

# TRADITIONAL MOMOSTENANGO: A MICROHISTORIC PERSPECTIVE ON MAYA SETTLEMENT PATTERNS, POLITICAL SYSTEMS, AND RITUAL

Robert M. CARMACK  
University at Albany

## INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly clear in Maya studies that the contemporary Maya, now living largely under peasant conditions, have much to teach us about ancient Maya civilization (Sharer 1994:66, 69; Schele and Freidel 1990; Fox and Cook 1996). It is also now widely accepted that a shared cultural tradition has existed throughout the Maya region since at least the Preclassic period, and that this cultural tradition has persisted despite major transformations since then in association with such developments as the collapse of the Classic Maya polities, the rise of more militaristic Maya societies during the Postclassic period, and the subsequent formation of colonized Maya societies following the Spanish conquest. Of course, as is characteristic of all civilizations created in pre-modern times, it is generally recognized that the Maya tradition has always been highly pluralistic, expressed in variations between such units as competing states, town and country, classes and estates, different geographic regions, and locally diverse communities.

Few scholars would disagree with the claim that the Maya cultural tradition has always manifested considerable internal variation (Sharer 1994:63-66). Much more controversial has been the issue of the extent to which a general Maya tradition has persisted through time, and whether subsequent expressions of that tradition can be used to reconstruct earlier versions—the issue of cultural continuity and change (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991; Cook 1997). Obviously, both continuity and change have characterized the Maya tradition through time, but scholars differ in terms of whether they place emphasis on continuity or change, and of the extent to which change is seen as a reworking of pre-existing cultural patterns or of their radical replacement with new patterns. Since I have been identified as a Mayanist falling within the continuity camp (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991:24; Fox *et al.* 1996), I will briefly comment on my position relative to the issue.

Much of my own research on the Maya has been carried out under the rubric of «ethnohistory», a term that by definition suggests that cultures (ethnos) have recoverable histories, and therefore significant continuity and staying power. Indeed, in my own studies of the K'ichee' Maya, I have repeatedly stressed the importance of persisting K'ichee' ideas and practices in the posthispanic communities of highland Guatemala. Nevertheless, I have tried to avoid the kind of ethnohistory that isolates native cultures from the larger contexts within which their patterns both continue and change. For this reason, I find «historical anthropology» a useful label for the kind of history I try to practice: an integrated approach that takes account of both internal and external factors in cultural development, and in which, for example, Europeans and native peoples (such as the Maya) from different regions of the world interact and mutually influence one another.

Historical anthropology as I see it has much in common with the historical sociology described by scholars such as Theda Skocpol (1984). Like historical sociologists, the historical anthropologist insists on studying the contexts of not only internal and external developments, but also micro and macro levels, practices and structures, continuity and change. Certain methodological tendencies flow from these focal issues, and include, among others, applications of the comparative method, the world-systems framework, and the microhistory strategy. Microhistory is a particularly important methodological device in historical anthropology because it facilitates the study of processes by which human agents create their own cultures and histories. Microhistory derives primarily from cultural anthropology (Burke 1992; Hunt 1989), and thus encourages the use of ethnography for historical purposes; ethnography in turn holds out the promise of discovering the multiple levels of meaning negotiated by culture agents («thick description») (Geertz 1973).

In the account to follow I attempt to apply one variant of historical anthropology to the study of Maya culture. I employ the methods of microhistory and ethnography by focusing on the limited and specific case of the Maya of Santiago Momostenango, Guatemala. The goal is to discern possible continuities and changes in settlement patterns, political systems, and ritual in Maya culture through comparison between the Maya of Momostenango and the ancient Maya. I reject the «essentialist» position that some romantic or even mystical preservation of Maya culture has occurred in Momostenango or elsewhere over long stretches of time and place. Rather, as will be discussed below, the historical relationships between the Maya of Momostenango and the ancient Maya, especially the Maya of the Classic lowlands, are far too complex and tenuous to admit to facile explanations of this type. The strictures of historical anthropology mentioned above—to study both internal and external influences, local and national contexts, practices and structures, continuity and change—dictate that we place the traditional Maya of Momostenango in the context of their concrete historical relations with the broader and older Maya tradition.

Another goal of this essay is perhaps similar to one stated by Michael Coe (1993:201) in his popular overview of Maya culture: to build a bridge between the

culture of the ancient Mayas and that of their millions of living descendants. I too am interested in building this bridge, although I attempt to cross it from the opposite direction of Coe; that is to say, from the culture of the living Maya to that of the ancient Maya. I am only trying to build «bridges» —create dialogue about relations between the past and present— not *explain* the one based on information from the other.

We turn first to the Ancient Maya, summarizing very briefly some of the key issues related to their settlement patterns, political systems, and ritual.

## THE ANCIENT MAYA

### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

As is well known, the Maya region is geographically diverse, and as might be expected no single political system has ever governed over all the Maya (whether in aboriginal, colonial, or modern times). This raises the question of whether or not we can speak of a shared Maya culture or civilization over time, and if so what would be the social grounding of that culture. In approaching these issues, we need to remember the strictures of historical anthropology mentioned above. Two Maya scholars who, in my opinion, have consistently done this in their useful summaries of ancient Maya civilization are John Henderson (1981) and Robert Sharer (1994).

Henderson, for example, admirably describes the social arenas in which Maya civilization was formed and transformed through time. First and foremost was the wider Mesoamerican arena in which the ancient Maya tradition developed; secondly, the arena of frontier peoples to Mesoamerica who interacted through time with the Maya. As Henderson (1981:40) points out, «Beneath the unity of Mesoamerican culture lies a wealth of diversity», and the ancient Maya became one expression of that diversity. Maya culture should be seen as a particular «variation» of the continuum of Mesoamerican cultures, and can only be understood if interactions with other Mesoamerican variants, especially the central Mexican, are taken into account. Norman Hammond (1982:147) is on the right track (although perhaps he goes too far) in arguing that Mexican influence on the highland Maya was so strong that «culturally the highlands had been, from the Classic period on, a separate sphere of development and one in much closer touch with central Mexico to the west».

Sharer (1994:63ff) also stresses the importance of the Mesoamerican arena in the development of Maya civilization, and further notes (again like Henderson) that Maya culture itself had many variant expressions through time and space. Most notably, the ancient Maya polities tended to be small, independent, and culturally diverse, although there were episodes of political expansion when Maya states became dominant over fairly large areas and numbers of polities. More importantly, Sharer points out, the diverse Maya polities participated in large «interaction spheres» created by means of trade networks, elite exchanges, and political-military competition.

These spheres of interaction provided the social basis for a shared Maya cosmology and culture that persisted throughout the region during the entire Early, Middle, and Late periods of the Maya cultural tradition. From this perspective, the Maya cultural tradition can be seen as an apt case of how ancient civilizations were created; as Wolf (1982:82) puts it, «The larger social fields constituted by the political and commercial interaction of tributary societies had their cultural counterparts in ‘civilization’».

