tense, whose concept of Today was a place where yesterday, tomorrow, and all creation could be kept alive by feeding it the beautiful way people did everyday village things like walking down the street, arguing, working, or sleeping.

The men farmed the sides of these great volcanic hills by hand using axes, hoes, ropes, and machetes, to coax five varieties of corn, thirty varieties of beans, multiple kinds of squashes, three colors of cotton, infinite types of fruits, avocados, and greens from the templelike steepness of the rich volcanic slopes. Others fished on the lake in canoes. These canoes were hollowed out by hand in the jungle from the trunks of enormous wild avocado trees by specialists who had made the village famous. There were other men who braided tule reed mats, wove women's head ornaments, and a multitude

of other creative activities, while every man cut and carried firewood neatly arranged on his back. They sometimes trotted twenty miles up and down steep hills with a hundred pounds of squeaking wood into the smoky compounds where the women carefully used the dearly obtained fuel to cook what the men brought home to the cooking huts.

It was there that the women ground the corn, tomatoes, beans, squash seeds, fish, and greens the men cultivated in the hills. After returning from the legendary open-air markets of Atitlan, the women hauled water from the lake. Balancing fifty pounds of water on their heads, they had to struggle as much as a mile to their compound of huts. Everyone's clothing was of a specific cut and ornamentation depending on one's age and gender, and it was the women who masterfully worried an ornery pile of native cotton bolls into tight threads and handwoven lengths of luxurious fabric. The cloth had to be tight to survive the washings of the women who formed long chattering files on the edge of the lake at their traditionally inherited *chjembal*, washing stones. There the beautiful clothing of their families was thwacked and twisted with Herculean force to get the dirt out. The women were very, very strong and the clothing they wore had to be as strong as they were.

The people of Santiago Atitlan had no concept of their town being part of somebody else's country. As far as they were concerned, everything real in the world was inside their territory.

Their land was the world to them. Guatemala as a country was a mythological spirit realm distant and unfamiliar to most Tzutujil people and categorized by them no differently than Japan, Jerusalem, Germany, or the United States. These strange spirit realms could be visited, but you had to return "Home" to the real Tzutujil land to be truly alive. There was no possible way of saying "leaving home" in the Tzutujil language. The people called the placement of their own town the Canyon Village. The surrounding land that was their world, the land that fed them, they affectionately called the Flowering Mountain Earth. This was their homeland. The village itself was known to all Tzutujil as Ch'jay, meaning literally "At Home."

This Homeland was bound and embraced on all sides but one by three forested volcanic peaks, and on the remaining side by the Mother Lake herself. Named for parts of the human body, this land was concentrically circumscribed by still more forested ridges, valleys, and bluffs radiating out some ten to fifteen miles on either side.

Though appearing relatively small on a modern map, this land of the Tzutujil was the world of the Canyon Village people and to them it was enormous.

The Canyon Village was subject to an ancient way of understanding I call Internal Bigness. This way of being and seeing permeated every aspect of Tzutujil life. In the same way little children can magically turn the ten-by-ten area of a sandbox play area into the farthest reaches of the Universe, the Canyon Village understood the internal bigness of their world. Because every rock, trail, mountain, stump, spring, and incline was either the backbone of a dead giant in an old story, or a rock placed there by a Goddess who in her grief could go no farther, the land opened up into an internal immensity that was known only to the people whose world it was. The road map to this internal Tzutujil kingdom were the myriad of stories, mythologies, legends, and histories taught to them during ritual meetings and village initiations.

This sandbox knowledge was not held by one or two children but handed down and added to by the twenty-eight thousand individuals of all ages who lived in this landscape of ancient Tzutujil story dream.

Because of this, their land was so big and magnificent that no human could comprehend it all. Only the Gods knew how to measure it. Its tiny physical size was simply an abbreviation of a cultural enormity that was carried inside each Tzutujil. Though it appeared to outsiders that the people lived off of and inside their land, the entire earth lived inside each villager.

This internal universe was set like a jewel of sparkling infinity into the finite matrix of the external world.

The external world called the people of the Canyon Village by the name Tzutujil. Linguists like to distinguish them from the numerous other Mayan linguistic tribes that surrounded the Canyon Village such as the Qekchi Maya, Quiche Maya, Cakchiquel Maya, Pokomam Maya, Ixil Maya, Mam Maya, Chorti Maya, Pokonchi Maya, Rabinal Maya, to name only a few. The people of the Canyon Village did not call themselves the Tzutujil. They call themselves what all Guatemalan Mayans call themselves: *Vinaaq*, which means a “Named Being.” This also stood for the word “twenty” because humans have ten toes and ten fingers. Both the terms “twenty” and “named being” signify to the Tzutujil the concept of being completed, which refers to being an adult. They also call themselves the *Nim Vinaaq*, “Big People” or the “Magnificent Adults.”

When a Tzutujil was born he or she was not automatically human. Babies' lives belong to the Moon and the spirit worlds. It took years to become human. This was accomplished by the efforts of one's family and, later, the extended family and, later still, at adolescence by the village as a whole, who came and removed you from the family nest to *cook* you out of your raw, unripe state into a "mature fruit," as they called it. Initiation was mandatory in those days and constituted the beginning of adulthood. This rite of passage, however, was not what made you into an adult. This first initiation only made you ripe enough to continue on in a lifelong pursuit of turning yourself into an adult, on through the next three layers of service to the village. By the time you were in your old age you became a *Nim Vinaaq*, "Magnificent Adult."

You carried yourself from one layer to the next on the shoulders of your ability to speak as an adult, which for the Tzutujil was defined by an archaic language that belonged to the Spirits themselves. This oral literacy was considered what magically kept the Universe glued together, running on a mysterious plasma of sound, song, and delicious speech.

According to the old people's understanding, being a Tzutujil was not a matter of race, it was a matter of memory. To them all people in the world at birth had forgotten this original multilayered spirit language. They had originally known how to speak it in the other worlds they lived in before this one. They simply had to be jolted by initiation rituals into remembering again in this world. These initiation rituals were presided over by people who'd already been initiated into the speaking and remembering ability of the layer they were teaching.

There were five main layers of initiation into becoming a Magnificent Adult. These were called:

Birth—Dawn Sprouting

Birth to Adolescence—Flowers and Sprouts

Adolescence to Child Rearing—Rainboys and Shimmerers

Child Rearing to Grandchild Rearing—Fruited Branches

Grandchild Rearing to Adult—Big Trees, Big Vines, or the Bark People

Adult to Death—Echo Person

Each of these layers corresponded to a ring in creation's tree and in the village matrix. They were not arranged in a strict ascending order or ranked in

the style of the military. They were more like the cumulative rings and tiers of growth on a deer's antler as the deer got older.

Each of these layers or stages had an intact ritual that consolidated their passage over the threshold into the next part of the journey. You did not discard any of the previous eras you'd passed through when you entered the next phase. You didn't give up your youth to become a child-rearing adult. You added each layer onto the next like an old-time telescope with all its collapsible sections.

As a person went through each segment of his or her life, that segment was "earned" and fitted nicely inside the new one until in one's old age a spyglass at least five sections long had been constructed.

Like a spyglass when collapsed down for easy keeping, it appeared that every person, no matter how many life sections they had re-membered or added on, seemed to be composed of only one section. It always appears to the very young or to teenagers that old people are only a little wiser than the youth, but when questioned by the young, the old can metaphorically open up their "life" telescope to see. Their vision would be five times as long as the youth's. The highly initiated old-timer tended to have more compassion for the youth than other people did because the elders had a greater memory and vision. They saw by their combined abilities and vision of old age, middle age, teenage, child, and echo age, which all together gave them the accrued vision needed by the rest of us to find our own sections. In the village, then, these people were our mentors.

When a teenager got her or his "second section" of vision, it was so much more ample and different than the first eyepiece of childhood that they thought they were seeing everything there was to see. They thought they knew everything. These youth had to be pushed by more adult people into the next stage and the next to keep them safe from living out their lives with too short a spiritual vision.

There was no public pressure to be initiated into any of these layers, the only exception being the initiation in and out of adolescence. To the traditionalist Tzutujil this was absolutely essential. Besides, given the nature of adolescents, initiation would never be pursued voluntarily.

In this book not all of the details of young women's struggle for adulthood are included in deference to the women of Santiago Atitlan. In Tzutujil etiquette men are not supposed to know what goes on in women's rituals, and,

if we do, we are supposed to act like we don't. In these pages, I hedge a little and tell a bit. I hope they will forgive me.

What is presented to us today as an adult in the modern world has little resemblance to those deeply veined faces of zany old Tzutujil women and men who spoke a complex magical language to rivers, mountains, trees, and the sun to make those things live. However, the uninitiated adolescent Tzutujil had a lot in common with the aggressive, freedom-oriented inhabitants of our modern cities whose bodies get old, but whose souls never volunteer for initiation.

Initiation rituals were not done for the initiate's benefit. They were done to keep the Universe alive for all of us. It was believed that in initiation by learning the ways and language of each layer, and then doing the rituals of each, the world as a Deity would stay flowering and flowing, greased on the beauty of the rituals.

One main reason individuals had for seeking initiation was to avoid becoming a ghost after they died. Ghosts are the spirits of people who at death could not get into the next layer of existence. This happened for two reasons. The Tzutujil believed that the dead rowed themselves to the other world in "a canoe made of our tears, with oars made of delicious old songs." Our grief energized the soul of the deceased so that it could arrive intact onto the Beach of Stars where the dead go to the other side of the ocean, the salty Grandmother Ocean who tossed and surged between us and the next world. On this beach of star souls our dead were well received by the "last happy ancestor" and then initiated further in that world into the next layer of life. After four hundred days of initiation into the next layer, these dead would graduate into the status of ancestors. In their new form they could help us here in this world, when they ritually fed our souls from their world just as we living here in this layer fed the beings we'd left behind in the previous layers of life.

Therefore, when a person was buried and not enough tears were shed and when truly felt grief was absent, the soul of the dead person could not make it to the next world and would be forced to turn back. Scared and invisible, it took up residence in the body of the tenderest and most familiar person it could find. To give themselves a feeling of physical substance, in desperation, the ghost would eat the life of that person. For this reason ghosts usually devoured their relatives, especially their grandchildren, jumping into their bod-

ies and eating them from the inside out, consuming the little child's spirit also. Then the ghost went on to the next grandchild or some other relative of the next generation. Alcoholism, substance addiction, most depression, homicide, suicide, untimely deaths, accidents, and the addiction to argument were caused by the endless hungers of such ghosts. This kind of ghost consumed soul after soul until a whole series of generations had been destroyed.

The second way a ghost came about was if a person hadn't become initiated, or suitably layered, while alive. In that case, one didn't really exist and upon death there wasn't enough of him or her, as a person, for them to row to the next shore. Each layer of initiation, each layer of remembering and its language ability, was very literally represented by a layer of special clothing that the people wore. This thickened a person into a spiritual substantiality, making a person into a full human. At death each of these layers of clothing were considered a language and the body was dressed in them like husks on an ear of seed corn. When you went to the other world you were recognized by these husks, by your layers of clothing representing the other worlds that you had re-membered through initiation. It was only then that the custodial spirit of the other world allowed you to pass into that layer. Without this clothing you were invisible to the beings in the other world and your only recourse was to return bodiless back to this world, devouring the future of your people instead of becoming an initiated adult soul that could help our world from the next. This ghost problem, of course, is what makes the uninitiated world of modern times so scary. There are ways for shamans to deal with the ravages of ghosts, the epidemic destruction of lives through depression and addictions. But Tzutujil thinking said it was better to have initiations and avoid the ghost problem altogether.

When I left the United States in the early 1970s and crossed the border from my native New Mexico to Old Mexico, I was fleeing ghosts. I wasn't headed toward Guatemala, but away from what seemed to be destroying my people and the beauty of the Native New Mexican cultures I'd grown up with.

Like a proud battered horse who could still recollect what freedom meant, I was fleeing from what had caused me pain. At first I ended up in Mexico, bouncing from place to place, reveling in that new world of marvels, harsh realities, and mystery. I wondered if there were any chance of finding a welcome for me somewhere on this earth in my lifetime.

That winter before I'd commenced this wandering, I'd dreamt a series of powerful and vivid dreams, one each night for eleven consecutive sleeps, during a legendary blizzard in northern New Mexico. During this barrage of visions, a world unknown to me had presented itself in such a way as to seem deeply familiar. These dreams consolidated my longing for tribe and home, a longing I'd felt since before I could speak. Leaving behind the haunting memories of my mother's death, my failed marriage, my rejection by the world, and native village of my youth, I drifted despite myself, with these dreams stored in my heart in hairsplitting detail. Then, after a year of adventures and foolhardiness in Mexico, the Spirits nudged me with what appeared to some as chance, across the Chiapas border into Guatemala, right into the waiting arms of a hardheaded village of handsome Mayan people: the Tzutujil. It was here in Santiago Atitlan, in Guatemala, in Central America, that my teacher-to-be, Nicolas Chiviliu, took me under his wing, up the hill to Panul' and into the sanctuary of his home. I'd recognized him from the dreams, dreams he'd claimed he created to bring me to him. He complained about how slow I was in finally coming home to him.

Nicolas Chiviliu Tacaxoy was the most legendary and powerful Mayan shaman in the highlands of southwestern Guatemala throughout the twentieth century until his death at ninety-seven on April 21, 1980. He died dancing his bundle. It was this bundle that I caught before it hit the ground that day, thereby giving me a responsibility to take over where old Chiv left off.

In the beginning old Chiv had kept me by his side, like a little packhorse, slowly and osmotically shaping me into a good assistant, where I learned to speak Tzutujil, make prayers in Sacred Speech, call wild animals, hunt disease, make offerings and ceremonies. After three years he deemed me ready, and I went through a grueling shaman's initiation that almost killed me—and did kill two of his other students.

Shamanic initiation, as described in my first book, *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar*, was a rare thing, happening to less than one hundred Tzutujil in a century. A very different kind of initiation took place for everybody else in the village, an initiation into adulthood and not to be confused with shamanic initiation.

Old Chiv's compound was practically a village unto itself, larger than most and thickly populated with all his progeny, adopted orphans, ex-wives, their children, and his children's children's children. My eleven dreams were no

longer part of a distant nostalgic memory of a forbidden, unobtainable life. Here at the heels of eighty-seven-year-old shaman Nicolas Chiviliu, and then later with the help of my advisor A Sisay and the whole village, I grew into a useful, happy man living in the matrix of an adaptive and ancient culture.

When I arrived none of the people of Atitlan had even heard of the word *Mayan*—that was an invention of Europeans. Nobody there wanted me to become a “Mayan,” they wanted me to become a person. All the Tzutujil youth were fighting their way out of the spiritual amnesia we were all born with. My own struggle to become a part of the village was not understood as me trying to become a Mayan. It was fully understood as what everybody else was doing: trying to become a *Vinaaq*, a Human.

To begin to do this, I first had to give my ancestry a home and some due. My Irish, Swiss, and Native North American forebears were not judged, examined or understood by the people but rather invited to live right there along with everybody else’s Tzutujil ancestors. There they were all feasted and made drunk while the ancestors told lies to each other about their living descendants, just like the living do about the dead; about how magnificent we were as we kept sending the dead all this ritual food and drink. My ancestors found themselves at home in the Mayan ancestral shrines, just as I did in the village compounds of their living descendants.

I didn’t decide to stay in Atitlan with the intention of studying or writing books on the Maya. The Tzutujil were not known for their sincere acceptance of outsiders, though hordes had come and all had left. Though Chiv had called me here, I was also spiritually adrift, ready to find a home. What the traditionalists in the Canyon Village saw in me and valued was the very part of me that the modern world thought superfluous. My intrinsic way of being was not only accepted in the village but eventually called into community service for its usefulness to the people and the Spirits they served.

In the United States, when I ventured off the reservation of my youth, most of what was really me, my true nature, the indigenous part of my soul, had to be hidden behind a germane grimace of conformity or held back unexpressed in a flat silence of invisibility in order to keep my heart safe. I learned early on that spiritual intelligence should not be naively exposed to subscribers of a dog-eat-dog money-oriented environment. I had an inborn comprehension of that archaic instinct that all people have somewhere in

their bones of wanting to give back a little something to the world of spirits that feeds them. This understanding of mine would be trivialized, mocked, and misunderstood. In the worst cases I was brutally punished by representatives of the modern machine-age culture who were proud of the fact that they had the power to blow up the whole world. At that early age I already knew that the consciousness that comes with a true spiritual initiation should be a required credential for those people whose decisions affect the rest of the world.