In previous publications (Carmack 1993:283-319; Carmack, Gasco, and Gossen 1996:80-121) I have attempted to go even further in describing the social grounding of ancient Maya culture, at least for the so-called Late Postclassic period, by arguing that the Maya social interaction sphere of the time had characteristics of a world system. Specifically, I point to the coexistence of dominant Maya units of power, economy and culture, and corresponding dependent or marginal Maya units; that is to say, core and periphery relationships. As in all world-systems, the Maya core centers shifted through time: from the highlands in the Early period, to the central lowlands in the Middle period, and finally to the northern lowlands in the Late period. The movement of the political center of gravity of Maya civilization was from south to north. Maya core units may well have provided influential models of social organization and prestigious cultural forms that ramified throughout the system and left their stamp on the proposed Maya civilization (see Wolf 1982:79ff).

A special feature of the Maya world system was the prominence of semi-peripheral (mediational) units in the form of trade and other kinds of commercial centers (Sharer 1994:67; Carmack *et al.* 1995:ch.3). This development resulted in a much more dynamic interaction sphere for the Maya themselves, as well as tighter integration of the Maya into the wider Mesoamerican world system. This was especially important for relations between the highland and lowland Maya during the Late period, when, according to David Freidel (1985:300-301, 308), «...populations migrate[d] from the Southern lowlands into the highlands in conjunction with a general period of syncretism to highland Mexican cultural means of legitimizing power, [which] might account for the migration myths of the K’ichee’ and other Maya-speaking groups of the highlands. It would also account for the strong connections between the Hero Twins genesis myth of the K’ichee’ *Popol Wuj* and the political-theological characters of the Southern lowland Classic Maya .... [Thus, t]he Postclassic witnesses the dismantling of the ‘great wall’ of cultural distinctiveness and the attempted incorporation of the lowlands into a Mesoamerican international culture.» Freidel’s point is important as we try to conceptualize possible connections between the traditional highland culture of Momostenango and the ancient lowland Maya civilization.

## SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

Joyce Marcus (1993), in a recent summary of ancient Maya settlement patterns, argues for the persistence of «stable but competitive provinces, periodically consolida-

ting into large regional states to reduce competition at the cost of their autonomy, and periodically breaking down again into autonomous (but warring) provinces» (p.137). The provinces could be politically centralized, with a single authority figure at the top residing in the main town center; politically segmented, the various segments linked together through lineage ties between town authorities of roughly equal power; or politically confederated, consisting of «loosely allied groups of towns» and their authorities, who identified themselves as part of a single province. Maya provinces were dynamic institutions through time, undergoing centralization and perhaps incorporation into larger empires, as well as decentralization associated with the breakdown of larger polities and the formation of segmented and confederated provinces of the types mentioned. As we shall see, Momostenango was once a province of a large Maya state, and has retained many of its provincial patterns down to the present day.

Maya settlements sometimes have been described by archaeologists as graded into primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary types. Marcus (1993) equates these with state, province, district, and village levels. Evon Vogt (1961, 1969), working with a somewhat simpler Maya settlement model of small, minor, and major sites, attempts to correlate this ancient pattern with the clan, hamlet, and town units of present-day highland Maya townships such as Zinacantán. Crosses and mountain shrines within modern-day clan and hamlet territories are seen as persisting versions of the smaller altars and temple mounds of the small and minor classic sites, while the large Catholic cathedrals of the modern town centers are said to be similar to the altars and temple mounds of the major ceremonial centers of the ancient Maya. Because much of the ritual at the Catholic cathedrals is carried out by rotating civil-religious officials from the rural zones, it is argued that rural Maya were probably responsible for much of the ceremony conducted at the Classic Maya centers. Vogt also points to the veneration of the ancestors among the present-day rural highland Maya, their association with mountains and the *naguales* there, and the use of crosses as doorways to the mountains spirits. These patterns, then, would correspond with the archaeologically defined Classic Maya deities (ancestors and their *naguales*), temples (mountains), and altars (entry crosses). Vogt's thesis has been much criticized, but it raises interesting questions about settlement patterns of the ancient and modern Maya.

## POLITICAL SYSTEMS

The structure of the Classic Maya political systems is an issue of much discussion within Maya studies. Linda Schele and David Freidel (1990), for example, argue that divine «kings» played a central role in Classic Maya polities, and that their legitimacy derived from dynastic lines traced back to the lineage ancestors and the gods themselves. The kings were institutionalized «shamans» who mediated between the village commoners and the state through ritual contact with the patron gods of earth and sky. They engaged in blood sacrifice and vision quests as part of an elaborate ritual re-

pertoire. Schele and Freidel interpret relations between rulers and rural peoples as having been reciprocal and close.

Using an alternate model, Arlen and Diane Chase (1992, 1996:803-810) see Classic Maya polities through time becoming larger, more hierarchical and militaristic, and increasingly integrated by «middle» sectors of artisans, officials, warriors, and priests. Still other scholars conceptualize the ancient Maya polities as «segmentary states», in which competing lineages formed the basic building blocks of the political system (Fox *et al.* 1996). From this perspective Maya states are said to have exhibited «neither strong central authority nor a bureaucracy and ... [were] largely incapable of maintaining control over distant territory» (Chase 1992:308). In a previous publication (Carmack 1981:148-180), I presented evidence from the historical sources that the prehispanic K'ichee'-Maya were organized as a segmentary state, but I also pointed out (contrary to the inaccurate description of my account by Chase 1992, and Hill and Monaghan 1987) that the political system was constituted by extremely important territorial as well as lineage divisions, a well-developed «bureaucracy», and centralized authority. In view of the considerable debate over the role of the lineage in ancient Maya political systems, in the account to follow I pay considerable attention to the issue of lineage and the role that it plays in the Momostenango's traditional political system.

Another issue addressed below is that of traditional Maya judicial process and law. This is a topic largely neglected in most studies of the ancient Maya political systems, which instead emphasize the predominance of religious or symbolic means of social control (Sharer 1994:69; Schele and Miller 1986). The Momostenango case suggests that judicial process was a well-developed, highly institutionalized mechanism of social control within traditional Maya political systems. Because judicial processes take place within legal «orders», it will be necessary to describe the basic corporate structures of traditional Momostenango.

## RITUAL

Michael Coe (1993:182ff), in his summary of ancient Maya ritual, notes the absence of specialized priests during the Classic period, although they were present in the Postclassic period. Apparently in the earlier periods ritual functions were carried out by the political authorities themselves, assisted by scribes (*ajtzib*). All ritual was guided by the Maya calendars, especially the sacred round of 260 days. The ancient Maya ritual process generally consisted of purification rites (food and sexual abstinence), special offerings (copal, rubber, food, blood), and festivals (eating, drinking, dancing, and singing). The blood offerings were particularly important because they symbolized the noble status of the politico-ritual specialists. One of the most important Maya ceremonies was celebrated at the end of the solar year, in an attempt to propitiate the deities for a productive and peaceful upcoming year. This *Wayeb* ceremony

«involved the construction of a special road to idols placed at a certain cardinal point just outside the town limits; a new direction was chosen each year in a four-year counterclockwise circuit» (1993:183).