Other, more sympathetic people—some of my teachers, my friends, and my parents—felt that I was too idealistic, unrealistic, and naïve, because of my demand that people live with imagination.

My insistence on spiritual and social accountability were seen as unreasonable and anachronistic. Schoolteachers in those days considered anything spiritual to be a flamboyance of the mind. They told me I would never get a job with things like that running around my brain.

But I did.

In the “inner bigness” of Santiago Atitlan I became a shaman much in demand, and my compound was filled to overflowing by village clients looking for cures. Simultaneously in the mid 1970s I was discovered as an artist by the outside world, and it was through the sale of paintings to Europeans, Asians, Africans, South Americans, and Guatemalans that I was able to make a living while living in the village. Life was rich, good, strong, and real. Though I was loved by many, tolerated by most, and hated by some outsiders, I was deeply in love with the village and life itself. Those days are long gone, but these books grow off a vine rooted in that love.

Originally, *Long Life, Honey in the Heart*, and *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar* were both fragments of a very large autobiography. It became apparent, however, that I was telling at least two simultaneous stories. One story was about my initiation as a shaman. The other was the story of how I became a member of the Spiritual Gathering of Elders called the Scat Mulaj, which was a very different career than that of a shaman. I did both things at the same time, in the same period, with some of the same people. To avoid confusion I kept both stories separate from each other. Shamans were healers of individuals and families while the theocracy of elders were in charge of public ceremonies to maintain the health of the whole village. The modern world has no similar institutions and readers seemed to confuse these two

dedications. For this reason, *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar* deals only with my life as a shaman and the year I spent in Mexico before I arrived in Santiago Atitlan.

The telling of the other story in *Long Life, Honey in the Heart* begins after I'd already been living in the village for over a year in old Chiv's compound. Though Chiv does not play a large part in the second book, you can feel him always looking on from a distance to make sure I was all right. Here the true story is told of my immersion into the everyday village life of courtship, marriage, childbirth, and childhood, while navigating the dangerous political obstacles of the time. Above all, it describes the initiations and rites of passage of the Canyon Village youth and myself.

For centuries on end, the old people of Santiago Atitlan re-created their culture over and over again every spring by remaking the human being during the annual initiations. The whole village was involved, everybody was renewed and blessed, and the culture itself was brought back to life. This was a slow, graceful, organic, archaic, and durable way of life until faced with the incomprehensible violence of certain very powerful uninitiated forces from without.

I was blessed to have been caught, corralled, mentored, remade, and absorbed into this brave, ecstatic culture who held their collective spiritual life to be a sacred particle of a divine brick laid into that wall of beauty the Spirits maintained against the oblivion of spiritual forgetfulness.

Though some may not agree, this book is not just about the Maya, nor is it, in the final analysis, mostly about myself. It is about young people wanting to live past twenty. It is about old people being useful, about community, about hope, about being willing to fail. *Long Life, Honey in the Heart* is about all people. It is about the capacity of the human spirit to retain its magic, dignity, love of folly, humor, and imagination in the face of imminent devastation from overwhelming, soul-crushing odds.

Above all else, *Long Life, Honey in the Heart* is my gift to the memory of hundreds of generations of Tzutujil people and the extraordinary spiritual intelligence of their initiations of all age sets, initiations that can no longer be seen.

And, last of all, it is my letter of gratitude to those men and women, ancient, old, middle-aged, young, and younger of Santiago Atitlan and the Canyon Village, who tried to teach me how to feed the spirit worlds and who

transformed a bitter, shy, North American boy into a human being. Into a jumping, crawling, walking, flying, swimming, singing, praying drinker of liquids, eater of foods, day-carrying, struggling man willing to defend the sacred Hole, the Bride of Life, the roots of the Flowering Mountain Jade Water Earth Navel kind of man who just couldn't let all we did together fade away into the dust of Death's Amnesia. And for them, I give this book to you, as a gift.



T H R O U G H T H E R E E D D O O R W A Y

A bold and sassy voice called me out of my end of Chiviliu's compound before the Father Sun cracked his way out of the seed of Dawn, sprouting into Day. Staggering half-awake toward this formal-sounding challenge, I found its author facing me in line with four other impressive black-blanketed *Cofradia* men whose short striped pants and long colored sashes swayed in the cold lake breeze.

Barely visible in the dim light, these emissaries had their heads bound up in deep red and purple headcloths called *xcajcoj*, worn only by Sacred House officials. Each tied his distinctly from the others, one with the knot in back, another on the side, or tied crossways, all according to the nature of the service they were installed to fulfill in the complicated system of thirteen sacred houses and village chiefs, known as the hierarchy.

The youngest, beardless envoy stepped forward brandishing a full bottle of cloudy brandy called *psiwanya*, canyon water, and commenced to give me a courteous and florid harangue. His weary seniors stood back in file, staring at the ground, nodding as he spoke, their hands folded over their sash knots on their bellies.

Exhausted and hammered by the stress of no sleep and the harsh bite of the cloudy liquor, ever present in the ceremonies, this fifth-position *Cofrade*, with great finesse, his eyes hardly open, proceeded to order me to present myself that very afternoon at the Sacred House of A Clash, whose chief was Ma Ziis, Coati Mundi, in the Pchibak, By the Mud, district of the village. I was to be very certain to bring along my *shool*, my cane flute!

The cloudy, fuel-like booze was trickled into an elegant shot glass filled clear to the top and ceremonially proffered to me, both as a traditional gift and to ratify my having received and understood the official message. This was like signing for certified mail. The Tzutujil felt that the message would be better understood if you “drank it into your belly.”

Before drinking, one prayed to the spirits and saluted each official in turn, according to his rank of spiritual accomplishments, if you knew how to read his position by how he wore his ceremonial clothing. Then you waited for their flowery, enthusiastic response before addressing the Sun Father and the Grandmother Moon. After trickling a drop on the ground for the earth, down went the liquor burning just like the rising sun peeking over the volcanoes reflected in the breeze-rippled lake.

“*Titjala. Titjaga.*”

“Partake, son, please receive this one.”

In turn, each official received as much as I did, according to rank and knowledge, from the same cup, always one cup for all. With slightly altered phrasing we tossed our acknowledgments to each other in order. The speaker went last, in this way fulfilling his initiatory role. Mayans like to teach by putting untutored novices in charge, under the scrutiny and supervision of those who know. Of course, when you’re in charge, you always go last.

My “drinking in” of the message signified my intended compliance with the request, a kind of oath, though in reality there was no adult way to turn down a ceremonial drink of this type and still be respected, so everyone always complied.

One did not just sip this liquor, as drinking it had nothing to do with taste

or preference. It was downed all at once, and the little drops left in the bottom of the glass were rained onto the thirsty ground while you solemnly spoke the words "*Ay Ruachuleu*," Earth Fruit. By remembering the world, the world was fed and we little humans along with it.

Their mission accomplished and my compliance assured, the message drunk and delivered, we shook hands enthusiastically. The envoys yelled out formal greetings to the crowd of sleepy-headed kids, old ladies, and all of Chiv's people who had gathered there. Respectfully, all of us returned the required responses, each of us according to our age and gender. Then out of the compound the men sailed off in a tired but majestic roll, adjusting their blankets in the wind, intent on the next mission of their morning course set for them by the old chiefs.



As old Chiviliu, my friend and teacher, was still out in the mountains harvesting coffee berries, I searched elsewhere for some comfort and advice regarding the nature of this "call to court."

One of Chiv's younger great-granddaughters in her twenties was fanning the morning fire under her clay tortilla griddle. She spoke to me as I hugged myself by the flames. In a formal, melodic way she explained how these messengers were lower-ranking members of a powerful and mystical group of village sacred leaders who formed a large theocracy of men and women dedicated to the making of ritual and public decisions for the village welfare. These were the Chiefs, the Scat Mulaj.

They dressed differently from the rest of the village, using only the most ancient forms. Every aspect of how their clothing was worn, the knots tied, the blankets folded, had special meanings. Old Chiv had served the Scat Mulaj in over fifteen capacities in forty years, including top headman of the village for three terms.

The villagers were in awe of these monklike officials, and an unexpected visit from them inspired in the villagers what it inspired in me: a combination of excitement, mystery, and dread. What these officials knew and did was held in a secret trust, and it was in this trust that the Village Heart was kept. They *were* the inner sanctum of Atitlan. What could they want with me?

As gossip is the neurosystem of a Mayan village, word of this visit from the chiefs had traveled among the twenty-eight thousand villagers before I

could tie up the sash on my *scav*, or "Indian pants." Before the hour was gone, even the smallest child in the village knew more about my situation than I did.

Young friends of my own age set found me before I had gone sixty paces on the winding, knobby basaltic chasms of the village paths to search them out. Excited and anxious, each of them besieged me with questions and speculations, like a flock of noisy parrots on a cornfield.

Every member of our band had relatives in the hierarchy, but because these friends of mine had refused initiation, none had ever been called to the meetings of chiefs. Before I could say even a word, A Leep gestured nervously with his fat, uncallused hands as he spoke: "Those old people will kill you with that canyon water. A lot of them have died from it, you know. What did it taste like?"

And before I could respond, handsome A Maash, our turtle shell player, added, "What could they want with you? Is it true that they asked you to bring your cane whistle?"

On and on they went until, like uninitiated men the world over who begin to joke with a great proficient lewdness when they get scared, we tried to jostle and amuse ourselves back into a feeling of normalcy and the familiar.

But when we finally stopped poking and laughing, our hats cocked against "our Father's teeth," the sun's heat, the question still remained: What *did* an entire heretofore uninterested group of powerful village chiefs and ladies want with an uninitiated outsider and his ten-inch cane flute?

One clear morning about a year earlier, after I first came to Atitlan, I was beguiled by a melancholy sound made by a young Tzutujil man astride a boulder in the labyrinth of rock-walled compounds.

He was hammering out a strange song with an ingenious rhythm on a fragile five-stringed guitarlike instrument whose voice was a mixture of a cicada, a sitar, and a muted bronze bell.

Split from sweet-smelling cedar woods, and held together with a glue of boiled animal hooves, this completely hand-hewn sound maker had dried rattlesnake tails glued under the top plate to give her the required buzzy sound that so appealed to Tzutujil sensibilities.

Mayans love things that buzz. If a musical instrument didn't buzz or rattle, the highland Indians figured it must be broken or badly made.

The Tzutujil even stretched little patches of pig intestines over the ends of their flutes with rattlesnake tails glued inside of them to give the flutes kazoo-like overtones. In any village in Guatemala, beautiful handmade marimbas, both large and small, with gourd or thin wood resonators, buzzed and plinked old Mayan songs and other music, and were ever present in celebrations, ceremonies, and feasts. Guitars were not a Mayan preference. For that reason I was stunned when I came across A Leep and his Mayan guitar, playing songs from a four-century-old tradition that very few Guatemalans living outside of Santiago had ever heard of.

After the first European invasion of 1524, the Tzutujil had sixteenth-century Spanish Catholicism and culture forced down their throats. During this time the Atitecos were exposed to the music of the vihuela, an ancestor of the Spanish guitar that had five sets of double strings. The Tzutujil learned how to make and play these new instruments, adopting their own indigenous drum rhythms and flute melodies to them. The Spaniards, who by then had melted into a colonial complacency, were mostly unaware that the Maya were using their classic ability to keep their ancient traditions alive by hiding some of their ceremonial music right in the conquerors' pockets.

For this reason, the Tzutujil guitar, with still only five strings played against a drone note, was used for centuries by shamans and love sorcerers to court the Gods and young women. Most of these songs were magical, making whoever heard them unable to forget the musician.

By the 1940s and '50s, however, this music had fallen into great disgrace as a new wave of shaming priests, pastors, health-care workers, and political zealots came into the area, denouncing anything from the past, Spanish, Mayan, or otherwise. The old music was demonized as "pagan ignorance" and seen as a hindrance to the enlightened advance of so-called modern progress. Indians were told that they really were playing the guitar "incorrectly" because their guitars had only five strings instead of six.

In a culture with open faces and hearts to match, it takes a lot of maturity and courage for a people to keep their cultural vision alive under a reign of imposed shame.

Since very few Mayans could read, the churches set up their own radio

stations. They distributed transistor radios to the villages to make sure everybody got the word. Music was an integral part of the Evangelical and Catholic services, and both employed quantities of young people who sang Spanish and Mayan adaptations of hymns from the American Bible Belt, played on six-string guitars that didn't buzz.

Where before Tzutujil boys had played five-string guitars to enchant and court their brides, many young women now refused to marry boys who could sing their grandfathers' songs to them. Basking in the praise of Church officials, many girls thought themselves "advanced" as they sat laughing at their own people's tradition while entranced by the exotic mewlings of American and Latin music squealing out of Church-supplied radios.

Originally Tzutujil girls chose husbands from among the young men who were admired by the community as a whole for their village-preserving abilities, such as farming, fishing, and making things with their hands. Young men of this type were also admired for their willingness to keep the village spiritually renewed by successfully surviving a difficult year of male initiation in which they were exposed to the spiritual aspects of the Female for the first time. Only then could they marry.

These young men courted girls partly by singing these old songs. Some of them hired shaman guitarists, while others were musicians in their own right. This style of courtship was admirable.

But the ranks of these young traditional men were shrinking. When foreign missionaries, who were allied to outside business interests, came to the Lake Atitlan region, they mounted a campaign to show how much better and more powerful their New Ways were. One of their tactics was to extend cash loans to the as-yet uninitiated young men, provided the men accepted the new religion and denounced the old ways.

For the most part the boys who took these loans started their own businesses, carting village products to the bigger non-Indian centers in Guatemala, and returning with piles of cash and lots of sparkling things for their sweethearts. To the young uninitiated girls, these fellows seemed wealthy, able, and wildly free of the pressures of slow, boring, village ways.

The leaders of their newfound religions told them that the old songs, clothing, forms, and initiation rituals were the work of demons and ignorance and would keep them in poverty. Native things were said to be passé and unexciting. Jesus loved them and showed it by giving them money and power.

Boys began refusing initiation because converted girls wouldn't marry men who were initiated. Soon the standards of marriage for those girls were measured in cash, what church one belonged to, and things that sparkled, rather than in corn, fish, and the mysterious songs of a slow-moving villager. Instead of marrying a boy who would become a good family man, who had learned the old things from old people, the girls began to refuse initiation also. They wanted boys who would make them socially prominent with new things from a new place. They wanted lots of earrings, tinsel shawls, gold teeth, shoes, radios, watches, and plastic. Many of these things were sold by missionaries on the side, especially watches and radios.

Men who sang their grandfathers' songs were seen as backward. Since for uninitiated men, the desire to be loved is greater than their ability to inspire love, the young men abandoned the old songs in hopes of drawing the attentions of these young women and eventually marrying them.

At this point, the music and a large number of other Mayan cultural treasures that had been preserved against the previous onslaught of cultural attack between 1542 and 1950 had been driven even deeper into a kind of Tzutujil underground. By the time I arrived in Santiago Atitlan in the beginning of the 1970s, Tzutujil music, especially that of the five-string guitar, appeared to be near extinction.

According to A Leep, only seven men were left alive who could play these old songs, and he was trying to learn as many as he could from one old fellow, Ma Reant Co, before he passed away. Teaming up, A Leep and I began to search out the remaining old people who could still remember this ancient music, even though some of them hadn't played it in forty or fifty years. Before long, I was repairing old warped and soot-encrusted guitars and getting a lot of precious lessons in this rare indigenous guitar style.

I loved the sound, which was totally different from anything I'd ever heard on this earth. A pretty fair guitar player, I thought I could learn the music quickly, but the tunes were wonderfully clever and the rhythm a lot like the Tzutujil people, more complex than they seemed. After four months of diligent practice, I could barely play one recognizable tune. It was not until I could speak Tzutujil well that I really learned to play the sixty or so traditional songs. Music and speech went hand in hand, both carrying the same heart.

I noticed that though a great number of the songs were courting tunes with lyrics, others were instrumental. The latter were considered more powerful.

These old men were actually serenading what modern people might consider things. There was the Song of the Stone, the Song of the Corner, the Song of the Doorway, the Song of the Road, the Song of the Compound Threshold, and so on. It took me a while to realize that these were shaman songs and that by performing them in the right order, one could actually charm the spirits residing in the places named. One could magically reassemble the “House of the World,” bringing it back to life in a spiritual dimension. Tree by tree, stone by stone, the old shamans sang the world back together. These old men could ride this music like a horse to visit the dead, or the Lords of the Mountains, and so on. The music was considered an inebriate for these places and things personified, and the world got drunk on its mysterious buzzy sound.

A Leep was more interested in digging up the old songs used in courting magic so he could seduce and enchant the girls than he was in preserving the old ways. I was definitely more interested in the shaman songs due to my intensive training and simultaneous exposure to the same shaman music through my old teacher Nicolas Chiviliu. But, of course, I wanted the girls to like me too.

Although American missionary religion had demonized this old Tzutujil music, my own interest in it seemed to bring it back to life. Because I was an American, albeit an atypical Indian half-breed, my endorsement of this old music gave some of the youth permission to love their old ways again. No matter what anyone tried to tell them, there was always something lurking in the boys’ bones that didn’t want to throw away these ancient songs of courting, pain, and prayer.

It wasn’t long before eleven of us young men had formed a music group, an indigenous band. We were dedicated to playing the old songs A Leep and I had uncovered while searching out the old guitarists who knew them.

This was a new idea. Never before had a “band” played sacred music like this, and the youth hadn’t been interested in it for generations. People had become accustomed to one lonely expert on a five-string rattlesnake guitar, or a sad little cane flute player with a wizened drummer, or an old man or old woman fitfully tapping on a slit log drum. But all of a sudden we had three boys on guitars, snake tails and all, two slit log drums played with antlers, turtle shells, cane flutes, clay whistles, a skin drum, gourd rattles, and eleven good voices, all lifting at once from sincere uninitiated men under twenty. We were all trying as hard as possible to be the most old-time we could imagine.

Because none of the youth could transpose the guitar songs onto the cane flute, I became the flute player of the band. This was ironic, as the guitar songs had originally been taken from the little cane flute music of the old days. Now I was taking it back the other way.

When our little troupe began to chug and play, large crowds of noble-faced Mayan youth would huddle up around us, smiling and chirping salutations, pushing and shoving to get a good spot around us, scrambling like nursing puppies to drink in what the young called our new old sound!

Since the coolest boys were there, unmarried girls, on the pretext of errands, dragged their courting shawls past us, craning their suave and coppery necks to get a look at us young fools chugging away at the old people's music. Every evening after the work was done, we boys would gather, the music would start, and the girls would pass by, alternately admiring and heckling us to make sure we knew they were there. That was all it took. As soon as the young women noticed us playing the old tunes, *all* the guys wanted to learn. Within a few months nine teenage bands had sprung up all over the village, each competing to be the most "traditional." Every adolescent in the village knew a couple of songs. Even the girls started to sing them while they ground corn and sat weaving. Where a year before only a handful of old white-haired men could play this music, there now stood a whole generation humming the old tunes, even in their sleep. The young men finally began creating their own songs, using traditional guidelines, and the music was saved. This was the first proud thing I'd ever done.

Chiv said nothing good could ever survive unless it had tradition, but he also knew no tradition could survive unless it included change as one of its traditions. He was highly pleased with our proud little band. He'd flap and dance, pumping his shinbones up and down, spinning to our old-time rhythms, his coat and sashes flying in the breeze, bellowing to the *Nawales* at the top of his ninety-year-old lungs straight through our ecstatic ruckus!

Chiv loved the deviousness of it all, and his respect for me increased even more. My part in maneuvering the traditional music back into the forefront of Atiteco awareness corroborated the community-held notion that the spirit of the old *Nawal Achi*, the original keepers of the Village Heart, had jumped into me for a while and were using me to do their work. Chiv laughed with tears in his mischievous old eyes to see young men, who a year before would have spit on the old ways, now competing to be the best at their ancestors'

music because the girls endorsed it. He admired their passionate faces, bawling out the old tunes, hammering at their old grandpas' strumming style with their youthful beauty.

As the originators of this renaissance, my little group became like youth elders, strange little subversive celebrities among the youth, defending the old with our newness. Our heads really swelled up. Like musical revolutionaries, we walked the streets all puffed up, feeling like a combination of a Mayan Elvis and Geronimo. What were we to do? Like all youth we wanted to shine, and this shine came from the ancestors.

Little Brother of Nettles was our slit log drum player in the band. His older brother, Nettles, had married the quiet niece of a man whose sister-in-law was married to Ma Ziis, this chief to whose house I'd been summoned to appear that very day.

After practice that afternoon, Little Brother of Nettles and the band decided we should all go and scout out the house, both to show me where it was and to find out what the old people were doing there. My flute still in my sash, we hiked to the northwest cliff of the village to a hut-covered slope overlooking the Mud. Sitting up a ways out of view, Little Brother of Nettles pointed out a long stone hall with a recently nailed-on tin roof that had replaced the century-old grass thatch.

Fragrant copal smoke mixed with tobacco wafted out of the old short doorway, which was framed top and sides by a thick layer of well-laid tule shafts, tied and trimmed in such a way as to give the door bangs and sidehair. Called *Tzokin* in Mayan, this reed doorway insignia was the universal emblem used to show that holy things lay within.

I liked seeing this because I recognized the motif from several Mayan ruins I'd visited earlier in my travels. This identical shape had been carved in the stone around the doors and over the lintels on top of the abandoned temples.

We stared down at the sacred place, but we couldn't see any people. Like little kids on a hunt, we figured that if we didn't see anyone, then they couldn't see us.

Little Brother of Nettles suggested that I'd be better off if I just fled the village altogether and waited a couple of months until this old hierarchy lost in-

terest in me and got tied up with something else. These blanketed, cigar-smoking old chiefs and sacred women could be strict and unpredictable and sometimes cruel. A Maash figured they wouldn't have sent out a special patrol of underlings to fetch me if it meant anything good.

My little band of uninitiated men generally agreed that I was probably being set up to be censured or punished for something. Maybe some jealous rivals of Chiviliu had decided to get back at him by driving me out of the village in his absence.

With his hat cocked and showing us his famous big teeth, A Leep postulated through his grin that most likely these old people were secretly enraged at and envious of Chiv for having so much fun with us leisure-oriented, unscarred boys in his official retirement. Chiv, who had served the Sacred House system for over forty years, would inevitably have had to make a lot of hard decisions as Head Man long ago. This must have left him with more than one enemy carrying a grudge against his determined impish style.

Just as I was preparing to creep off a ways to consider the logistics of my flight out and away from Atitlan without disgracing old Chiviliu, my friends scattered past me like quail, squealing out an alarm as they bolted. As I turned to look at what it was they were fleeing, I was grabbed by the elbows and courteously but firmly dragged down the hill to the reed-covered doorway by the same officials who'd been to my quarters earlier that morning. We knelt in front before entering, chirping, "*Ex kola nuta, nutie?*" Are you present, My Fathers, My Mothers? A large, resounding response echoed from the deep dark belly of that sacred place. Only then did we step together over the threshold.

Copal smoke from several billowing burners choked the murky darkness. As my eyes adjusted to the crowded hall, it was evident that I stood surrounded on four sides by beings greater than myself.

To my right, behind hundreds of shimmering, dripping, smoking tallow candles, stood a row of life-size sixteenth-century Spanish Catholic saints dressed as Atitecos, and Mayanized beyond the conquerors' imagination. These were accompanied by the householder's personal spirits and "throne beings," and two rawhide boxes full of sacred ropes, obsidian blades, and spines.

Bright armloads of flowers encrusted the reed frame of the saints' "home." The ceiling was thick with fragrant portulaca flowers, and the holy images

were covered in little orchids. To my left, on hundreds of braided reed mats sat at least a hundred red-halo-bedecked women of the sacred, dressed in ground-length white gowns. They were all holding fat candles that glowed inside of large lance-shaped jungle leaves, which illuminated the room in a beautiful green light.

Directly facing me, extending down the south wall, over three hundred old eyes stared at me out of the heads of more than one hundred fifty official men in black tailored wool blanket tunics with unused sleeves, their luxurious red headcloths tied up pirate fashion or loosely draped over their shoulders. When I said my meek little greeting, “*Ex kola nuta, nutie?*” the whole room thundered with replies of various degrees depending on rank, gender, age, and relation to my lack of age and knowledge.

A stooped-over, grinning, chunky old Tzutujil fellow stood up behind the barrel of an old deerskin drum where he’d been hiding and asked the three main chiefs to bring me a stool. Before his initiates could do so, I’d dropped to the ground firmly and presented myself to the deities there first. Then I shook hands with all the hierarchy, one at a time, as old Chiv had told me they did at their meetings. I was a little unsure of the ranking among the women, since they sat in bunches instead of files, but then they were more forgiving than the men.

I felt very nervous, as if a trial were about to begin. As I sat down, I saw that the older chiefs didn’t seem very sympathetic toward me. There were three main chiefs, an older Head Man, a slightly younger Little Brother, and a *Chp*, Last Child.

The driving force and executive chief was the second of this group, the Little Brother. He rose, magnificent in his deep blue *jaspeado* shirt and white streaked mustache, and asked me very pointedly with a flurry of tobacco-stained fingers, “Son! Why have you been playing sacred music with uninitiated youth in nonsacred places and nonsacred ways?”

I was devastated. It hadn’t occurred to me that the Hierarchy was watching our young band, or much less cared. On top of all that, I had assumed that the old-timers would’ve been more than happy at the revival of an old dying tradition.

Having quite a bit of my old Irish grandmother’s ornate tongue still curling in my cheeks, which is only a little less beguiling than Mayan in a fix, I

broke out my best Tzutujil and replied: "Your words jump inside my ears and bite my heart. I feel pain when I hear these words spoken by the magnificent Lord and through him all you Lords and Women Lords, our Mothers, our Fathers, in front of wood, in front of stone. Do me the goodness of pardoning my lack of humility, but I was simply trying to keep the youth interested in the old words and the old ways!"

The crowd loved my words. I felt like I was in the hard, dark Mayan underworld from which all life itself emerges, being tested by the resident Lords of Death and Nature, who peppered me with riddles and kept a kind of abstract score for each of my responses. On that first round, I probably received a positive score for style and no credibility for content, as I was too young for such big words. The first chief stood sort of trembling, no doubt feeling the sacred liquor a little more than his "little brother" because he was much older and more frail. His face small under his ancient red silk turban, peeking out at me from under his white eyebrows, he quizzed me:

"Do you know, if you play those songs incorrectly bad things begin to happen? You're over there playing our music badly, and we're in here correcting the results of your self-aggrandizing blundering. Those children you play with know nothing; they just want to feel big instead of useful. We're over here trying to take care of the Gods and they're over there forgetting who takes care of them. Our Gods are starving and you guys are eating their food!"

I was defeated. No doubt about that, I reckoned. Tears of humiliation came to my eyes. They were right: By stumbling upon what, from my point of view, seemed like a dying form, I had assumed I had a right to it. Instead, it was a secret form. Among Mayans, great things had to be earned by "going the route," and these things weren't meant for mass consumption or public display. Profound discoveries were quiet, life-giving events, kept, fed, and maintained, and the fruit of such discoveries was distributed in a discriminating way. What I'd discovered was a sacred and secret form of music, not altogether dead but ailing—still attached to a very alive understanding. So impressed had I been with the power and uniqueness of the music, I'd overlooked asking permission to play it, unaware, because of its secrecy, of how many supporters the old music really had. Sure my welcome had deteriorated in the most complete way, the child in me finally spoke up in a martyred tone:

"Forgive me, my mothers, my fathers, but I'd not heard that our music wasn't sweetly heard by you. We meant no harm to the village at all, and, if you so prefer, we'll quit playing and not do it anymore."

Though a few old ladies were chuckling it seemed that maybe I'd won another round, since most of the hierarchy liked the humanness of my response. The throng was rumbling and discussing it all when out of the crowd a stout, well-made forty-year-old chief stood and yelled above the murmur, "Let's see if he really knows how to play at all. Maybe this talk is all for nothing. Venerable Ma Set the flute player was my uncle, you all know, dead now for one year."

The crowd agreed and the hierarchy's old drummer, grinning in approval, leaned across to me and murmured, "Do you know the Song of the Holy Boy?" Utterly silent, the royal gathering strained to hear.

"You mean all three?" I sheepishly asked.

The crowd roared.

There were three inseparable tunes and rhythms that had to be played in an unending sequence for Holy Boy. It was supposed that if they were played any other way or separately, the musicians would die within the year, having insulted the spirit of Holy Boy and messed up the order of the world. I'd learned this from some of the older guitarists, but still it was "inside" knowledge, even for them. The old people were amazed.

Pulling my little *shool* cane whistle from my sash, the room went silent as I began the first song of the trilogy. Ma QoQuix, the drummer, jumped in right on the beat, thundering away on the immense village drum whose ancient skin and cedar trunk groaned and buzzed under the flailing assault of his two ironwood beaters.

When I changed over to the second part, he stayed right with me, catching on to the new cadence as tightly as a flea on a running horse.

The room rustled with muttering and whispers of "*Rutkin oqa*," He does know it, or "*Ki' nuna ruqa*," His hand feels delicious to him.

When we'd finished the third part, an inspired crew of really old shoulder-blanketed ex-head chiefs huddled in an animated ball around the active chiefs. At some point in their secret banter, the head chief shot out of the crowd to his feet and ordered me to play "the Song of the Road, please!"

"I don't know that one."

A collective gulp of disbelief coursed through the smoky room.

"Then," he forged on, "play the Song of the Chiefs Walking."

"I don't know that one, either."

"How about the one for the Flowers on the Shrines?"

"I've never heard that one."

"How about the song for the young initiate boys when they come rowing in on the big canoes at night with branches for the Gods and Shrines?"

"Nope."

The crowd laughed and stared, captivated by the incongruity of my rousing rendition of one of the most secret, sacred, and difficult tunes while claiming ignorance of the more commonly used flute songs in public rituals.

Finally, the head chief interrupted the commentary and chatter and proposed to the men and women of the hierarchy, "Maybe, Brother Parents and Our Mothers, in light of his abilities, it would be good to give the post of head flute player to this big old orphan as punishment for past crimes. What do you say?"

The old women said yes all around, I think mostly because they liked my curly yellow head, but they held out their right hands, palms up, showing their calluses from grinding corn, in the universal sign of acceptance and pleading used by Tzutujil women to accentuate their vote.

The men seemed agreeable too, except for two who were sure I'd fail.

"Then it's good, son. Learn all the flute songs and in ten days please appear at the house of Ma Tec Sojuel and Ma Stev Tzapalu. Accompany the drummer here to come get us so that we may receive the initiates in all there is to do in their rituals for the five days that follow. Notify your relatives!"

Though I didn't know it then, this was a challenge beyond a human's capacity. As the price of my continued stay in the village, these old *Ajaua*, chiefs, required me to learn how to become a full-fledged village flute player in ten days flat. I would not only have to learn a large body of flute songs that, in fact, were practically extinct, but I would also need to know how to act in processions and in ceremonial context. I was being initiated into the village hierarchy in a very atypical way. That strange day was not over yet and the old folks weren't ready to release me back to the world yet.

The head chief Ma Wanit continued: "Now we have work to do today, and you should be our guest as we walk. This way our Flowers and Sprouts of the

Canyon Village, the people, will know you're one of us now, not just a boy making noise in the streets. Let's go to the challenge, Brother Parents, my Venerable Mothers."

Up they rose, standing like a congregation of large ornate water birds moving off their rows of nests, ready to flock together through the village paths and alleys. The drum and flute players always headed the majestic column. Although I played no tunes that day, as I didn't know them yet, I was asked to walk by the drummer's side, my flute unused, tucked inside my belt as he rumbled away.

An orchid-covered image of a saint concealing a deified obsidian blade was carried on four younger men's shoulders, while low-ranking *Cofrades* swung copal burners alongside, raising clouds of pungent smoke.

Dense crowds of villagers converged from all sides and followed us. People asked each other, "Why is Martín walking with them?"