Linda Schele and other Maya epigraphers (Schele and Miller 1986; Schele and Freidel 1990; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993) stress even more than Coe the close relationship between political and ritual functions among the ancient Maya. The authority of kings is said to have been legitimized through metaphors that expressed the «cosmic vision» of the Maya world, and by ritual sacrifices that mediated between the gods, the agricultural cycle, and the commoners. The kings, then, were like «divine shamans»: transformers «through whom in ritual acts, the unspeakable power of the supernatural passed into the lives of mortal men and their works» (1986:301). The accession by the king to a supreme politico-religious position provided an especially important context for public ritual. The accession ceremony itself consisted of the incoming ruler donning the symbolic costume, drawing blood from his body parts, sacrificing a war captive, and finally being seated on the «world throne».

In a previous publication on the Postclassic K'ichee'-Maya (Carmack 1981:201-207), I describe similar relationships between the king, ritual, and the cosmogonic and political orders. The K'ichee' king (*ajpop*), for example, played the metaphoric role of sun deity at zenith, and hence patron of the agricultural season between Spring equinox and Summer solstice. As with ancient Maya kings, through ritual and blood sacrifice the K'ichee' ruler became lord not only of war and the state but also of light and warmth, rain, and maize fertility. Also like the ancient Maya kings, there is evidence that the K'ichee' kings were identified with Junajpu, one of the Hero Twins whose exploits are recounted in the *Popol Wuj*. Additional similarities between the Classic Maya and Postclassic K'ichee'-Maya accession ceremonies could be cited and would provide further evidence for the strong historical continuities in ancient Maya ritual (despite the many «Mexican» elements also present in K'ichee' ritual symbolism).

Let us turn now to ethnographic and microhistoric information on the settlement patterns, political systems, and ritual of the traditional Maya of Momostenango. The description to follow has been undertaken with an eye toward finding possible relationships between these cultural patterns and their cognates in the ancient Maya civilization.

## THE MAYA OF MOMOSTENANGO

### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

The fate of the Maya civilization under colonial rule is one of the most important but least understood questions about the Maya. Sharer, like many students of the ancient Maya, sees the Spanish conquest as the end of the final phase of Maya civiliza-

tion because it «destroyed most of the native institutions» (1994:49-50). The Maya of Momostenango and other communities like it, however, suggest that while Maya culture was once again drastically transformed under the pressures of Spanish rule, it survived in reconstituted forms. The nature of this posthispanic Maya culture is one of the issues that I have attempted to address in my historical anthropological research on Momostenango.

Momostenango has a very long and robust Maya tradition, which is one of the main reasons I decided to conduct historical and ethnographic studies there in the first place. My own publications (see especially Carmack 1981, 1995), and those of other scholars (B. Tedlock 1982; D. Tedlock 1985, Cook 1981; 1997; Bossen 1984; Fox and Cook 1996), clearly document the lively traditional Maya culture still extant in the community (Carol Smith [1997] notwithstanding). Like other traditional Maya communities such as Santiago Atitlán in Guatemala (Mendelson 1956, 1965; Carlsen and Prechtel 1991), Zinacantán (Vogt 1961, 1969) and Chamula (Pozas 1959; Gossen 1974) in Chiapas, and Chan Kom and Tusic (Redfield 1941; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1964; Re Cruz 1996; Villa Rojas 1945) in Yucatán, Momostenango has proven to be an invaluable source of information on the ancient Maya civilization (e.g., see Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993; McAnany 1995; Kerr 1992; Sharer 1994). What are the historical bases of the rich Maya tradition in Momostenango?

Linguistic evidence indicates that Maya culture had its beginnings in the general highland area where Momostenango is located (Carmack 1995:4-11), suggesting that the original rural peoples of Momostenango were heirs to one version of Early Maya civilization. During the Late Maya period Momostenango (Chwatz'aq) was forcibly incorporated into the K'ichee' state (Carmack 1981), and thus became part of a polity that had important ties with other units of the Maya world system at that time. Even though Momostenango may have occupied a somewhat marginal or peripheral position within the K'ichee' state, its inhabitants nevertheless shared in the general Maya civilization of the Late period, as well as in the particular K'ichee' variant of that civilization (a variant also showing strong «Mexican» influence).

The Spanish colonization of Momostenango was relatively non-violent, and its former K'ichee' rulers —now co-opted by the Spaniards as subaltern *caciques*— played a major role in mediating the transition to township status within the Guatemalan colony (Carmack 1995:51ff). It is important to note that during the long process of subjecting the Momostenango Maya to colonial rule and exploitation, the *caciques* descendants of the K'ichee' rulers remained an important presence and source of cultural knowledge. The *caciques* in Momostenango certainly dropped in status through time, but they never completely disappeared as an important social sector (down to the present), and never ceased providing significant input into the local and regional Maya culture. Thus, while Momostenango under Spanish and later Republican rule was profoundly peasantized, and remains so today (although this is undergoing rapid change now), the *caciques* were able to incorporate considerable elite Maya culture into the emerging community traditions (*costumbres*).



It needs to be emphasized that the process of preserving and reconstituting traditional Maya culture in Momostenango has been achieved only through centuries of active political struggle on the part of the Maya themselves. I have documented (Carmack 1984, 1986, 1995) for the Maya of Momostenango a long series of rebellions stretching from the Spanish conquest to the present, and preservation or at least reconstitution of the Maya culture was always one of the main issues driving these conflicts. Even in cases where leadership was provided by acculturated native «captains», the rebels always turned to traditional Maya authority and culture for support. Consequently, successful rebellions were accompanied by elaborate «nativistic» Maya cultural construction. Furthermore, while the Maya of Momostenango were not immune to the modern social forces driving the recent insurgency movement in Guatemala, their support for it was extremely limited, to a large extent because it failed to articulate well with the Maya tradition (Carmack 1988; Smith 1990; Carmack 1995:368ff).

Most of the ethnographic information on Momostenango summarized below was gathered during the 1960s and '70s (the «ethnographic present» of the account to follow). At that time almost all the inhabitants of Momostenango identified themselves as Maya (over 95%), and a substantial majority of them proudly claimed belief in traditional Maya religion and culture (*costumbre*). An important sector of reformed Catholic Maya (about 25% of the population) had rejected traditional Maya religion, but not Maya identity, while the small ladino population (2-4% of the inhabitants) was Hispanic in culture and traditional Catholic in religion. Protestants at that time were too few in numbers to exercise much influence on local politics or religion. Conflicts over culture and religion were sharp between the reformed Catholic and traditional Maya, as had been the case between the ladinos and traditional Maya in centuries past. The dialectic consequences of these conflicts constitute one of the important reasons why so many social institutions and cultural patterns that are unmistakably Maya have persisted in Momostenango.

We turn first to traditional Momostenango settlement patterns, beginning with the provincial level.

## SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

### *Province*

The Momostenango township created after the Spanish conquest corresponded very closely to one of the thirty or so provinces (*ajawarem*) of the prehispanic K'ichee'-Maya state (centered at the town of Q'umark'aj, or Utatlán). Known as Chwat'aq (and perhaps also by its Nahuatl name, Mumustenanco), the province was ruled over by chiefs who represented three different royal lineages from Utatlán. The province had achieved strong corporate identity among the local Maya population

and considerable autonomy within the K'ichee' state. Significantly, these same political features characterized the Momostenango township formed after the Spanish conquest and incorporated into the Guatemalan colonial state.

As documented elsewhere (Carmack 1967; 1995:29ff), the prehispanic chiefs of Momostenango mediated the reconstruction of the Spanish colonial township boundaries and settlement arrangement so as to correspond almost exactly with those of the aboriginal province. The head town of the province was retained as the colonial center (Momostenango), and at least two other district towns of the prehispanic province continued to be recognized by the Spaniards as secondary political centers (San Bartolomé Aguascalientes, and Paxchun Buenabaj).

Despite many changes in the township since the early colonial period (such as transferring the main town center to a different location, and the granting of separate township status to San Bartolomé Aguascalientes), Momostenango retains most of the boundaries of the prehispanic province, and a similar pattern of towns and district divisions (for example, the original prehispanic political centers now constitute the main secondary towns of the township). Furthermore, the resident Maya in the township continue to identify it as their most important political community, and strongly defend it against surrounding townships that once constituted separate K'ichee'-Maya provinces. They also continue to recognize the original provincial capital as the ritual center of their traditional political community.

### *Town and Country*

Momostenango's settlement pattern below the township level consists of (1) small town centers, surrounded by (2) rural territorial divisions (cantons), which in turn are composed of (3) numerous hamlets. The major town center has long been Momostenango itself, but three other centers also have town features and are identified in the K'ichee' language as «towns» (*tinamit*): Pueblo Viejo, San Bartolomé, and Buenabaj. The number of recognized cantons in Momostenango has varied through time, apparently being twenty-two in prehispanic times, six during most of the colonial period, and thirteen or more in recent years. There is no general Maya term for the canton today, but in colonial times they were generally referred to by the Spanish term *parcialidad*, while in prehispanic times the nahua terms *chinamit* and *calpul* were widely used. The more than 260 hamlets of rural Momostenango today also lack a generic Maya term of reference (they are named after geographic features or resident clans), while in prehispanic times they were widely known as *amaq'* (see also the account by Fox and Cook 1996).

The Maya population of Momostenango has always been widely scattered throughout the rural cantons and hamlets. Even today those concentrated in the four town centers probably constitute only about 10% of the township population, and during the colonial and prehispanic periods the percentage was probably less than half

that figure (Carmack 1995:425). This highly dispersed pattern is partly the result of the broken topography and variable geography of the Western Guatemalan highlands. In terms of social structure the pattern no doubt corresponds to the proliferation of patricians (roughly coterminous with the hamlets) associated with population expansion in the rural zones; as well as to their grouping into more formal territorial units for purposes of political administration (cantons), and the subjugation of the rural masses by the relatively small ruling elite in the political centers (towns).

The kinds of ritual structures found in even the smaller Classic Maya sites are absent in the Momostenango hamlets. The clan altars (see below) located within the hamlet territories are extremely simple constructions, and lack monumentality of any kind. Furthermore, while the ancestors are important to the Maya of Momostenango, they are conceived as generalized power rather than specified deities. Nor are the mountains primarily important as the habitation of ancestors; they are manifestations of the great earth deity (*juyub taq'aj*), whose manifestations consist of both mountains and plains, land and water. Ancient Maya temples (but perhaps not the shrines on top) may well have been metaphors of mountains, but as suggested by the Momostenango case they more likely symbolized the earth (and only one aspect of it) than the ancestors *per se*. In addition, for the Maya of Momostenango the *naguales* are viewed as messengers from the earth and not exclusively alter egos of living or deceased persons.

The Momostenango town centers, with their monumental Catholic cathedrals, town halls, markets, and other public buildings, express the wide social chasm existing between the urban elite resident there and the peasant Maya inhabiting the cantons and hamlets. This is true despite the fact that some clans have «clan houses» in the town centers, and rural peoples do participate in important ritual, marketing, and judicial activities in these centers. Obviously, the fact that *ladinos* and highly acculturated Maya reside in the town centers helps explain the sizable social gap between town and country in Momostenango. Yet, present-day relationships between town and country may have historical bases extending back to prehispanic Maya times, despite the many substantive differences between the two periods.

Town and country relationships in Momostenango are now characterized by hierarchically organized town officials dominating rural authorities in economic, judicial, political, and ritual spheres. Town officials exercise a coercive, serf-like control over rural peoples through elaborate patrimonial ties based on the presumed superiority of the Hispanic culture of town officials (Spanish language, religion, dress, etc.). Town *ladinos* and collaborating acculturated indians control the Church and its patron saints, municipal government, market, and development programs, and in the process support their own status as elite monopolizers of modern knowledge and state power. Such relationships may be more similar to those of the ancient Maya elite than we have realized, given the likelihood of important ethnic, linguistic (including literacy), political, and commercial differences between the town elite and the rural Maya in prehispanic times. At any rate, it has long been the case that traditional rural

Maya in Momostenango, though far from being powerless relative to the town elite are socially distinct from and clearly subject to them.

### *Construction of a «Ceremonial Center»*

A revealing illustration of this last point comes from the construction of a «ceremonial center» in Momostenango during the first two decades of the 20th century, a time before modernization began to radically transform the traditional institutions there. The project was carried out in the main town center, and involved the construction of monumental Church and military buildings, streets, fountains, and other public works, all built around two adjacent plazas. The construction was far more monumental than anything in the area since the Spanish conquest. Labor was almost entirely performed by Maya from the rural areas, who were required to provide the equivalent of twelve days per year of their time over a period of almost ten years. They also made regular «tribute» payments in money to support other expenses involved in the project.

The success of the construction project depended almost entirely on control over the masses of rural Maya by a despotic patrimonial political system of ladinos resident in the town center. Central authority was in the hands of a ladino military «lord» (with the rank of general in the Guatemalan army), who established patron-client relations with the canton and clan leaders of the rural zones. Besides the threat of military force, the elite general and his ladino subalterns used military promotions, support for traditional Maya religion, and personal favors to gain the cooperation of the rural Maya. These Maya peasants by the thousands provided labor and wealth for the construction project out of duty, honor, fear, and promised favors. The construction of ceremonial centers and towns by the ancient Maya may have relied on generically similar kinds of elite-commoner relationships.

Let us turn now to the traditional political system in Momostenango, beginning with a description of the all-important corporate lineage structure.

## POLITICAL SYSTEMS

### *Corporate Patriclans*

The traditional political system of Momostenango is centered on an integrated set of corporate groups defined primarily by ancient principles and practices known as *costumbre*. The fundamental units of the system are corporate descent groups: patriclans and lineages, known to the K'ichee'-Maya as *alaxic* («those who share common male descent»). The patriclans (the generic term by which I will refer to these units) are named for their founding ancestors (Itzeb, Coj, Pérez, Pasá, etc.), and are asso-

ciated with specific geographic locations («hamlets», such as Pasaq, «plains», Chiciwán, «canyon place», etc.). In most cases, at least two or three clans will be found residing together in a hamlet, although the hamlet may be named for only one of them (e.g., «Los Pérez»). Many clans are subdivided into lineages (*xeteil*), groupings of usually three to four generations of depth, and while the wider clan geneologies generally have greater generation depth, rarely do they extend back beyond ten generations of time.