Keeping watch at a healthy distance, my young friends who had fled earlier were scared, mesmerized, and jealous. Since they felt abandoned by my acceptance into the old folks' ranks, I lost them as my friends. The distance between us widened as I came closer to what they feared to enter, the road to initiation.

It seemed as if nobody in the village knew the real way all those flute songs were meant to be played. Everybody had strong opinions about the matter, though, and they would whistle what they thought was this song or that, but it would all end up so birdlike and off the wall that I couldn't find a song in it. When I tried doing what they did, they'd always say, "No, no, no, that's not it. You're not doing it right!" Nobody really knew.

Even Chiv kept acting as if he knew. Puckering up his old lips, pushing his eyeballs to the side, he'd blow a toothless whistle, more breath than tune, emitting a series of incomprehensible tweets and whispered moans that rose and fell like sand in a windstorm, so abstract I couldn't get a handle on it.

The truth was, the last official flute player and the only person who really knew the songs, an old fellow named Ma Zet, had been so cantankerous that he had refused to teach them to anyone. His songs went with him into the grave, along with his technique for making his flutes. For this reason, the Tzutujil didn't like to give any one person full control over any one thing.

There was another man who was rumored to know most of the songs, but he'd gone missing and, even so, was an alcoholic who didn't believe in the spirits or the rituals the songs were for, and wanted pay to play in the ceremonies. I couldn't find him anyway.

One broiling afternoon, as I was dragging myself home up the steep basaltic thoroughfare out of Panaj after bathing in the lake, I heard a toothless lady's voice off behind me to the left, hissing out of a clump of small huts:

"Sh la." Hey, your mother's son.

"Ma il ye." Mr. Sir.

"Hey, your mother's son, come here."

"Hey, your mother's son, don't let them see us together."

"Mr. Sir, hurry up, come in here." Turning and looking, I felt my arm taken by a bent-over, ancient woman dressed with a raggedy elegance, in the late nineteenth-century Tzutujil style. Bustling me into a tiny hut no wider than I was tall, she sat me down on a finely carved wooden man's stool about the shape and size of a small skunk with a stubby tail.

Speaking softly through the three overworked teeth she still had, this old-time woman gradually generated the whispered understanding that she was the widow of the very same Ma Set, the late, grumpy sacred flutist who wouldn't teach anybody the songs I now searched for in vain.

Secretly and carefully, she spoke to me as if we were two lovers having an affair. Though she was all wrinkles and her clothes more patches than cloth, she had the smile of a little precocious girl, with the intense unblinking eyes of an anaconda.

She, of course, knew all the songs by heart, but no one seemed to know she did. Women didn't play flute songs, and technically weren't supposed to know them. Flutes were male things, but the voice of the flute is female. She told me, this old-time woman, that the flute song in the ceremonies was the voice of Nature in tears. It was the weeping of every Female life form, animal and plant, who wept as her children grew and were harvested by life, eaten or replanted. The voice of the primordial mournfulness of the Female lived in the flute, she said, and women didn't need the penislike flute to sing the tears of their own nature; they simply wept. Ritual, however, demanded it.

The flutes were alive, she said, they weren't just some means of making music. I should make sure to have at least ten or twelve flutes prepared at all times, as they broke easily and became jammed up with spit or humidity.

Given the extreme length of some ceremonials, she explained, one had to alternate flutes often to give each a chance to dry out while you played another. She said that to have an array of three-, four-, and six-holed flutes in the sash was a sign of a good flute man, an *aj shool*.

An old drummer had shown her dead husband how to “feed” his flutes and give them a special altar, just as drums were fed in private home rituals. She now passed this information on to me.

That lonely old whispering creature taught me how to make flutes, too. I’d cut three different types of cane in the mountains and secretly bring the segments to her miniature hut. There we’d size them, fit the mouthpieces and burn finger holes using hot pebbles from her cooking fires, until I had a fair little pile of attractive well-playing whistles and a good grasp of how to make more when those wore out.

To play the flute, the old woman said, you had to be able to drum the rhythm to all the songs, as each was distinct, and the flute tunes ran exactly with the drum cadence. To be a good drummer was necessary too, because occasionally the flute player got stuck filling in for the drummer when the drummer keeled over or disappeared into a trance or into the night due to the long stint of no food, heavy ceremonial alcohol, and all the effects of days of rituals.

She showed me how to play the flute with one hand, leaving the other free for the drum, just in case.

Every afternoon I’d sneak into her tiny little place, and she’d whistle in a whisper all the little flute songs for every ceremonial contingency. She made me follow and repeat them with her over and over and over, correcting and encouraging me very patiently. She did this until the fine nuances and animal-like tweets and moans were as natural to me as my own breath, and she was satisfied that her husband’s sounds were faithfully restored, albeit without his help.

I brought her little gifts, though she’d make sure no one knew why or who they were for. No one had seen me practicing this music with Ya Sion, the old woman. Through her astounding method of teaching, I was now amazingly well versed in the crucial parts of the sacred flute music. When I showed up to assist the hierarchy during the initiation ceremony, it would be as if I’d been magically instructed by the spirits themselves for my having accomplished this impossible task. There were many mythologies about regular

people being taken into the Mountain Kingdom of Gods or into the other world, returning a day or two later full of knowledge and talent that would have normally taken decades to learn.

To my flute teacher, I was her private soldier whom she groomed in traditionalism to launch against the Christians and adherents of modernism who hated the old ways. She wanted the people to see that despite the dusty layer of shame and skepticism the missionaries and businesspeople spread atop the village sense of wonder, the Gods could still make what had fallen dead rise back into flower.

The hierarchy, on the other hand, had utter faith that whatever spirit had given me the songs of Holy Boy in the first place would now give me the rest of the missing songs. To the old people it was all a test: If I was the one the Gods wanted as flute player, then their spirits would teach me. If not, the village was no worse off than before. The chiefs never pitied me, they just prayed we'd do good ceremonies and all get through them intact.

They needed the flute songs to keep the integrity of the village alive and to maintain a solid, well-done, year-long series of ritual spirit feedings to the Gods. Flute music was one of the many necessary ritual offerings the old people had been struggling without for a while.

The spirit did come to teach me. She came in the form of a bent old beauty of a white-haired lady in a small hut where, in a whisper, we whistled and laughed in a wheeze. Then I'd go home to my hut behind Chiv's and transfer the songs I'd learned onto the cane itself, my feet drumming the old woman's new rhythms until everything matched up.

Uninterested in this, my band chums left me alone to learn what I must while they cruised the village paths every evening, unattached, resentful, and uninitiated.



**T H E I R F A C E S L I K E C O P P E R A X E S
F I R S T G L I M P S E O F I N I T I A T I O N**

Their old eyes blinking and dreaming like a large herd of resting peccaries, the entire body of the hierarchy, both men and women, the royalty of the village, had been waiting in front of the long hut since dawn.

The town drummer, Ma QoQuix, and I, their new flute player, had "piped" them into this compound after our predawn meeting in front of the sixteenth-century church.

The rustling sound of their gnarled old feet, the swishing of their gowns, shawls, headcloths, sashes, and the clinking of their staffs in the cold pink light of dawn, over pebbles, cinder, sand, boulders, through throngs of dogs and turkeys, would be a familiar and homelike sound to me for years to come.

Each of these wrinkled creatures was a jewel of memory. Together with the

younger middle-aged officials, they formed a treasure chest full of the memory synapses needed by the Tzutujil to keep themselves together as a culture. These royal spiritualists, who remembered the village back together every year, today went scrambling and giggling over the threshold into the compound to the rhythm of our songs, to sit and stand waiting for the initiate boys.

The old mustached men lit each other's cigars, smoked, spat, and discussed another ritual as they waited. The thirteen Sacred House chiefs leaned on their flowering staffs and insignias, their old salt-and-pepper heads tied up in bright red and purple headcloths. The *Xuoja'*, "Lady Chiefs," sank onto reed mats on the ground, moving elegantly, sitting well, holding long green jungle leaves with candles inside. Each of their hand-spun, ankle-length, white-and-purple gowns spread out sumptuously and tentlike around them, a twenty-four-foot-long ribbon headdress wound around their twisted hair like red halos, heavy and cocked to one side.

The hierarchy was good at waiting. All Tzutujil had to be good at waiting, but the hierarchy were the best there was because their waiting was sacred.

They knew after years of ritual that waiting beautifully and well was a major part of every ceremony. Each aspect of a well-done ritual was part of what they called food for the spirits. Because spirits ate mostly beauty, a body of ancient ritualists like these had to dress in the most delicious way and wait in such a manner that the beauty of their waiting could be feasted upon by the gods.

Today the image of the grand old chiefs and *Xuoja'* was irrefutably a feast for the spirits as they waited peacefully for the newly initiated boys.

The big initiation ceremonies for the youth were finally coming to a close but only after the boys had spent a year of separation from their families. These families now gathered off a ways beyond the mounded rock walls of the young chief's compound as it was the custom to continue the ritual separation and respect on this last day of the initiates' road out of childhood.

I was watching two butterflies playing on Yalen Botan's smallish headdress when a general murmur rippled through the assembled throng. Out of the cavelike darkness of their enormous thatched initiation house, from the village's spiritual underworld, the initiates began to emerge like newly fledged birds from a nest of tangled ritual smokes and smells.

Their faces the color of new copper ax heads, with billows of copal and tobacco smoke rising off their backs like mist off a pond, each boy glowed from a source deeper than the ancestral pride that held up their exhausted bodies.

Reeking with a mysterious birthlike aroma of pine needles, tule reeds, jungle melons, wild cacao, dahlias, palm flowers, wild bananas, portulaca buds, orchids, and months of living together in the other world, they poked their way out of the darkness and smoke of their old nest, squinting in the bright April morning, finely dressed as Men for the first time. Fresh off the backstrap looms of their mothers and female relatives and out of the hands of their sweethearts, all their man-clothing was woven and embroidered specifically for this day.

Each novice man had his stiff white-and-purple cotton knee pants held tight up around his waist by the wrappings of a wide double-length sparkling sash. When they were yet boys before the initiation, the ends of their sashes were even more extravagant, worn wide and neatly tied in front so that they dangled in two- to three-foot sections of ends and finely knotted fringe. When they strutted around the village searching for girls to admire and be admired by, their sashes almost dragged on the ground in the appropriate alluring exaggeration of both the youth and the unmarried girls who dragged their shawls the same way.

But today at the guidance of their middle-aged initiating chiefs and elders, these sashes were tied in a more ropelike, bunched-up way with a floppy knot in front. The remaining ends sparkled in the morning breezes, waving in unison well above their knees, as did the sashes of all the adult Tzutujil men present.

Trembling and tottering, they pulled into a line, face to face with the hierarchy, each shouldering a split cane basket from the Village of Hummingbirds filled with a fish, an adorned cacao pod, a decorated jungle melon, and new plantains over which were piled flowers and honeycombs.

Only now could their initiating chiefs and old mentors to the chiefs stride out of the tule reed doorway of the other world into this one where Ma Quix and I stood facing the initiates along with two hundred men and women spiritual officers and related chiefs. The head chief of the initiates popped out last while adjusting his black tailored blanket, his *qu'*, around his left shoulder and over his right with the sleeves hanging in the rear. The sub-chiefs, with their white *anona* fruit staffs of office marking their swaggering

stride, their hats cocked, and their sacred cloths hanging around their necks, also lined up behind their initiates.

The head young men's chief put his stout staff behind his shoulders like a six-foot club and rolled his arms in a dangling position over each end. His long exaggerated tasseled red headcloth was draped over his shoulders and reached to his midthigh past his incredibly ornate sash. He was shod in a six-colored Moroccan cutout set of bootlike sandals each with thick-soled Michelin tread, its straps bound with three buckles and covered with a prodigious quantity of colored stitches and brass eyelets.

Mayans are different from other peoples in that they guard and protect the spirits, the gods who gave them life. Like a hero, this village warrior, this year's young men's chief, was required to spiritually protect not only the youth in his charge but also the elders, the hierarchy of religious leaders, the widowed mothers of children and the spirits themselves whose otherworld homes were kept in the sacred houses.

Nine-tenths of that spiritual protection lay in this man's willingness to manifest a particular brand of male beauty. His duty was to maintain a constant unshakable stance, posture, and stride as he, well adorned as a spirit warrior, scared away evil by his animal presence and his mastery of an archaic eloquence when he spoke.

Most youth have bravado, but their initiatory leader had beauty, firmness, and a sense of direction, not to mention permission to wear the fanciest array of clothing in the known Mayan world.

That day, as he strode up and down gracefully, encouraging his subchiefs and kissing the ringed hands of all the old chiefs, he looked every bit the part.

Not a shaman or a leader exactly, the initiating chief, known as the *Najbey Mam*, Foremost Grandchild, was the man all boys wanted to be. He was a married hero who battled for beauty and whatever else was needed to keep the village alive.

Pacing in front of his tired initiates and subchiefs, he was misty-eyed for all the magical times they'd been through together in the last year, but he still bore the affected self-assurance, boldness, distance, and appropriate disdain that was the epitome of the arrogant pride his position required. The villagers felt safe and reassured when they saw him. Though nobody else in the village acted like that or would be tolerated for doing so, this behavior was expected of him. He'd learned it all from his elders, both men and women, who,

having fulfilled this position in the past, had graduated to other spiritual pursuits.

He was an example to the young of something to aspire toward, then eventually move away from. He was something for the old to sweetly remember. Later, his reward for having been a fierce Mayan hero of beauty would be to become a regular man again, at home, farming, with his children and wife, knowing he had accomplished something wonderful and useful to the village, something he no longer had to be.

Today, however, he pulled out in front of the two lines facing each other, between the youth and the elders, and began an esoteric harangue in a Tzutujil ritual dialect I didn't understand. The hierarchy responded with rhythmic nods at certain pauses.

Standing behind the initiate boys the thirteen chiefs and subchiefs began to whisper in the initiates' ears. The basket-carrying boys repeated these words in unison out loud in a sacred form of male speech of such heart-piercing depth and majesty that the hierarchy began to weep. Men and women alike, mentors, all the parents and the relations of the boys who were held at a distance by the previous years' initiates, were touched.

At this point old Ma QoQuix, my companion the drummer, who always knew what came next in every ceremony, gestured to me to start playing the Song of Flowers. He did this in a matter-of-fact way, as if we'd been doing this together for a thousand years and I was just waiting for his signal.

At the squeal of the flute and the thundering of the drum, everyone, in an ancient involuntary habit, moved to adjust their blankets, shawls, headcloths, flowers, sashes, and baskets, readying themselves to process to the center of town where the village at large awaited the New Men.

Walking at a moderate speed, QoQuix and I, with the small official who carried the drum, headed out of the initiates' compound with the young men following us, two by two, at the head of the procession.

Pushing along behind them came the large body of hierarchy, wide and long. The clattering din and barbaric beauty of this majestic column was soon engulfed by hundreds and hundreds of relatives and neighbors who poured in on us as we oozed up the stone-and-cinder arteries of the village toward the plaza, the middle of their world. The initiating chiefs had arrived before us and had brought Holy Boy to his place on the plaza.

Shouldering their baskets of the fruits of the earth, which they had rescued from the Underworld, the initiates and their escorts came to a complete stop in front of more than twenty-five thousand Tzutujil and neighboring Mayan peoples.

When the initiating chiefs had quieted the crowd, the trembling youth began anew the ritual of speeches and prayers, so clear and loud that their words echoed off the old stone walls of the church and *cabildo*, the government house.

This time they spoke from their hearts, with no help from their teachers or elders. Many wept to hear them, and all the people's hearts were touched. Some were jealous, and others amazed, but none were left unaffected by their own courageous village youth speaking out their own big thoughts using ancient words in traditional forms in front of the whole world.

The New Men were incensed with copal by the initiators and then disappeared into the sanctuary of Holy Boy who, dressed like a chief himself, was waiting to fertilize their fruit in a secret ritual.

I'd never seen anything like this. Where else could you find a group of tired teenagers who actually desired to touch the hearts of their entire gathered tribe and elders?

You had to go through initiation yourself to really understand what was happening, and any Tzutujil over twenty had done so. They understood that no one could begin to explain it without having experienced it. You couldn't read a book about it and think that you understood it. It was as if initiation rewired you with a language ability that no one could acquire without it. This was part of the great incentive for youth to go through with a village initiation.