Momostenango traditional clans are strictly exogamous, and in-marrying wives never achieve full membership in their husbands' clans. A grieved wife often must appeal to her own clan for help, and she typically loses family lands and even children if she is widowed and subsequently remarries outside her deceased husband's clan. Clan lands are held jointly in the sense of not being alienable, and of reverting back to the clan when family inheritance breaks down. Clan lands are clearly demarcated by stones and other natural objects, as are family plots, and a ritual walking off of boundary markers by clan authorities symbolizes overall clan control of property.

Social and ritual functions take precedence over economic functions within the traditional Momostenango patriclans. Most agricultural and craft activities are carried out by the extended family units rather than the collective clans or lineages. Commercial activities too are largely family rather than clan matters. Marriage, in contrast, is primarily a clan affair, and involves a long process by which one clan gradually becomes linked to another through exchanges of women and other gifts between the two. In the not too distant past, clans tied together through marriage formed an important social unit known as the *calpul*. Part of the marriage exchange takes the form of bridprice to which all clan members contribute. Witchcraft (*itzibal*) is also usually a clan affair, an expression of conflict between clans over marital, land, and other problems. Clan rituals are expected to protect the members against the ills of witchcraft, but most sickness and death nevertheless are explained by it.

Traditional clans in Momostenango place authority in an informal council of adult males (*nimaq winaq*), and a clan head or «chief» (*chuchqajaw*) who has sacred authority through close association with the ancestors and the earth. The clan chief is thought to have been chosen by the deities rather than by the clan members: outside clan chiefs are called in to perform red *tz'ite* bean divination in order to select the new chief. Clan women (*ixoqib*) and children (*ak'alab*) do not participate in council meetings, but are subject to decisions made by the council and chief.

More than 300 traditional patriclans of the general type just described can be found in rural Momostenango, although there is considerable variation in detail between them. Some of the more acculturated Maya of the rural areas (merchants, reformed Catholics, Protestants, descendants of prehispanic nobility) establish corporate clans that differ in fundamental ways from the generalized traditional type. Such «institutionalized clans» place greater stress on territorial control, and typically seek legal personality and communal land titles from the national legal bodies. They tend to compete politically with other territorial units recognized by the state, such as

districts and «aldeas», and thus, are able to undertake major public work projects (e.g., building roads or public buildings, and providing commercial capital for members). Authorities of the institutionalized clans parallel those of the modern sector; they adopt Spanish titles such as *alcalde*, *regidor*, *presidente*, *vocal*, etc., and are recruited on the basis of formal training and experience rather than age and kinship status. The modernizing features of institutionalized clans are symbolized by the construction of clan office buildings, the scheduling of meetings according to the Christian calendar, the reliance on national legal codes, and the use of voting procedures in decision making.

### *Corporate Cantons and Community*

Two more comprehensive types of corporate groups exist within the traditional political system of Momostenango: the Chwatz'aq community and rural cantons. They share many structural features with the patrilans, although they are defined more strongly on territorial grounds than the patrilans. The traditional cantons and wider community are identified by their K'ichee'-Mayan names: the community is known by the name of the original prehispanic town, Chwatz'aq, while the thirteen or more traditional cantons also have Maya names (e.g., Buenabaj, Xolajab) that for the most part have existed since prehispanic times (the traditional Chwatz'aq community is also referred to by its patron saint name, «Santiago», and in some cases Spanish saint names are used in reference to certain cantons; e.g., Santa Ana, San Bartolo). The political structures of the traditional Chwatz'aq community and cantons are almost identical, and will be discussed together in the following account.

The traditional community and cantons are corporate structures with strong moral and cultural backing. Members share common speech, dress, beliefs and practices (*costumbre*), and respect for authority. They are not «tribes», however, for territorial boundaries are precise, central authority is well defined, and they are subject to higher authorities. Authority is vested in councils of principales or elders (*ajawab*) who gain council status by means of religious and political service, age, and ability to lead. Usually two or three «chiefs» (*k'amal be*) dominate the councils; these chiefs are men of influence and skill who belong to prominent clans. In general, the elders are perceived to have sacred qualities, and therefore are almost universally venerated as decision makers and guardians of traditional Maya life.

The administration of the traditional community and canton affairs is in the hands of civil-religious authorities (*ajpatan*) chosen by the elders to act in both ritual and secular matters. In general, three levels of authority are recognized: (1) top-level authorities who receive Spanish and K'ichee' titles (*alcaldé*, *chuchqajaw*), and are trusted men with considerable delegated authority; (2) mid-level assistants, also identified with both Spanish and K'ichee' titles (*regidor*, *ajq'ojom*), who are men rising in the hierarchy or less competent men who will rise no higher; and (3) low-level servants

(*ajch'amiy, mortomá*), who are young men performing menial services. Women participate only at the lowest level as assistants to the men engaged in *cofradía* service.

Parallel to this «civil-religious» hierarchy are a series of ritual specialists or priests (*chuchqajawib rech tinamit/canton*), chosen through divination by informal councils of clan chiefs. They perform the most sacred rituals on behalf of the traditional Chwatz'aq community and cantons. They are not organized along hierarchical lines, although they tend to be chosen from prominent clans within their respective territories. These traditional priests carry out rituals at sacred mountains and watersprings located at the cardinal directions of the traditional township. They also perform rituals in the town center during important annual ceremonies, such as Holy Week, Patron Saint's Day, Day of the Dead, and 8 *Batz'*. These various rituals are oriented toward bringing peace, health, agricultural and artisanal success to the traditional Maya. Solidarity in the face of new religious forces (such as the reformed Catholicism) and encroachments into Momostenango lands by outside townships is an additional theme of their ritual activities.

It should be noted that the traditional community and canton political system is fast breaking down under the onslaught of modernizing forces. Recently, the *cofradía* component of the traditional civil-religious hierarchy was eliminated in Momostenango by military fiat, and local municipal officials have applied unrelenting pressure to transform the traditional Maya authorities into mere auxiliary extensions of the municipal government.

### *Traditional Judicial Process*

A well-organized customary judicial system, replete with institutionalized authorities and an unwritten legal code, operates within the jurisdiction of the traditional patrilans, cantons and Chwatz'aq community. Participants in the system consider it to be Maya (inherited from the ancestors), and its roots can be traced back historically to prehispanic times (Carmack 1990:121ff). Its organizational and cultural features are most easily detected at the patrilan level, and the canton and community councils often defer to adjudication carried out at that level. Nevertheless, very similar procedures and legal principles operate at all three levels.

The traditional judicial system in Momostenango is called *nim ja* («big house»), the ancient K'ichee' name for elite clan houses, even though the proceedings today are often carried out in the humble houses of clan members. The actual making of judicial decisions is known in the K'ichee' language today, as in prehispanic times, as *q'atbal tzij* («cutting the word»), and constitutes an authority that rests in the «hands» of the clan heads. The adjudication process always includes an explanation (*pixab*) of the laws broken and decisions made by the clan head, and takes the form of recounting past cases, traditional mores and norms, etc. Breaches of customary law in rural Momostenango, then, are handled by a standardized set of Maya procedures and rules, a

kind of «family court» presided over by clan heads and councils of adult males. These same authorities also represent the interests of the traditional units before national judicial agencies when necessary.

The traditional judicial system is relatively unspecialized. Offended persons almost always initiate the proceedings, and sanctioning is largely a group function. Serious transgressions usually result in sanctions involving capital punishment (*k'ax-kol*): bending over for long periods of time, whipping (*rapuj*), hanging by the armpits, and in the past, mutilation of offending body parts. For lesser transgressions the sanctions may consist of reprimands, fines (*ch'ajbal*), or loss of certain traditional rights. For the most serious transgressions, the clan chief informs the ancestors and deities of the wrong done, and then banishes (*xesex ubik*) the culprit from the clan or larger traditional community. Although the traditional judicial process is not constitutional in a literal sense, it is highly effective and its executors enjoy enormous legitimacy. As might be expected, primary attention is given to determining the facts of each case in order to apply the law rather than to debating the validity of the laws themselves.

The customary laws (*pixab*) define publically correct behavior for traditional Maya in Momostenango, but they are not formally codified. Nevertheless, they are well-known, precise and deeply revered. A study of cases adjudicated by the traditional Maya authorities of Momostenango suggests that at least three main types of laws are defined by the system's code: (1) laws whose violation is considered to be a minor transgression (*mac*), (2) laws considered to be more serious transgressions (*macaj*), and (3) laws so serious that violation of them is deemed sacrilegious or beastly (*awaj*). These laws, and the judicial procedures by which they are applied, can be illustrated by one of many adjudicated cases I recorded for the traditional clan, canton, and community courts of Momostenango.

The events of the the case took place around 1970 within the confines of a traditional patriclan (*alaxic*) located in a rural hamlet not far from the Momostenango town center. A young man named Teodoro had sexual relations with the wife of Fermín, a clan brother (literally a cousin). Later, Fermín caught his wife in bed with Teodoro, and while Teodoro fled from the house without his pants Fermín began beating his wife. Fermín and his brothers called for a clan council meeting (*nim ja*), at which Teodoro was told that «if there had been a *machete* you would have been killed». After the meeting Teodoro was taken by the clan chief (*chuchqajaw*) and other adult clan members to the municipal judge, where he was accused of adultery and sentenced to twenty days in jail. The parents of the adultress wife were then brought before Teodoro and Fermín's clan council, and were ordered to take their daughter back to her own clan. Teodoro and Fermín's clan chief forthwith separated out the woman's belongings, and banished her from the clan. Finally, the clan chief took the case before the traditional community council, where a twenty-day separation period for the couple was arranged; in the end, however, an «act of separation» was drawn up by the same council. Later, when Teodoro returned from jail, the clan held a final council



meeting. After a long discussion in which every council member participated, the clan chief declared (*pixab*) that «it is impossible to do such things within the clan; it is shameful!». Teodoro was banished from the clan, and the clan members were prohibited from even speaking to him. I was told by clan members that this was a particularly serious transgression (*macaj*) because it was premeditated and involved the wife of a clan brother. Nevertheless, had the adultery been committed with a clan sister, it would have been even worse, that is, «beastly, impossible» (*awaj*)!

### *Centralized Authority*

It is clear from the account above that the patrilineages have long been the fundamental building blocks of the traditional political system in Momostenango. There is good evidence that clan chiefs provide the basic model for the authority relations that characterize the canton and community levels of political administration and judicial process. In fact, most political activities at all three levels (clan, canton, community), including conflicts, are structured by relations between clans, and this is well understood by traditional Maya authorities (these relations are further discussed in Fox and Cook 1996:814). Even in the town center, where national authorities dominate political actions, clan interests are often the driving force behind conflicts of various kinds (although this may not be understood by the officials in charge; see the example in Carmack 1995:330-334). Perhaps the segmentary state model used to interpret ancient Maya political systems provides a reasonably accurate way to look at the traditional Momostenango political system as described above.

It is important to point out, however, that the traditional Maya of Momostenango have always been willing to accept more centralized authority in the context of wider state-level hierarchies extending beyond the local community. For the Spanish period this is most clearly exemplified by the paternalistic loyalty accorded to the Spanish king by the Momostenango Maya; the king became an unseen father figure, and their own caciques chiefs became representatives of the king. A document from mid-sixteenth century Momostenango records the accession of the first of these caciques to the highest local political office, with all the pomp and ceremony of an ancient Maya prince (Carmack 1995:55). The Maya of Momostenango supported the Spanish king all the way up to the end of Spanish rule in Guatemala, only to declare allegiance first to a rebellious Maya «king» from Totonicapan in 1820 (Atanasio Tzul) and then to the *quixotic* Mexican king, Agustín Iturbide (Carmack 1995:120-121).

The acceptance of patrimonial state rulers by the Maya of Momostenango continued off and on during the entire postcolonial period. Included among the political figures to whom they gave allegiance in exchange for close personal ties and favors were Rafael Carrera, the conservative president of Guatemala between 1840-60; Julián Rubio, a rebellious conservative caudillo who challenged the liberal rulers of the 1870s; and the ladino general mentioned above who ruled over Momostenango with

an iron hand during the early part of the twentieth century. Close and personal relations between the traditional Maya of Momostenango and state caudillos, based especially on loyal military service provided by the Maya, continued throughout the subsequent decades of this century, with such stern father figures as Manuel Estrada Cabrera, Jorge Ubico, Carlos Castillo Armas, and Carlos Arana Osorio. Obviously, the traditional Maya of Momostenango are culturally amenable to centralized authority and state rule as long as it allows for personalized relationships and considerable local cultural autonomy.

Let us turn finally to a review of some of the more salient features of traditional ritual as practiced by Maya religious specialists in Momostenango. While the brief account to follow is largely based on my own historical and ethnographic research on the Maya of Momostenango, I also draw from the much more comprehensive studies on this topic by Barbara Tedlock (1982) and Garrett Cook (1997). I begin with two overlapping but nevertheless distinct types of religious specialists in Momostenango, the shamans and priests.

## RITUAL

### *Shamans and Priests*

There are thousands of religious specialists who practice shamanic-like rituals in the rural areas of Momostenango. They are generically known as *ajq'ij*, «daykeepers», while the local terms for shaman in Spanish are *brujo* and *zahorín*. Typically the daykeepers are called to the position as the result of having been born on certain propitious days of the sacred calendar, and having been cured of certain illnesses by an experienced daykeeper (Tedlock 1982:55ff mentions such illnesses as muscle cramps and bloating of the stomach). Neither hallucinogenic plants nor the local fermented maize drink (*chicha*) are involved in the calling process, although *chicha* is imbibed as part of most shamanic rituals.

The power of the shaman derives, at least in part, from entering into altered states through dreams, trips to the inside of mountains, special associations with animals (sometimes as companions but usually as messengers who bring signs—especially snakes, coyotes, birds), divinatory signs such as «lightning» in the blood or flares in fire, and from the fates of «days» as manifested in the arrangement of the red *tz'ite* beans. These interlocking ritual techniques are described in detail by Tedlock (1982), who observes that the religious ideas behind the techniques (such as ideas about the fates of the «days») are always subject to interpretation by the daykeeper on the basis of practical considerations.