Though I was ignorant of what was taking place in its true depth, even though I spoke Tzutujil, anybody could see that what was done here this day was perfectly right and necessary for the village to stay alive. Now I was a part of all that.

I couldn't know yet that the fruit in those baskets was the boys' souls, nor was I aware that each of these boys' souls was a fragment of the Bride of the whole village and the world. It would take three more years before I'd be taught enough by doing what these tired shiny boys had done, literally risking life, limbs, and sanity to descend into the Underworld to face the Gods of

Death, to help retrieve the Goddess of Water and Growth back to her rightful throne here on this earth in our village, Santiago Atitlan, the Umbilicus of the Universe. All of these things and a thousand other necessary understandings were as yet missing from what I would need to know to become a full human being in the sense that the Tzutujil understood. But I, like hundreds of uninitiated Tzutujil boys that day, saw what these initiates had done and what they'd turned into, and we who witnessed this were aching with the desire to become just as visible, noble, flowering, able, courageous, and useful to the village.

In our hearts we didn't want to feel guilty about our heroic and animal natures, we didn't want to be declawed as boys. Like these initiates had done, we wanted to learn how to use our exaggerated naturalness, animalness, and heroic instincts for something that old women, young women, Gods and men could admire and endorse. To achieve that, to become useful village men, we'd be willing to be polished like pebbles in a stream of initiating fire.

The miracle of this first morning of my public flute playing and the praise I thought my having learned the songs in ten days would arouse was dwarfed by the immensity of the young men's ritual. That day, my service to the village became more important to me and to them than did the novelty of my unexpected ability to do it. The old people were right about the music, anyway. This was where it belonged. They had given me a gift.

After five more days and nights of ceremonies and marching, during which I was immersed in a blur of beauty, ecstasy, and an ancient intelligence, the initiations were over until the next year. Cradling large armloads of cacao pods, jungle melons, and orchids, ecstatic and babbling, old Ma QoQuix and I stumbled home through the maze of basaltic passages between the compounds at our end of the village, escorted like a couple of exhausted two-year-olds to our huts where we were ritually released back into our everyday lives. We were officially off duty until different public ceremonies would bring us back into village service.

Infected with ritual desire, I was saturated with a delirious comprehension of community and magic from which I've never recovered. Sinking into my pile of aromatic reed mats at dawn, I slept to the sounds of water birds and roosters, determined to serve this dusty flowering village until I too could become a village man.



COURTING THE GODS, MARRYING
OFF THE SAINTS
LIFE IN THE HIERARCHY

The longed-for rains had begun to gather. Thunder rumbled down from the deep volcanic folds, bouncing off our Mother Lake. Soon the dry, sad earth would "smile" again with popped-up green sprouts and the thick buds of the tropical spring. The flowering trees could now turn their hopeful dry-season blossoms into a myriad of rich and heavy fruits, and a deafening racket would echo off the canyons where they grew when clouds of little green hard-headed parrots descended to devour them. These parrots were the voice of the Mountain Woman Valley Woman, Ixoc Juyu Ixoc Taqaj, and they had a right to eat it all, as She herself had planted the world, the world we people nibbled at and depended on.

The wetness would sprout strange fungi; the rivers would swell, churn, and cut away whole mountainsides that would collide into the slosh, melting

into silt. Springs would reappear and our beloved Mother Lake would rise. These were all signs that she of the “cattail-skirted voice of water birds at dawn, mother of fish, crabs and otters” had returned home. Our initiates seemed to have succeeded in bringing the Mother waters, the Goddess of life, back to our village.

Though the old woman had taught me the songs of the cane flute, Ma QoQuix, the town drummer, was my trainer in how to play each song, at what time, how long, how loud, and at what pace.

His old head bobbing, Ma QoQuix thrummed the double-skinned village drum with two ironwood beaters. The barrel of this ancient drum had come from an immense wild cedar tree in a canyon south of the lake by the Crossed Roads, which had figured prominently in the creation of the first human being long, long ago in the beginning of this fifth world. On one side of the drum was stretched a hairless jaguar skin, and the opposite end was covered with an equally hairless doeskin, both sides polished by long careful use.

Whenever the hierarchy had to stroll in a slow procession or march on a long brisk trek, this highly prized drum was carried on the back of an official called Ma Choot, Bee Stinger. Clubfooted, bent over, barrel-chested, with no neck and a face like a howler monkey, the inspired and long-suffering Bee Stinger carried the fifty-pound drum squarely on his spine by means of a rough handwoven maguey-fiber strap that ran over his forehead. Like most of us in the hierarchy, he knew that all discomfort was a gift of energy and food to the gods, a sacrifice for good.

At seventy years of age, Ma QoQuix, however, had banished the idea of discomfort. Dedicating his work as a drummer to the Gods, he could drum standing, sitting, marching, starving, full, drunk, asleep or awake, wet or dry for fourteen hours nonstop on a regular basis. There were times when we'd end up in rituals that lasted for six days, with breaks for food and liquid only once a day.

Under this man's tutelage I learned how to breathe a special way while playing, so that I would never run out of air when marching up and down steep hills out in the bush. I learned to focus on any change in the music yet still pace myself while measuring the expenditures of energy necessary to play a given flute song against my exhaustion and hunger.

Eventually, I would be able to effortlessly switch a spit-clogged cane whis-

tle with another from the arsenal of flutes protruding from my red sash without losing a note in the middle of a tune.

Whenever I did this I was rewarded by a string of big gentle smiles from the drummer, the old matrons, and the priesthood. QoQuix was a very direct, uncomplicated instructor of this very subtle and complex ceremonial art. Whenever he saw the moment coming where we'd have to change songs and cadence, especially if we were in the middle of an entirely different song, QoQuix would whack me good and hard on my left arm with one of his iron-wood drum mallets, flicking it at me between drumbeats, never losing his rhythm. He'd keep on pounding on me and the drum until I changed to the proper tune, and then he'd fall right into the new rhythm in perfect time with me.

After five days of that kind of clear emphasis, I knew all the changes really well and rarely lost my place during my next three years of flute playing to the sacred. By the end of that first week, my left arm was wonderfully bruised and blue. My elbow was so stiff that I couldn't even touch my chest.

One day, laughing but a little worried, old Chiv rolled up the ravine behind Panul' where we lived, returning with an armload of succulent rock plants called *tintaq' juyu*, thick mountain. After mashing them up between two stones, he buried the pulp inside a ball of chewed sticky wild tobacco leaves and rolled this mixture onto a big handlike *maxan* leaf. He tied the whole affair onto my elbow, bicep, and forearm, and then dragged me into his famous sweathouse, big enough for four, and steamed me while fanning my arm with a big shock of wild avocado leaves. Under the barrage of all this praying, smoking, and fanning, movement finally began to creep back into my poor limbs. A life dedicated to the spirit was more strenuous than most outsiders could ever know. This was only the beginning, of course. The constant renewal of rituals and offerings filled the lives of the hierarchy with daily rounds and procedures that required constant bodily resilience as well as a mental stability in the face of the ever-present ability for rituals to go haywire at the last minute.

These types of rituals were never meant for anyone's self-discovery. They were for the spirits themselves so that they would stay healthy and be inspired to continue providing themselves to us in the form of food, clothing, houses, lodging, and everyday life. But slowly and deeply I began to under-

stand the spirits' ways and the true magic of these old people as we proceeded with their time-honored obligations of giving their lives to the rituals that made it possible for the spirits to give their lives to us and the earth. It would take me a long time to understand the way this actually worked. But I could see very well how effectively their subtle and complex ways of doing things kept the Village Heart viable and the people together at a level of understanding corresponding to the knowledge of their own age set and level of initiation.

The flute and drum were addressed as one unit and together Ma QoQuix and I were called the *Ajshool Kajoum*. Once a public ceremony began, it was hard to tell if we, the *Ajshool Kajoum*, ran the ritual like a little musical generator or if it was the ritual activities themselves that drove us into motion. Every section of each rite had a specific cadence and melody sequence attached to it. After a while, when what we were doing together became pure habit, it seemed as if the instruments were playing themselves. At times like that, when the ritual ran concurrently with the music, I felt a freedom, a sensation of running fast on a many-legged horselike dragon of interdependent excellence, my hands and heart connected to the rest of the hands and hearts of the people in the ritual like branches on a trunk.

The old stones of the temples, shrines, and the church in the center of Atlán were said to have been placed in their present positions after having been charmed into motion by an ancient female music. Likewise, the old matriarchs and patriarchs wouldn't even budge a rat's hairsbreadth to pray, eat, dress, stand, walk, dance, or stop moving without hearing the proper song from the flute and drum.

The earth and the world, the weather, the stars and moon, growth and decay—all things were powered, according to Tzutujil sacred knowledge, by a sacred music, by the sounds of each thing being itself. And since humans, just by being themselves, did so much damage to everything around them, they must, by Mayan standards, send back an equal amount and quality of beauty and deliciousness to the world of the spirits whose song we'd interrupted with our noisy experiment, which we called village living. For this reason, the carved stones, the images of these powers, the carved woods, the images of those generous food-giving powers, the Holy Bundles and saints, all had to be fed with offerings of products made by our fantastically inven-

tive human hands, the same hands that stole from the earth and spirits and gave to the people.

Because of this, the images also had to be infused with complex meaningful ritual words from the throats and inventive minds of we humans who disturbed the world with our strange wailings and wars. The masters of the making of these offerings and the remembering of complex ritual language were this hierarchy of men and women.

Above all, because of our human interruption of the symphonic song of all things being themselves, we had to literally dance with the carved stones, the carved wood, the bundles and the saints of those powers, holding them as if they were a beautiful friend, a spouse, or a precious child. This was done on the back of the Drum and Flute music, whose song was an offering in itself.

Every image of every power was majestically danced with in their respective feasts. It was this dance, these words spoken with tears, these offerings ingeniously made and given, that renewed the spirits behind the images, bringing them back to consciousness, reanimating them out of their swoon of exhaustion after having worked so hard for us humans here in the Umbilicus of the World.

Though not every member of the hierarchy was present during every ritual, some of them always had to be. The drum and flute, however, were always required to make their sounds during every ceremony of the sacred houses. On account of this, the *Ajshool Kajoum* had an atypically fixed position among the chiefs and *Xuoja'*, one of the main institutions that the old people relied on to remember how and when to go about making the yearly rituals happen in the traditional way.

The old people were full of contingency plans and used to change things as they saw fit while still conforming to the standards of the needs of the gods and tradition. But they relied on the drummer and the flute player to make sure all the rituals happened on time and to give them reports on what had happened in rituals that certain officials weren't required to attend.

After three years of this service, I became very good at ceremonies. I could speak like an old chief to matrons and chiefs. This training was separate from my shamanic training, with which I simultaneously struggled under the wing of old Chiv, who'd retired from the hierarchy long ago. This double training was difficult to do and not a typical way of going about things, but I was in

love with the village and was trying to be as useful to those who desired my participation as I could be.

One day, at the top of the old temple steps, in front of the big stone colonial church, the old Head Man presented me with a *qu'* and the old chiefs' wives opened their shawls and gave me a wonderfully oversized (for my big American head) red, purple, black, and white checked handwoven headcloth made from natural cotton. These were the robes of a hierarchy member and the right to wear them came only after successfully completing several years of service to the spirits.

The *qu'* was originally a jaguar skin tunic in the olden days, and it was still called that. The front and back were named the head and the tail, respectively. Over the last four hundred years the *qu'* had become a thick, tightly woven, herringbone solid black wool tunic of the same cut.

Mine didn't have a hole cut for my head, and the sleeve holes weren't cut in yet either. This ensured that my *qu'* couldn't be worn as a chief would wear his, over the head, but had to be zigzagged over one shoulder and rolled on the opposite shoulder in a flashy way whereby the sleeves hung down in back. The "head" hung in front over the right shoulder and the "tail" draped over the left shoulder to the back.

This was the proper style for the hierarchy initiate who'd finished teenage initiation and had passed into the middle ranks of the hierarchy.

My headcloth or *xcajcoj* could not be worn on my head yet, only over my shoulders in a rectangular scarflike fashion until I became an active leader. I also wore it over the sash of my pants tied sideways to signify my active involvement during a ceremony.

This clothing signified the third layer of remembrance of the village, and anybody seeing me wear these regal garments would know where I stood in regard to my progress in the ritual theocracy. But I was not yet a chief or a headman.

The real name for the active village hierarchy was *Scat Mulaj*, meaning the complete coming together, or the complete gathering. The Scat Mulaj consisted of a complex system of sacred houses tended by male and female chiefs, husband-and-wife teams for the most part, called *Ajau* and *Xuo*, respectively. The up-and-coming sacred house officers were called *ajsmajma*,

meaning "farmers," if they were men, and *Tixel*, or "parent," if they were women.

Sometimes mistaken for a guild of shamans by outsiders, the Scat Mulaj did not have anything directly to do with shamans. Shamans and midwives were doctors to individuals and families, functioning pretty much as loners and never as a group. The Scat Mulaj, on the other hand, were concerned exclusively with the maintenance of the spirits who gave life to the village as a whole. They accomplished this through a set series of annually recurring ceremonies and ritual meetings, and worked only in groups. They were also a theocracy of priests and chiefs who, like a multigendered order of ecstatic monks, oversaw all village initiations. They were a kind of royalty whose former enormous political power had been reduced by the Guatemalan government after it had wrested its independence from Spain. The spiritual importance of their work, however, actually increased in the twentieth century.

Nobody actively campaigned to serve in the Scat Mulaj. That would have been antipathetic to what they were doing, and very bad form in Tzutujil etiquette. Each official was appointed to the position he or she would occupy by the very Spirit he or she would serve.

There was a very large body of old retired Scat Mulaj officials who paid great attention to their dreams and to the dreams of the villagers. If somebody dreamt that such and such a spirit wanted someone to serve her in the capacity of her sacred house, then the dreamer would casually report this to a retired Scat Mulaj, who was now a member of what was called the Trunk of the Village.

This Trunk member would talk about the dream to his peers in the retired circles and report it to one of the active chiefs. During the numerous meetings set up to determine new initiates for the specific sacred houses, the active chiefs would usually hear that there had been a concurrence of dreams endorsing the same person from other Scat Mulaj members. Once this had been affirmed, the headman of the Scat Mulaj would send a group of lower ranking officials bearing gifts, accompanied by a highly eloquent, senior ex-chief. When they arrived at the house of the candidate, who by now had heard through the grapevine about the possibility of such a visit, she would listen quietly to the request of the envoys, responding as best she could, refusing to accept the appointment for at least the first two visits, as is only right.

By the third visit, however, after having consulted with all of her extended family, the candidate might accept if all her people were in accord. If one of them or she herself had dreamt that she should accept, then the third time the envoys came, she would acquiesce. This acceptance is important so as not to insult the Gods. Such dreams are calls to service from the spirits, not messages from the dreamer. Then she would be escorted triumphantly into the presence of the Scat Mulaj and given a lot of tasks, introduced to her teacher, called a *teonel*, someone who was really just finishing up the same position in the same sacred house. These teachers advised the candidate on all they needed to know having them do the job the teachers had already carried out before they moved up to their new positions.

As the years went by, after entering the Scat Mulaj, one graduated from one sacred house to the next, going from sixth to fifth to fourth position until reaching one of two possible chiefs' positions after completing *Najbey Al*, First Child Position.

Members of different sacred houses had similar duties, which differed according to the idiosyncrasies and nature of the gods and powers each sacred house served. Each rank, including the chiefs, had distinct, well-defined responsibilities.

The *Rox Al* or "Third Child" had the responsibility in any sacred house of dancing the images, stone, wood, bundles, and Holy objects to the six songs of reception that Ma QoQuix and I played.

Women officials were exclusively in charge of ancient female bundles and female deities, especially anything having to do with water. These images were danced to the rhythm of the slit log drum called *cuncun*. Made from a gouged-out hardwood log with an *H* slit cut into it, these drums were played with a deer antler. Their sound suggested the call of the *pog*, a waterbird known as the pie-billed grebe. This was called the Voice of Female Water.

Like everything else in the village, where men and women even had their own distinct language dialects, the male and female members of each sacred house routinely did things in an entirely different fashion, according to what each gender saw as most useful to making the world come alive.

For instance, though appointed in the same way as men, women didn't sit or act according to rank, nor did they really like having ranks. They did not rise from position to position, they just rose. They observed who did what the best and, by common agreement, certain women just became experts at

different ritual events. At their own discretion, each woman would maintain a position of expertise, adding another woman if they got the call to do so through a dream. Women were thus apprenticed to other experts. Women chiefs and men chiefs, however, served as couples and were almost always married. These chiefs were very powerful and had a lot of say-so.

No one in his right mind did more than one year of service in a row because of the terrible economic strain to his family. Spiritual service in the Scat Mulaj was not compensated. During a year's service, a member had to provide a lot of feasts and offerings, which put the official immediately into debt to the rest of his clan. This debt could take up to five years to recover from, not to mention the time it took to recover physically from the grueling service.

For this reason, in the most ideal of households, it would take a minimum of thirty years to fulfill the ten to twelve positions one usually had to serve to become a Sacred House Chief. When you retired from that position, you were retired into the prestigious Trunk of the Village Tree.

The Scat Mulaj were called the branches of this tree and the people were the fruit and leaves. The ancestors, of course, were called the roots.

Those chiefs who served as headmen and headwomen of the entire Scat Mulaj every year were chosen from among the retired old sacred house chiefs in the Trunk of the Village Tree. Some people fulfilled this role several times, as old Chiv had done.

As part of the ancient intelligence passed down from their spiritually practical ancestors and *Nawal Vinaaq*, each sacred house gradually rounded up an ordinary villager to sit and help each headman and headwoman decide things. These civilians had no ceremonial knowledge and did not wear the same kind of fancy clothing, but had just as much prestige as any other member of the Scat Mulaj. These ordinary men and women were necessary to keep the precious connections with the everydayness of the village, and their input was always listened to.

One of the three top chiefs of the entire Scat Mulaj was also an ordinary person. The first chief was an expert on tradition; the second chief was an expert on actually carrying out the various rituals; and the third chief, the civilian, was an expert on what the people needed or were thinking.

Outsiders and anthropologists who consider themselves experts on the Tzutujil hierarchy for the most part formed their opinions without having

done much more than sit or drink with villagers and pass pleasantries in Spanish. Such interviews were usually pursued during the convenient break in the academic year between the spring and fall semesters, or during a generous paid stint to fulfill the guidelines of a book grant. But to really understand the Scat Mulaj took years, even for an initiated Tzutujil, and required that one have an enormous capacity with the Mayan language. This capacity extended far beyond ordinary speech. The Scat Mulaj spoke in a very high form of Tzutujil and prayed in an esoteric, archaic form. And they used kinship terms among themselves that differed from those used by normal villagers. There were no Tzutujil people, old or young, in the history of their tribe, who had experienced all seventy of the hierarchy positions and the hundreds of annual rituals that nurtured the village excellence, so how could a short-term visitor get more than a mere glimpse? And how could a glimpse be justification for all those authoritative books on what the Tzutujil knew about keeping the flowering earth jumping and living? Some of these outside experts did not even call the Scat Mulaj by its proper name, referring to it as the *Cofradia* system. They also claimed, inaccurately, that the Tzutujil spiritual hierarchy was just a crafty adaptation by victimized Mayans to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish Catholicism.

It was a great deal more than that. To understand the full magnificence with which the old Tzutujil Maya were able to keep their life-promoting ritual institutions during the horrible trauma of the European interruption of this culture, we have to first understand what happened to the Spanish before they invaded what is now called the Americas.

During the medieval period, in the Iberian Peninsula in what is now Spain and Portugal, several distinct cultures came to their flowering peaks side by side. Under the protection of the Spanish Muslim caliphate, literature, water technology, carving, cooking, goldsmithing, metallurgy, damascene steel technology, mathematics, medicine, agriculture, horse breeding, architecture, astronomy, building methods, alchemy, textile dyeing and weaving, library science, and, above all, a rare and fluid spirituality bubbled and cooked in a creative foment of curiosity and imagination of a kind never before seen in Europe.

Spain was not a country then. But in the south in Andalusia, a group of diverse city-states and districts, though officially under the domain of the Arab Muslims, eventually formed a loose confederation. Like Costa Rica and

Switzerland of the past, this area became a place where free-thinking people, artists, and mystics sought sanctuary. In these small and magical kingdoms ruled by powerful kings and queens, there was a minimum of organized violence. This was all the more astounding considering the violence that surrounded them in other parts of the world, and the atrocity-filled centuries of the Christian Crusades in Jerusalem against Islam and the Jews. Muslim Spain had miraculously escaped much of that horror and had actually been able to remain neutral to some degree.

A diversity of cultures such as the Gallego Celts, Andalusi Berber, Iberian Phoenicians, Italic culture, Muslim Arabs, the pre-Catholic primitive Christians, Gnostic Christians, Persians, Sephardic Jews, to name the better known, were permitted to flourish in city-states such as Granada, Córdova, Seville, Cadiz. These cultures freely added to one another without having to melt into each other except where they did so of their own accord. When this happened, there emerged far richer hybrids, and the little cities of the mountains and coasts became kingdoms of legend and imagination. It was here that the Grail stories were born. Writings of both distant and local tradition, religion, and language were cherished and translated into a mountain of interesting books, well tended by the Sephardic Jews, who had always been scholars. The Iberian Peninsula was the safest kingdom in the Western or Eastern Hemisphere of the time. Women could walk the streets at night in safety and foreign travelers didn't worry much when traveling from city to city because they could live on the hospitality of the curious princes and knowledge seekers they found there.

After Europe's last Middle Eastern Crusade failed and lost momentum, thousands and thousands of European men who for years had lived by violence and heroic crisis and who had a homeless existence returned to northern Visigoth Spain, France, Germany, Italy, and other Christian countries. Muslim Spain gave sanctuary to many dissident Crusaders who, having learned a great deal of wisdom and having grown accustomed to the civilized garden life of the Middle Eastern civilization, found it intolerable to continue living in the dog-eat-dog harshness of Catholic Europe.

Most Crusaders returning from a life of war, however, found no place for themselves, and lived landless and purposeless. The Catholic pope was quick to take advantage of the violence that had now become a part of the people, seeing these unemployed soldiers as a means to stamp out all of the

enemies of the “true faith” and Rome’s centralized kingdom. By reorganizing returning Crusaders into glorified goon squads, Rome set the frustrated defeated knights onto their own people, massacring millions of Cathars, troubadours, and many others. When they had finished this internal Crusade against the “heretics,” the formerly flourishing earth and culture of southern France, from Provence to the Pyrenees, was a razed, smoldering, depopulated desolation, utterly devoid of resources.

Once Rome had reconsolidated its political and religious power base in this area, it was time to launch a new Crusade against Islam. This time the target would be Spain. Coming from a culture with no vision of personal or spiritual freedom, and having been traumatized for generations by a life of violence and emotional numbness in service to an angry God, the northern Visigoth Christians vented the fury of their inferiority complexes further and further south until two centuries later they’d rendered Spain a poor, ruined, raped land, united under one God and two Christian sovereigns.

Gone was pluralism, gone was free thinking, literacy, safety, abundance, and beauty. Gone was money, gone were the rich human resources of Andalusi culture.

By the 1400s, Spain was so far in debt that it had stretched out its fleets of ships all over the world, searching for peoples to overrun, enslave, and plunder to feed the monster of an unnaturally synthesized, top-heavy kingdom. England, France, Holland, and Portugal did the exact same thing.

In 1524 when the first Spaniards arrived in what is now Guatemala, they came in on a tornado of shame, hatred, and a numbness from centuries of wars with their own people, wars that had originated with other traumatized people like themselves. Generations ago they had forgotten what it meant to be truly at home in the natural earth.

Deranged and damaged from generations of violence and cultural misunderstandings in their own lands, with elders who couldn’t remember life without the violating and mining mentality of war, these invaders of Native America were worse than blind to the excellence of the cultures that they found there. They could not understand the hearts, subtle beliefs, and strong tribal identities of the peoples they overran in search of Spain’s artificially enforced identity.

As far as the Mayans were concerned, this was simply uninitiated behavior. Spain was a melancholy and depressed country that, like all conquering

entities, was being eaten by all the ghosts it had created through all the killing wars waged on its own people. Essentially, Spain sought to export this kind of domestic depression and self-violence onto what they rationalized as "lesser" peoples. By taking the gold and abundance of these peoples and hollowing them out, just as they had done with the Spanish Moors and Jews, they sought to fill the empty hole in Spain caused by the erosion of their own nation's soul due to self-violence. Ironically, large groups of Spanish citizens, Jews, and dissidents emigrated to the "New World" to escape this repression, only to reestablish the same syndrome out of old habit. All those countries who wanted to be powerful by enslaving and conquering others were mostly one-God people. This imperial concept came from having no true parents, no true initiations for the young, and a culture that promoted an empty grandiosity that covered up a mass cultural depression that was only sometimes successfully exported to their subject colonies.

After the conquerors came the *ecomenderos* or landlords. These colonial families were given large tracts of Native land. These tracts were usually divided along the boundaries of the indigenous kingdoms who had inhabited the lands when the Spaniards arrived. The Mayan population living inside these boundaries were taxed by the *ecomenderos*.

Next came the Spanish clergy and the bureaucratic officials of Spain's civil governments. The Church levied a 10 percent tithe and land labor from the Indians in their diocese. The clergy and the *ecomenderos* were always at each other's throats and in competition over territory, each raising tribute for themselves and the Spanish throne from the conquered lands. Both the Church and the landlords had to pay taxes to the Mother Church and the monarch, respectively, keeping what was left for themselves. Sometimes they raised taxes illegally, misrepresenting the income on their rents, or reporting a census lower than reality.

Spanish landowners often allowed the political organization of a Native kingdom to remain intact if it hadn't been decimated during the conquest. Except for three famous Tzutujil leaders who were imprisoned in the Spanish capital in Guatemala, the local tribal hierarchy was left in working order as long as they made sure the tribute for the Spanish throne was levied by the chiefs and turned over to the *ecomenderos*' henchmen.

The Church, understanding that the spiritual organization of the tribe was identical to its political organization, levied tithes from the common popula-

tions inside the Church's domain instead of the Tzutujil Hierarchy. They also prohibited the hierarchies and shamans from practicing their "heathen rituals." Needless to say, the *ecomenderos* had a great deal more success getting their tribute than the Church did its tithe, as *ecomenderos* used the Native institutions to collect it. Nonetheless, the regular people, who had already been leveled to poverty by the conquest, were again taxed by the landowners who represented the Crown.

This competition between the Church and the landowners was so vicious that the strain of such double taxing on some tribes caused them to commit mass suicide. Whole villages would disappear overnight. Other villagers ran away into the bush in hopes of not being detected, and were thus forced to live a lonely, ostracized existence, something that was unbearable to most Mayan peoples.

Most of the Tzutujil did not kill themselves, flee, or give in to this overbearing dominance of these two feuding factions of European greed. The Atiteco hierarchy found a highly intelligent and crafty way to miraculously turn the whole Spanish system back on its purveyors. First off, they sent a whole group of village youth to study with the Church. These youth returned to the village literate in Latin and Castilian Spanish. The old people then developed a phonetic way of writing the Nahuatl dialects of neighboring non-Mayan tribes.

With this weapon under their sashes, the hierarchy secretly indicted both the *ecomenderos* and the priests by drafting well-written reports in both Spanish and Latin. These reports described both parties' respective corruptions, explaining how much they were cheating the Crown and the Church of their "rightful" percentage. They paid a disgruntled Spanish overseer to sail to Spain and deliver these secret writs directly into the hands of the king and archbishop.

In the end the Atitecos were given an unprecedented degree of home rule. They also had their taxes and tribute lowered considerably, and were left alone as long as the tribute came in regularly.

To complicate the lives of the Mayans, the Spanish Church itself was divided up into feuding factions made up of powerful orders of clergy, monks, and ecclesiastical bureaucrats. They too fought among themselves, competing for authority over different areas of Mayan territory regardless of the

boundaries of the landlords. Once jurisdictions had been assigned, the clergy often built complex churches, monasteries, and clerical quarters right smack on top of old Mayan temples, forcing the beautiful old temple stones, originally shaped with jade chisels and axes, into the form of European buildings. Having a great manipulative understanding of the Maya's reverence for sacred places, the Church fathers thought that by setting churches on top of temples that had been in use at the time of the Spanish invasion they could more easily coax the Maya to transfer their spiritual allegiances to the new god and his temple. You can always tell when this has been done. Even today in many villages one can see how the steps leading up to the atrium of a colonial church are fan shaped, mimicking the pre-European temple beneath.

One of the biggest and earliest Catholic churches ever built in a tribal town in Latin America was placed right on top of a small temple in a Tzutujil village called Siwan Tinamit, Canyon Village. Situating it just opposite the old Tzutujil capital of Chitinamit across the bay, Franciscan monks and priests used the original temple stones and forced labor to raise a very large colonial church complex. Though partly ruined, the church still stands in full use today. This was the beginning of Santiago Atitlan.

European Christians, Templars, Cabalists, Masons, Copts, Buddhists, Hindus, and almost every people in the world understand their temples to be a sacred architecture in which their own cultural vision of the whole world is represented in microcosm. But the Tzutujil, with no verb "to be," spoke about their temple as a nonrigid, fluid thing to be added to and fed with offerings. These offerings kept the world alive, like the fertilizing and watering of a tree, an ancient tree that continually bears the fruit of "now." The Spaniards of the sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries, however, saw their churches as static representations of heaven, of God's territory.

Every angle, corner, length of wall, step, layer, and direction in these old Tzutujil temples was the microcosmic home to a family of deities who represented a part of the House or temple of Time. Each of these deities came to the temple on roads of time radiating in from concentrically placed mountains, valleys, springs, rivers, cliffs, and so on, where they lived in concentric rings of temporal deity families.

This made the old temples into a kind of spiritual clock whose outer form represented the fifth layer of existence in which we live now, bound into a

form called the Fruited Earth, held together by an architecture of deified Time Ropes. That is why the Tzutujil called life destiny *Bey* and *Colo*, Roads and Ropes.

Every part of the temple itself was holy, and the Deities of each of these Time sections were called by their calendar names as represented in the old Mayan calendar. Inside the temple structure, invisible to the eye, were secreted all the other layers of possible existence like the unblossomed petals of a flower. It was this inner possibility, maintained in a tension of withheld potentiality, that gave the spiritual force necessary for life to continue.

The temple's physical shape, composed of Deified Time and tangible form, was called the Earth Body. Every part of the temple Deified, called by its calendric appellation, was simultaneously understood to be a part of an anatomy of a spiritual body much like our own, containing at once a heart, lungs, liver, limbs, head, and so on: a body of calendric days, a body of named time.

Every part of this body was analogous to a part of the temple and a part of the world, but certain joints of this Body of Earth were considered to be places where Time could be actually fed. In others words, like a flowering tree, the temple sat between the four previous worlds and layers that had already flowered, and the other eight worlds that were held in perpetual possibility like a huge set of concentric buds of creation inside the temple's form. Time, in the form of hungry Deities, kept our present existence tacked down to a tangible reality, like the temple's form.

Because all the architectural aspects of the temple were also parts of the Earth's Body held together by Time, we humans could feed those individual places of time with our rituals to keep the Earth-Temple-Time-Body alive. Throughout the year in the old days, the whole universe, born and unborn, was kept alive by the hierarchical priests "feasting" time through ritual in different parts of the temple in the umbilicus of all reality.

Because this temple was called the House of the World, and Tzutujil houses collapse every year if not maintained, the House of the World had to be renewed every year, and the human being, along with the Earth, had to be remade. This remaking of all things was what the Tzutujil called initiation. Without initiation, renewal ceases and the flower withers. To understand all of this took years, and it was in the initiations that this knowledge was im-

bued into one's bones. It was this understanding of Time, Earth, and Temple that made one into an adult. What made one an elder, on the other hand, was understanding how to carry this knowledge and still go about a regular, hard-working life, knowing that the flow of everyday happenings in the village and the world were of that Holy Temple's Body.

I suspect that most of the European colonists didn't know much about any of this; their universe was in the hands of one distant God. They weren't trying to feed this world, the past, or the future; they were mining and wasting this "evil" material world to build a ladder to heaven, a happy world eternally suspended in an unattainable future.