In Momostenango the vast majority of shamans are men, both old and young. They have patron-client relationships with those whom they serve, and are paid for their services in food, drink, and the national currency (Quetzales). They can do

harm (*itz*) to their clients if mistreated by them. Prior to performing services, the shamans abstain from sexual relations and attempt to put their personal relationships in order. They are primarily patronized by the traditional peasant Maya, but more acculturated Maya sometimes use their services. Reformed Catholics (Maya involved in «Catholic Action») and ladinos will engage shamans only rarely, usually when their personal problems are extremely serious and other remedies have failed. Maya from other townships also visit famous Momostenango shamans from time to time.

Some shamans are wealthy, and politically powerful. Such shamans tend to be polygamous. They actively seek new means of power, and many have turned to spiritualism (*nawal mesa*), the zodiac, and unusual artifacts (*mebi'il*) as supplements to more traditional ritual devices. Only the most marginal, materialistic shamans will claim the power to do evil (*itzibal*); that is to say, identify themselves as witches (*ajitz*), for this is considered to be a dangerous thing. Two shamans from Momostenango killed by a storm some years ago on Volcán Santa María are reputed to have been witches! Evil shamans interpret certain days of the divinatory calendar as bad, and make blood sacrifice of animals, especially chickens, in their ritual practices.

Shamanism in Momostenango flourishes among the poor, exploited, and alienated Maya peasants. The shamans serve those who have not turned to the reformed Catholic movement but lack strong clan support or have problems beyond the capacity of the clan to resolve. Because the more acculturated Maya of the rural area often have ambivalent status within local society, they sometimes turn to the shamans for help in dealing with their problems.

A closely related religious specialist, but nevertheless socially distinct from the shamans, is the political authority mentioned above as the *chuchqajaw* («mother, father»). The title itself points to a status deeply embedded in the traditional kinship and patrimonial political systems of the Momostenango peasantry. As noted above, these men function primarily at the clan level, but are also active at the canton and traditional community levels as institutionalized political and ritual specialists. Their ritual techniques overlap with those of the shamans (all of them are daykeepers), and yet it seems appropriate to refer to their ritual functions as «priestly» rather than «shamanic». In contrast with the shamans, the *chuchqajaw* are functionaries in corporate organizations, and their ritual authority has specific political functions. Tedlock (1982:52-53) argues against categorical distinctions between the two, although she tacitly recognizes important differences between them by designating those I refer to as shamans as «shaman priests», and those I call priests as «priest-shamans».

As we have seen, every traditional clan in Momostenango is headed by a *chuchqajaw*, who functions as the chief authority, ritual leader, and group shaman. In contrast with the unlimited number of individual shamans, there is only one *chuchqajaw* for each clan, and his title bears the clan name (e.g., *chuchqajaw rech alaxic Ixcoy*, «chief of the Ixcoy clan»). Like shamans, clan chiefs must previously have had special callings, but they must also be chosen and instructed by other clan chiefs brought in from the outside. After formal selection and training, they have the

exclusive duty to perform certain rituals according to the sacred calendar on behalf of the clan. Their priestly functions include offerings, prayers, and divinations at special altars located within the clan territory, primarily the ancestral (*warabalja*) and fertility (*winel*) altars (Tedlock 1982:77ff describes a more complex set of altars found within the territories of traditional clans, including an altar called *meb'il*, at which ritual is carried out to secure commercial success for the clan members). As clan chiefs the *chuchqajaw* are highly honored within and between clans, in large part because of their ritual expertise. While they are supported by small but regular payments (in money and goods), they cannot survive on these benefices alone, and must therefore support themselves.

The cosmology that guides the clan ritual carried out by the priestly chiefs is more integrated and elaborate than that of the shamans. The central symbols are the earth deity (*juyub taq'aj*, also called *Dios Mundo*), honored at the *winel* altar; and the ancestors (*räx molo*), especially former clan chiefs, propitiated at the *warabalja* altar. The sacred earth and ancestors are highly revered, and must be fed (*copal* incense) and given gifts (flowers). These sacred powers intercede frequently in the daily life of the clan members, for both good and ill.

At the traditional canton and community levels in Momostenango, the chief Maya authorities also have joint political and priestly functions. In their political aspect they are known as *alcaldes*, and in their priestly aspect as *chuchqajaw rech cantón/tinamit* («canton/town priestly chiefs»). Prior to being put on the slate of one of the national political parties, the traditional community *alcalde* is selected as candidate by a council of *principales*, most of whom are themselves *chuchqajaw*. Depending on the religious qualities of these *alcaldes*, they may engage in numerous priestly activities in connection with the *cofradías* as well as more strictly Maya rituals.

Two other ritual specialists are called to conduct traditional rituals on behalf of the entire community, and like the *alcalde* they have the K'ichee' title of *chuchqajaw rech tinamit* (in some cantons similar ritual specialists exist). Unlike the clan canton, and community chiefs, however, their authority is exclusively priestly, and not directly political. Even though formally selected by a council of priestly chiefs (*chuchqajaw*), these two town priests are hereditary positions, for the selections are always made from the same clans and cantons (Los Cipreses and Pueblo Viejo are the designated cantons). The two priests receive regular benefices in the form of sandals, money, and food on the days they carry out their functions, but like the clan chiefs they are almost wholly self-subsistent.

Tedlock (1982:35ff) describes the traditional community, canton, and clan «priest shamans» (*chuchqajaw*) as a religious hierarchy, the bottom level of which is made up of the thousands of individual shamans (her «shaman priests»). According to my informants, however, the hierarchy is actually a political rather than ritual one, and is made up of the different levels of authorities within the corporate units of the traditional community. The two town priests exercise no authority over other traditional re-

ligious specialists at the canton or clan levels; not even in their own clans and cantons. Nor do they have authority over civil matters, such as arranging marriages, settling disputes, distributing lands, etc. In lacking political authority in such matters, the two town priests contrast with the traditional community and canton *alcaldes* as well as the clan chiefs. The sole function of the two priests is to carry out highly esoteric ritual on behalf of the traditional community of Maya. On specified days of the sacred and solar calendars they make ritual offerings at four sacred mountains located in the cardinal directions of the township, as well as at special altars in the town center (one of them in a secret municipal room), at the old town center (Chwatz'aq or «Pueblo Viejo»), and at a mountain shrine (Las Minas) in neighboring Chiantla, Huehuetenango.

The town priests work generally within a more politically oriented and complex cosmology than do the clan chiefs, although Tedlock (1982:82) points to similarities in the calendar days on which they make ritual offerings and the cardinal orientation of the respective altars where the offerings are made. The four sacred mountains at which the town priests carry out ritual (Sokop, Tamankú, Pipil, Kilajá) are protected by *naguales* (such as snakes and mountain lions) and so are dangerous to anyone but these priests. The mountains represent the most powerful manifestations of Earth God (*juyup taq'aj* or *Dios Mundo*), the major deity of the traditional Maya in Momostenango. At shrines built on top of these mountains the priests make offerings to the four yearbearers during the last of the five unlucky days of the K'ichee' solar calendar.