When the Franciscan fathers came to Atitlan, they brought a great quantity of hand-carved images of particular Catholic saints in attitudes that were revered as part of the Franciscan cult ritual of this order. In those days, Spanish Catholic churches contained rows upon rows of amazingly carved images of all the Christian martyrs and saints, representations of the different stages of Jesus' life and death, Mary in all her difficult postures, the eternal Father, and a million other angels and ornate holy concepts.

To their credit, the old Tzutujil hierarchy paid great heed to where all their recycled temple stones ended up in the Catholic colonial church, as well as to where these Catholic images ended up being placed. Depending on where they stood in the church in relation to the original temple stones, these new saints became a code for the old Tzutujil Mayan deities of time and place. It was the same old Mayan Earth, the same Tzutujil Time, but in a strange foreign configuration.

Of course, there were saints, images who were the patrons of things the Tzutujil didn't have before the Spaniards came, like sheep, horses, wheat, cows, pigs, steel, glass, money, and so forth. But these were interpreted simply as a tribe of minor Time Gods from another Earth come to live in Atitlan with the sophisticated Mayan layered Gods. These new Gods were simply the Spaniards' old Gods. They had been the power behind the life lived in that other Earth just as these Mayan deities made life happen in the Mayan earth.

The Scat Mulaj spent a great amount of time and prayer feeding and incensing these holy places inside the central church. The European priests, like the American priests three hundred fifty years later, assumed that because the Tzutujil theocracy was in the church kneeling in passionate prayer,

lighting candles, leaving flowers, liquor, and copal smoke in front of the specific Christian Iconography, that they were somehow participating in an erroneous folksy Catholicism.

In the 1600s Spaniards started becoming rare due to earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and the mass plagues of yellow fever, cholera, malaria, typhoid, and typhus they had brought with them. These sicknesses killed off so many Indians, too, that there was little tribute to be had. The clergy quit the highlands for at least three decades.

By the time churchmen and Spaniards started reappearing later in the century, something disturbing had happened in their long absence. The old Tzutujil, who were in complete sympathy with the new priests, tried to explain it to them. “What happened,” they patiently demonstrated, “is that when you Holy Fathers left our village all your saints got lonely. After all, even Jesus wasn’t married, and God himself was pretty much on his own. So, they all fell in love with the local Gods and Goddesses for the most part, except for Maria Natividades there, who ran off with San Antonio, but what can you do? After a while babies were born to them, as often happens when beings get together. They in turn grew up and married the sons and daughters of other Gods and Saints. Now we have thirteen Jesuses, six of whom are girls, and the other six boys. We’re pretty sure the thirteenth one is both. We have white Jesus, yellow Jesus, red Jesus, green Jesus, spotted Jesus, and sparkling Jesus. There are so many Saints and Gods now, there aren’t enough of us to take care of them.”

The church had filled to overflowing with so many little saints and little stone Gods that no one person knew all their names. Someone would have a dream about one, and explain His or Her name and what he or she liked to eat to the rest of the hierarchy. Then the people would know what to call him and the person who dreamt him would be responsible for his feasts. But, for the most part, the Tzutujil world was now overrun with nameless little Gods, all on account of the great promiscuity of the Spanish Saints and the beauty of the Mayan Goddesses. These little Gods, it turned out, were the Gods of a different kind of time, another earth with the strange new things that modernity would bring in a couple of centuries, things that neither the Maya nor the Spaniards knew anything about. The Tzutujil prophets did know, but that’s another story.

Guatemala has always been rocked by one earthquake or another, and the

Earthquakes were particularly violent back then. Soon the village church was so damaged that by the late seventeenth century the Catholic priests thought it better to rehouse their "legitimate" Saints and carvings in the private homes of high-ranking Mayans for safekeeping where they could continue to be adored. In order to continue receiving their tithe, the priests eventually put into place a system intended to imitate a well-established Spanish institution called *La Fraternidad* or *La Cofradia*, both of which translate as "brotherhood." This system is still very much alive in Spain and Latin America today.

A *Cofradia* consisted of a lay brotherhood made up of appointed, unordained pious civilians, both men and women, dedicated to the maintenance of the cult, vestments, and fiestas of a given image of a Saint, or an aspect of Jesus or Mary. These organizations were responsible for any expenses incurred during their term of office, insuring that masses would be said at the appointed times and processions carried out. Above all, the *Cofradia* had to make certain that everybody in the village paid their *tasacion*, or tithe, to the priest, who usually skimmed it.

Besides giving homes to homeless Saints, the rationale of the Church was to put in place a system that would insure that the Indians paid closer attention to the finer points of seventeenth-century Catholic dogma without the constant need of a priest, while keeping the coffers filled.

The Tzutujil loved the idea, and mysteriously engineered it so that the official Saints (which were Gods of Time now) were kept in the *Cofradias*, or private huts, right in the same lodgings where certain prohibited Native Gods, bundles, and secret ceremonial relics that had craftily escaped the scrutiny of the *padres* and had been kept for centuries all along. Here, too, was where all the offspring of the Gods lived.

Soon the *Cofradias* simply became Sacred Houses, called *tzokin hai*, or *shutin hai*, where the families of the Gods and Saints of Time and the deities of the products of these seasons were housed and maintained as always. But now, with the added company of the Saints officially sanctioned by the Church, the Tzutujil were able to merge it all and keep what was best alive.

The Saints' celebrations would innocently take place in the home of the old gods, which they shared. Each Sacred House thus formed corresponded to one of the thirteen aspects of the powers anciently maintained by the old

Tzutujil in their constant efforts to keep the Flowering Mountain Earth alive and well.

Some of them housed:

Wild Animals and Plants, Winds, Blue Corn Woman

Domesticated Animals, Above-Water Animals and Plants, and Yellow
Corn Woman

Cacao (Chocolate) Growth, Underwater Animals and Plants

Ancestors, Death, Underwater Dead

Three Corn Plantings

The Hierarchy maintained some of the medieval Christian aspects in their processions, while the language of the ritual and the rituals unseen by the priests kept what was truly Mayan alive.

Married into, eaten into, absorbed, or alone, what the conquerors of those days brought was made much more beautiful by the Tzutujil. The old Gods salivated in hunger alongside the new ones and their mutual offspring in expectation of the delicious recipe of faith and eloquence which fed them. What the Scat Mulaj fed with their prayers, processions, dances, songs, candles, copal, tobacco, flowers, liquors, turkeys, shrines, and offerings made life live in Atitlan. And now I was one of their new helpers.



DEER DANCERS, JAGUAR DANCERS,
HATCHING THE VILLAGE HEART
GOING THE ROUTE TO INITIATION

Up from the Big Road, a sound like a thousand adolescent coyotes bred to large moaning cats rustled in here on the chilly night breeze of November. Faint at first, then close, then far, churning in the sweet lake air, their screaming, hooting, howling, and cooing came creeping in on the wind, through the upper cornstalk walls of this Sacred House.

Here Axuan, the God of Mountain Wind, North Wind, Dry Wind, and all the wild animals, with his wife, Ya Xuan, the Mother of Blue Corn, stood majestically attired as mountain royalty, eating in the flickering flames of a thousand kidney-fat candles laid out for ten feet in front of them.

Ma QoQuix and I entered. We knelt praying, greeting Axuan and his wife between the hot flames and the images of the Gods and saints. The old hut was like a spiritual engine, fueled by a fluid archaic language and ancient pro-

cedures. Each member of the theocracy of Axuan and Ya Xuan was performing his or her diverse duties. Some were sitting on the bench in state as kings and queens, while others swung ornate incense burners full of coals, which released chokingly fragrant smoke trails directed skillfully to each deity and holy direction that still other members of the Scat Mulaj who had returned with us were praying to. We had all just returned from a mission to other sacred houses to retrieve more boughs of cedar, cigars, and sacred liquor.

Having finished saluting the spirits and the officials, the drummer and I were boisterously greeted by the chiefs. Their heads were all covered with beautifully tied headcloths and their backs with long black blanket robes hanging to the ground.

Grabbing our arms, they graciously sat us, as always, in the very special place at the main bench next to the chief of Axuan and his wife, the *Xuo* of Ya Xuan. Ma QoQuix and I faced a covey of happy Tixelí, who waved their hands at us sitting with their legs folded to the side on their finely woven little reed mats. These women officials of this Sacred House nestled comfortably on the six-inch layer of fresh pine needles that covered the entire floor.

We yelled a greeting to them: “*Ex kola nutie?*” Are you there, My Mothers?

“*Jie oq kola joj nta.*” Yes, we’re here, My Fathers. They waved their arms, laughing, and rolling their eyes at us.

The *Xuo*, a dignified old matron with a skunk stripe of white running through her black hair, presided at her place by the head of our bench next to a rawhide box that was suspended with ropes like a baby’s cradle from the cross poles, allowing it to rock freely. Blackened with centuries of caresses and copal soot, it held the *Nawal taq Alaniel*, the Holy Wombs of the Earth, and the much adorned dried placentas of the first boy and first girl ever born at the beginning of the Earth in this creation.

The *Xuo* was in charge of this powerful bundle, which no male could touch, as it was a woman’s territory. It contained all the spirit umbilical cords of every living thing in the universe, which connected us here to the Big Thirteen Goddess. These included the ocean, moon, lake, hot springs, rivers, plants and earth and every wild animal. This bundle was taken out and danced only twice a year, once in June and once in November.

The chief of Axuan, the *Xuo*’s husband, sat next to her. He was trying to explain something to us about a prophet coming to visit the next day, but we

couldn't hear him well over the driving din of the marimba band chugging away in the corner.

Besides my official duties here as a flute player, I had apprenticed myself to a bundle in this Sacred House called *Rukux Way Ya*, the Heart of Food-Water, Heart of Earth. This grand bundle contained the supernatural male power to fertilize all living things of the earth. It was the male equivalent of the woman's umbilical bundle and was said to hold many powerful holy objects that were left to the tribe by the Gods at the beginning of the last creation. A twin bundle of the same type was cared for by the Gods themselves inside their sacred mountain house, *Q'alibal Juyu Taq'aj*, Mountain Valley Throne, where I'd received my jaguar whisker.

Though our male bundle was also taken out of its big ancient box and danced only two times a year, only a few highly initiated men had ever seen or touched the gifts that lived inside. Every time the bundle was danced the Gods in the inner bigness of the other layers danced theirs. Their bundles and ours were all married but kept in separate places. The force field of longing created between the faraway bundles gave life to the world. Tonight was one of those nights.

In this world, the Heart of Food-Water was cared for by a jealous and neurotic rain priest who wore a white-purple headcloth over his shoulders unlike the red, brown, and purple ones the rest of us had. This signified his celibacy and marriage to the Gods.

I'd fallen in love with the Heart of Food-Water ever since Chiv had brought me here five years earlier. But like anything you love, you have to first learn her language before you're allowed inside her heart.

The secrets of this carefully wrapped pre-Christian, Seed Heart of Abundance lived inside an archaic ritual Mayan language reserved for the priests and initiates of the Bundle itself. I'd have to become one of four students who would serve for four years, learning all the dances, origin stories, and ritual procedures of the bundle before I'd be allowed to really look inside. Though we had been promised great mystery and ceremonial vision, one whole year still remained until we'd be called on by Chiviliu, the Rain Priest, the Prophet, the Chief of Axuan and his *Xuo*, to ritually initiate us into the secrets of the Bundle of Food and Water.

Tonight, however, the Rain Priest readied the bundle, chiding the attending officials into doing everything just right as they spread it out. Because the

copal and tobacco smoke rose so thickly and the bodies of the officials intentionally obscured everyone's line of sight, it was impossible for anyone to see what the priest was doing deep in the bundle box. This was a common technique used to maintain secrecy in all the sacred houses.

There were still a few deerskins left on the table, their antlers tied up in colored ribbons. Soon any number of this year's new men, recently initiated boys, would ooze through the reed doorway into the sweet smoke and mystery of this night and claim them, joining the wild band of Deer and Jaguar Dancers.

The bundles could not be danced without a visit from the Jaguars and Deer who danced out the story of the first human being who had received the Bundles. This story was told only to new men initiates, and only they were allowed to dance under the skins. This was a serious part of male initiation and anyone else not "cooked" enough could die, lose his mind, or, at the very least, get very ill. Men with pregnant wives were ineligible to dance, as they were past this stage, having already fertilized the earth, and were moving on to other rituals more in line with family life.

All of a sudden the marimba was told to stop playing, and everyone went silent. We strained to listen as the antique mystical speech of the *Najbey Quej*, the First Deer, the Priest of the Hide Dances, seeped like a confident stream of murmuring birds past the tule reed doorway into the Sacred House.

You couldn't quite see them all outside, the row of bobbing antlers upright in the soft candlelight rising from a dark file of deer heads, while the hides that completely covered their bodies clacked and rustled on the ground as they knelt, praying and shifting to the directions. For all the world here were sacred animals from the "Other World" at our door, kneeling in a long row in the dark, asking permission in their ancient tongue to come into our world, the world of people.

The stiff-eared Jaguar moved his head slowly back and forth as the huge crowd of Deer followed his old words in prayer.

Finally, the praying stopped and, kissing the ground, the Jaguar popped up to what seemed an enormous height, and all the Deer, yelling and whooping, leapt over the threshold into the Sacred House, madly dancing and screaming.

As if it were our second nature, in love with this old semiannual ritual, knowing the truth, that real spirits were here with us, the drummer and I

struck up the stirring Song of the Deer. When he felt the roar of the drum, the Jaguar went wild, whistling and yelling in a desperate loud mewing complaint, "Fall down cliffs, close up canyons, come into my clutches, I'll grab you, Uh ooo o ooo ou. . . ."

Swirling like an enraged tornado, his timeworn skin flying up, whipping his tail around, the big old Jaguar transformed into a monster cat who tried to maul all the Deer with the claws of a moss-stuffed ocelot he wielded skillfully on his frantic paws. Spinning furiously in on him with lowered heads and jabbing antlers, the herd of Deer tried to gore the angry old feline, dancing all the while. With their shields and rawhide aprons lowered, they fended off his blows, raising the dance to a frenzied battle of beauty: fur flying, animals screaming, Jaguar swearing vengeance.

We played louder and louder, then we switched into the next phase of songs. Twelve stanzas had to be completed in each of the three phases. When we finally finished the last one, the Jaguar and the Deer separated, panting, to opposite sides of the hut. The candles were flickering wildly while their wax gushed into grotesque forms from the wind the animals had raised in their furious dance. An official tied a blanket over the doorway. Villagers began rushing in, especially unmarried girls who wanted to see the initiates, but no pregnant girls or their husbands were allowed into this ritual, for fear of miscarriage from fright. Sacred guards were posted to keep out anyone who was not already there to begin to witness what followed.

Using two loose glossy antlers, the Sacred House chief played a big slit log drum that looked like a capsized wooden canoe: *blung, blung, chat', blung blung blung chat', blung blung chat', blung, blung, blung, chat'*?

From one end of the room, a strong, well-adorned Deer danced forward into the space in the middle of the Sacred House. The Jaguar started to dance toward him slowly and majestically from the opposite end until they faced each other, both smoking long ceremonial cigars. The fumes of the tobacco rose elegantly from under their hides.

Gradually, they worked their high-arched dusty bronze, bare feet toward opposite ends of the heavy canoe-bottomed table where I, the drummer, and the lords were sitting. This table weighed at least a hundred fifty pounds. Sinking into the pine needles beneath the ceiling of portulaca flowers, these two dancing spirits, without any pauses or rests, simultaneously bit their ends of the table with their teeth. Clamping down like beasts, their eyes

bulging, without the use of their hands, they picked the table up into the air with just their clenched jaws. With the table in their teeth from opposite ends, they began to dance both the table and the Holy Bundle of Heart of Food-Water, which had been placed in the middle of it earlier by the rain priests. Picking up speed as the ancient sound of the *cuncun* quickened, they began to rotate the table, dancing and leaping all the while. The table still in their mouths, they kept this up until they had returned it back to its original place. Then, sinking to the floor in a reverent kneeling position, they released the old table. Leaping up, they began to dance frantically, the two of them sparring viciously, swirling and swirling until finally the Jaguar fell to the ground in a death trance, trembling. With the sound of the drum rolling, the Deer adversary pulled off the Jaguar's hide and placed it over the incense burner that had been kept smoking by the Fourth Brother of the Sacred House. The Jaguar's Skin was placed with reverent care on the altar in front of all of the Gods of this Sacred House, and the log drum ceased its old rhythm.

Jumping up from beside Ma QoQuix and me, the Third Brother and the sacred women, the Tixelí, grasped copal burners, and after thoroughly smoking and incensing the dancers, they carefully removed their skins one at a time. When the dancers had finished praying to the bundle, we all rose to greet them as young men, sitting them next to us on the benches with the chiefs. Though proud to see them as young human beings, we knew full well that these boys were still in the "bite," or trance, of their spinning dance. We didn't expect them to be totally human yet.

When the Jaguar Dancer finally got up, we greeted him roundly with fierce affection. He was and always had been the Master of the Dance, called *Najbey Quej*, First Deer, by everyone in the tribe.

I had danced this dance a couple times the year before. The air under these magical hides became wide and dreamlike as you spun. You actually became the First Man, the Deer, and it was hard to stop being the Deer even after the hide was gone. There were a lot of procedures for getting under the hides and into their magic, into the other world and back home, in one piece. *Najbey Quej* was the man who knew it all, and in our youth we all looked to him to help us get through the experience.

He always had his head tied up with a silk scarf and he had the powerful,

playful face of a Jaguar in a man, if I ever saw one. *Najbey Quej* was considered a kind of prophet or visionary. This dance was a spinning dance that let you know things beyond the scope of humans, and *Najbey Quej* knew more than most. He had the air of a grudge about him, probably like nature itself: unhappy with humans but still tolerant of everyday human ignorance—only God knows why.

Najbey Quej and I were always friends, but his job this night was to remain a Jaguar, keeping the whole world alive by being the Great Wind Jaguar who danced out an old secret story that only the initiated understood. This way he simultaneously taught the fresh crop of village initiates how to go through their animal nature without losing their humanness.

When all the prerequisite prayers, salutations, gift giving, encouragement from the old ladies and lords, and the ever-present canyon water was distributed, the youth lined up and said their farewells to us one by one. They asked for our blessing to do well, and we gave them the best we had. Donning their deerskins, antlers up and ears poking out, they started to circle, walking backward, swaying their heads back and forth into a spiral trail back, back, back into the other world of the Gods and animals.

The *Najbey Quej* once again became the Jaguar, and he led the initiates now not as an antagonist but as their captain into the Holy World of the Wild Creatures.

Whistling and whining, growling and screaming, all the animals knelt to thirteen directions, raising and hooting, falling again and whistling, praying as animals now. When the marimba began to pulse again, they commenced dancing almost cutely in place. The shadows that fell over the cornstalk walls entranced the village back into the original world at the beginning of ancestral time.

Then at a given signal the dancers all shot out into the dark like startled swallows, faster than can be imagined, onto the paths, running and hooting, spinning and jumping, sparring and flying. The hides gave them an inhuman power everyone understood, and off they flew to another sacred house containing another bundle called The Herd and a different Baby Bundle. They would go on like this for two days until all the bundles had been danced.

As soon as the ceremonial dancers were gone, all the officials, men and women, inside our Sacred House jumped up and started dancing abstractly,

some with their hands behind their backs like ice skaters. All of us were required to dance ecstatically, even to the point of fainting. Some of us would not wake till dawn.

At sunrise a feast was called and we, the holy wounded, were healed by the kind voices of our mothers, the Tixelí. They called us to eat the food given to us by the Heart of Food-Water, the Baby Bundle, through the Deer. We thanked everyone in order and feasted together, each of us eating the exact same things cooked in conformation to the old foods traditionally eaten at this time. These foods included the Foot of the Holy Children, a tamale the size of a child's foot in which the Road of the Sun Father was etched; *pulic'*, a stew made from turkeys sacrificed the day before; and wild mint, white corn, dried and ground mouse chilies, toasted squash seeds, small tomatoes, and salt from the mountains.

One at a time, each official thanked each deity, tribal ancestor, hierarchy official, and all of the sacred cooks. With such a large retinue, a feast "thank-ing" could take more than an hour. By then the food was usually cold, but the opportunity for gratitude was understood to be the main reason for a feast anyway. After all, it was the bundles, the Gods who danced as we danced, and the visiting animals who actually occasioned this feast. The ornateness and eloquence of the gratitude given during a morning feast of this kind was one of the things that caused the earth to come back alive again. Indeed, the Gods and ancestors were feasting right along with us in their world, only what they were eating were the things we'd sent them the night before—candles, liquor, flowers, tobacco, incense, songs, prayers, ritual, and dance. They too had fallen down in a trance of ecstasy and were now being revived by the delicious steam and aroma of our thanking them for what they'd given us.

The Gods sent us food and life, and the thanking made the feast delicious to the Gods. Everyone and everything was thanked and fed in every way.

The same thanking was repeated after everyone had finished eating. Each of us took our bowl to the cooks and showed them its emptiness, thanking them profusely in one of the many fine eloquent language forms used by initiated adults. These were not liturgies but well-made ancient speeches distilled from a rich horde of traditional images that expressed the excellence we felt in our full hearts and bellies. There is nothing more wonderful than being sacredly happy, fallible, full and hungover on God in a group of people

dedicated to these activities, knowing that by doing so you were helping the world and the village.

When we had finished, we readied ourselves to reenter the sanctuary, the Sacred House where the Old Heart of Food-Water Bundle sat in state, unopened, feasting on the magnificence of all the flowers, smells, and fires.

Suddenly, old Chiv, accompanied by the Rain Priest, and two ex-chiefs thudded into the compound flanked by three tall white Guatemalan Ladinos in polyester shirts and slacks, cigarettes hanging out of their mouths. Two of them had fierce-looking machine guns in one hand and clip belts over their shoulders. They laughingly followed the old Tzutujil leaders, lining up to face the chief and *Xuo* of the Sacred House.

Old Chiv said they wanted to see the Heart of Food-Water and have a look inside of the bundle, as they'd heard it was very interesting.

The chief, old Chiv, and the Rain Priest's eyes locked in some kind of shock and unspoken recognition. The Chief and *Xuo*, with a regal flourish of hands and robes, invited the "visitors" in while sending word that the rest of us, the Scat Mulaj, should keep our distance.

A blanket was again hung over the doorway and copal smoke began curling out under the eaves of the Sacred House and through the roof thatch.

The crowd of officials who should have been inside were confused, doubtful, and uncharacteristically silent. Something very bad was happening and we all knew it. A political candidate and his bodyguards were "visiting" us traditionalists. It made us all nervous. Mocking laughter arose from the hut and finally the three short-haired, hatless, tall white men with guns strolled out of the hut making jokes in Spanish. Ignoring the village officials, they disappeared up the Big Road to their shiny car at the mouth of the village. The hut was closed to us for another hour, and then the old people emerged. Chiv explained nothing to me personally nor to anyone else, but said his polite and formal farewells to all present and then disappeared into the bush.

By the time we'd reentered the beautiful Sacred House it looked small and humble. We'd lost the ceremony; the happiness was gone.

We'd been violated by what didn't love us, or comprehend the delicateness of what it took to get to the common spiritual ground where what was human could feast with the divine. The beauty had been scared off like deer

in front of sport hunters. The immenseness had been diminished and trivialized. How could Chiv have sold us out like that? How could the Rain Priest have let him? What was wrong with these old men?

I'd been Chiv's student for three years now. I'd been initiated as a shaman and knew him to be a strong defender of the traditions. Nevertheless, he had, with no warning, nonchalantly allowed a bunch of insensitive goons to come right into a sacred sanctuary with no procedure or ritual. These men had no respect or knowledge for what they wanted to see, and yet Chiv had allowed them to peer into the most significant Holy Bundle the village had. I and the other Bundle students weren't even allowed to see inside those multiple mystical wrappings until we had undergone the requisite four years of focused training that it took to mature us enough to understand what every shred and crumb of the Bundle meant.

Why hadn't the other officials stopped them? Why hadn't the village barred the way? It was like inviting some horrible men to sleep with your wife, daughter, sister, or mother while waiting outside for them to finish. To make it worse, these strange men made it all look as casual and trite as if they were in a *tiendita* to buy cigarettes. I was furious and so were the other young men with whom I'd been training.

We held our peace and completed the remaining rituals for the House of Axuan, all the while keeping silent about our anger. But the following day, after we'd all been released back into regular life, we were unable to contain our feelings of violation and disappointment. We were determined to confront someone, and so we confronted Chiv because he seemed like the guiltiest party.

When we arrived at his compound, the old shaman was sitting in his personal Sacred House, the one with the stuffed fish hanging overhead.

Trying not to enter surreptitiously, we boys yelled out the customary "*At kola Ta?*" Are you there, Father?

"*Jie n kola anen ai'i.*" I'm here, little lords, Chiv bugled.

"*Kixjona.*" Come in, all of you.

"*Kixits be ga a i'i.*" Please, all of you sit, young lords.

Chiv had several freshly steamed duck *patins* laid out in front of him. This kind of *patín* was made by taking a club-killed lake duck and smoking it over a hardwood fire, then cooking it in a paste of achiote, tomatoes,

squash, seeds, and salt, with little chunks of *piech'*, wild banana-stalk hearts, and gourd tendrils sprinkled in. The duck was then wrapped in a plantain leaf, tied with *zibaque* fiber, and the package was steamed for an hour in a big clay pot made for just that purpose. It was as if he'd been expecting us at that very moment and had a feast laid out for us. You can be sure that was exactly true. He was a magician and a rascal.

"*Kixwa aii.*" Please, eat your fill, young lords!

"But, Father, we've come to speak to you about what happened yesterday morning in the compound of Axuan."

"Oh, yes, but first it's good to eat. Look—smoked duck!" old Chiv replied, grinning and salivating.

"How come you let those *Mosi'* see the Bundle?" I blurted out, ignoring the requisite Tzutujil etiquette of gradualness. "These men are uninitiated, they know nothing about the true meaning of the Bundle at all. How could you just open it like that without any of the respect and time it takes to do it right? How come you sold us out?" I wanted him to answer, to tell me he hadn't done it for money, as some suspected and had whispered about since yesterday.

But Chiv was hungry. "Well, maybe that's true," he said, "but the best thing, really, is to eat. Look, smoked ducks, five of them!"

The other boys couldn't take it anymore and began to eat, because this was a prized, rare, and delicious food made only by the Tzutujil. In the past, legend said, Tzutujil shamans and heroes had used *patín* to beguile monsters and bribe their Spanish overlords into letting the Tzutujil do what they liked without restriction.

"Father, you know it takes four hard years to learn the old words and dances to open that Bundle, and now these *Mosi'*, these laughing, mocking people, with no work and no culture, come ruin our sacred Bundle. When you let those people see what we boys are kept from seeing, the sacred ran away from the Bundle. These people just come to steal, they give nothing and have now ruined the most holy thing in the village, the Heart of Food-Water. How could you let that happen? Tell me how?" I was getting really worked up, and though the other boys had their mouths full of the delicious fare, they nodded in agreement. Chiv had his mouth full too and was nodding also, but mostly to help him chew because he only had about eight teeth.

Finally, swallowing his semichewed food, he spoke.

"Son, the duck is really delicious. Please eat, look—smoked duck! What can be so troublesome when you have smoked duck? Eat." Chiv was like a hawk on a sparrow, with no time for anything other than what he was focused on.

Disgusted, I rose up and, in the worst breach of Tzutujil etiquette imaginable, I had begun to exit without so much as a "Thanks" or "I'll return," when the *Najbey Quej*, the First Deer, the powerful Jaguar Dancer, strode through Chiv's door with his hierarchy wife. Dressed in his best blue-and-white handwoven striped shirt and bird-embroidered knee pants, his lined jaguarlike face grinned like a big cat when he saw me. He grabbed my hand, seeming to shake it in greeting, but he actually prevented me from leaving, making it all look as though I'd risen to go greet him.

He had a grip like a howler monkey and, winking, walked me together with his wife back to the smoked duck, everyone shaking hands, exchanging greetings, happy to see one another. Finally, we all started eating together. *Najbey Quej* was very happy about the smoked duck and his wife did a lot of damage to my *patín*. I gradually started eating too. Chiv and the jaguar man kind of smiled as they gnawed at the bones, crunching them like skunks eating mice, their heads bobbing, humming in delight. When it came to birds and smaller animals, the Tzutujil don't leave any bones. It was good, I had to admit.

Finally, after another hour of smoking pipes, belching, and storytelling, old Chiv told the old jaguar man about my complaint.

Najbey Quej just laughed, barely parting his lips. He and Chiv lit their funny, tiny stone pipes, sharing a half-penny cigar to fill them up.

"*Tdta'*, Brother Father, I call you this because you are hierarchy, but you're acting like a spoiled baby monkey. This bundle is older than any of us, and was here on the earth before any humans were created. This bundle's holiness was not created by people physically, and, for the same reason, there are no people who can destroy it by taking it apart. When people take the holy apart, they take themselves apart.

"Don't you think the bundle must have its own protection? The power in that bundle makes us whole but we don't make that power. What you say is true; in order for that power of the great Heart of Food-Water to keep us

whole, we must maintain the bundle properly. But does that make these disrespectful people so powerful that they can diminish the power of the bundle?"

Calmed a bit, I was listening, and I replied, "We have to wait four years to see what they demanded to see in the blink of an eye, and then they went off joking as if they'd just seen something unimpressive, something they already knew. Why do we have to wait if you just let anybody else treat it like a piece of junk?"

Chiv had digested enough to get in on the conversation by now. "Look, son, for years we people of the Canyon Village, the Temple of Birds, have had to deal with people from other countries, whites from the cities and all kinds of people who always wanted what we have. It's getting worse all the time, and up till now the spirits have protected themselves. People from the outside want to take apart our bundles to see what's in them. You can take one apart in a second, but you see nothing. The only way to "see" what's in the bundle is to learn slowly how to put it together and how to take care of it, like an egg, for instance. If you want to see why the mother bird thinks her eggs are so precious, like our village loves its bundles, then you could break the egg. All you would see is mucus and yolk. But if you initiates sit, hatch, maintain, and care for the egg without breaking it, you will see in the end what an egg is all about. An egg is really a bird, and a bird that can lay another egg. To hatch an egg and raise that hatchling so that it can fly takes time, care, and worry. That's initiation.

"By looking in the bundles those people saw 'nothing,' and, seeing nothing, they took nothing away with them. Like most of the greedy peoples of the earth, when they heard rumors about the most precious thing our village had, they assumed it must be gold, material wealth, or who knows what. They wanted to make sure we 'poor' little Indians didn't possess something that these big politicians didn't already have, something that had somehow missed the avaricious scrutiny of the previous oppressors.

"And mark this: If they had seen any worth in our bundle, they would have connived to own it or just stolen it at gunpoint. But since what is in the bundle cannot be seen without going the route of learning, they saw nothing.

"You have to go the route, boys. This means that by going the four years you learn how to see 'nothing' in a substantial way. What is in the bundle is in

the seeing. We are not so primitive as to think that the bundle is the power, it is simply a home for the power to be seen. The bundle is a throne, and it takes four years for our poor human eyes to see the spirit sitting there.

"All of our bundles contain ordinary things that, when seen in ritual context, become the extraordinary things they really are. Our everyday human struggle for food and life tends to sprinkle a dust of commonness on the world. Our ceremonies 'repolish' the spirits, make it so we can see the holiness of what surrounds us every day. The Spirits are big and they've always made it so that we have to go the full route of learning to see what's really in there. Everybody else who takes the shortcut will not see. You will see in time, boys. Don't be scared off the nest by some clumsy hunters; be patient and courageous like mother birds and hatch the spirit."

What Chiv was saying was very beautiful and true, but part of me believed that this was just a quaint comeback to avoid telling us the truth. But old Chiv was right. The Old Jaguar man was right. The old men and women of the hierarchy were right, for when the time came for us to see what was in the bundle, it was so beautiful as to be undescribable. Like all those who came before me, I promised not to tell what I saw, and I won't.

"Besides," Chiv continued, "they had machine guns! You'd be out of a teacher if I hadn't gone along with it. So, did you get enough duck, lords?"

We sang songs and talked all night, waddling home as the morning star began to rise. I fed that star and slept.