Tedlock (1982:99ff) has brilliantly reconstructed the correlations between the sacred and solar calendars calculated by the town priests in order to know when to carry out these year-ending rituals, and the multivocal nature of the different symbols associated with each mountain and yearbearer. The yearbearers in Momostenango are known collectively as the «grandfathers and grandmothers» (*mamib*), and individually by their calendric names: *noj*, *kiej*, *e*, *iq'*. These four «mams» are patrons of the years, and provide different yearly fates as they are annually received on the mountains in clockwise rotation. It is noteworthy that much of the symbolism of the yearbearer's ritual is profoundly political: the shrines themselves are conceptualized as political «dispatches», and each yearbearer is represented by two invisible *alcaldes* and their respective secretaries. In addition, important political figures of the past (such as *Cacique* Diego Vicente, and Presidents Rafael Carrera and Jorge Ubico), as well as militant patron saints (such as Jesucristo and Santiago), are propitiated by the town priests. These various sacred powers (including patron deities of natural phenomena, such as rain, clouds, vegetation, etc.) are said to be authorities of Earth God, who together will preside over the political and spiritual fates of the community during the upcoming year. The town priests believe the main purpose for carrying out the yearbearer ritual is to gain favor with these powers, and they do this by paying fines (in the form of gifts such as copal, flowers, and prayers) that expiate the community's misdeeds from the past year.

## 8 Batz' Ceremony

The *Wajxaqib Batz'* («eight thread») ceremony in Momostenango begins the sacred calendar round each 260 days, and puts on display the local traditional Maya religion. Thousands of Momostenango Maya, many of whom now live in other townships and even in other countries, gather at the main shrines located in and around the town center to make offerings to the sacred powers. The external appearance of the ceremony is one of a huge shamanistic orgy, and has been so described by some observers, but a more informed view reveals its complex articulation with the diverse religious specialists described above. The ceremony is organized along Maya rather than Western lines.

The time and place of the ceremony is fixed: it celebrates the putative beginning day of the sacred calendar round, *wajxaqib batz'* (8 Batz'). The ritual participants follow a ceremonial circuit of altars and shrines from the western mountain shrine (Ch'utisabal), south to the water shrine (Paja'), east to the town shrines (Paklom, Chikachoch), and west again to the mountain shrine (Nimasabal). Through this ceremony the religious specialists recreate on a small scale the cycle of visits by the two town priests to the four yearbearer mountains mentioned above. B. Tedlock (1982:71) indicates that for shamans being initiated, the Nimasabal shrine is not visited until the following day, 9 E. Rituals similar to those of 8 Batz' are celebrated on other days of the sacred calendar at these same altars, although none of these is as important as 8 Batz'. In particular, as B. Tedlock (1982:71) points out, forty days after the 8 Batz' ceremony, on 9 Batz', new daykeepers complete their training with a final ritual at Nimasabal. Nine Batz' is also a day when religious specialists who could not attend the 8 Batz' ceremony have a second chance to fulfill their ritual obligations.

The priestly and shamanic daykeepers (*ajq'ij*) who swarm over the altars during 8 Batz', especially at Ch'utisabal and Nimasabal («little and big place of sweeping»), do not indiscriminantly make offerings at the shrine, but rather seek niches where they were first initiated and left behind pieces of broken pottery. The disintegrating bags of the red *tz'ite* beans scattered among the sherds belong to deceased daykeepers who left them as a sign of their ties to the shrine. The majority of those making offerings are shamans, including some women, and are serving clients and individual families. Easily overlooked are the priestly authorities (*chuchqajaw*), representing the clans, cantons, and traditional community. The traditional priests communicate with one another at the shrines under the direction of the two community-wide priests, but no overall coordination of the ceremonial activities takes place.

The 8 Batz' ceremony is multifunctional. It serves to bring traditional Momostenango Maya together, regardless of where they might now reside or work. This is especially important for the merchants, many of whom spend much of the year outside Momostenango; they are obligated to return to the community and demonstrate by means of ritual their spiritual connection to it. The ceremony is thought to remove the collective sins and debts of the community, as well as of particular individuals and

groups (such as cantons and clans). On this day too the mountains are honored as manifestations of Earth God and the ancestors. Tecum, the martyred Maya hero of the Conquest and now the «king» of Earth God, is remembered and recognized as the founder of the great shrines used in the ceremony.

More specifically, the 8 *Batz'* ceremony functions to meet the needs of the many Maya shamans, priests and chiefs of Momostenango. No matter how negligent they may have been during the past nine months in exercising their ritual powers, on this day they are expected to burn *copal*. It is also the day for initiating new daykeepers, some of whom will become clan chiefs and the majority of whom will function as shamans serving individual clients (see B. Tedlock 1982:64ff for a detailed account of the complete initiation process). The initiation ritual itself and the memory of past initiations help make possible, however loosely to the outsiders' eyes, the integration of traditional political authorities, priests and shamans into a regional Maya religion.

Let us end our account of traditional Maya ritual in Momostenango with a brief description of how Holy Week is celebrated by the Maya.

### *Traditional Holy Week*

Holy Week in Momostenango is an extremely complex ceremony with many levels of participation and meaning. One level is represented by the modern sector of Momostenango, divided into two largely independent participating groups: the local Catholic hierarchy, especially the priests and catechists; and the *ladinos* and acculturated town Maya, organized into *hermandades* (religious sodalities). A second level is made up of the *cofradía* sector, which is largely independent of the Church hierarchy and seems to practice a more colonial, sincretized Spanish-Maya form of ritual. A third level consists of the *costumbristas*, traditional Maya who are almost totally independent of the other two sectors and participate in rituals that are transparently Maya in origin.

During the days of Holy Week the three sectors just mentioned engage in almost continuous ritual activity: pilgrimages, processions, dances, music, recitations, speeches, and dramas. A careful examination of the ritual practices of the three sectors reveals that even though at times there is loose coordination between them, for the most part their respective ritual acts are autonomous, or even in conflict with one another, and differ markedly in meaning and practice. For example, the Church and *ladino* processions are hierarchically organized, with clearcut central authority and division of tasks. The *cofradía* processions are for the most part well organized, but authority is dispersed (the traditional community *alcalde* has only weak supervisory authority), division of tasks is primarily by sex (men and women march in separate lines), and organization tends to break down toward the end of the ceremony (when, for example, heavy drinking and disorganized dancing with the saints may occur). The traditional Maya *per se* do not engage in processions during Holy Week, and in fact their ritual

performances often disrupt the processions of the other two (for example, I witnessed *cofradía* saint processions blocked by traditional dances, with the *cofrades* blowing horns to clear the way or physically pushing aside the dancers).

Ritual meanings, of course, are harder to determine, but clearly they too differ markedly for the three sectors. For the modern sector Holy Week ritual is an opportunity to express the superior power of the Church on the one hand, and of the *ladinos* on the other; that is to say, their rituals are highly political (in a broad sense of the term). The daily masses provide the Church with a forum for expressing these meanings. For example, in the mass of Holy Friday the church is filled with catechists and their followers, and the priest exhorts them to bring more «conquests» for the Church, while to the *cofradías* he charges, «it is past time to leave paganism and witchcraft behind, and to become true Christians». The *cofradías*, for their part, seem to play a subordinate ritual role throughout the week: they take the various saints to the calvarium and back, march toward the end of the *ladino*-dominated sodality processions, carrying nothing more than candles placed in humble reed containers, and on Holy Thursday recreate the betrayal of Judas with an image dressed in bright clothes seated at a table in front of the church (the image is burned the next day). Nevertheless, their journeys to the old colonial capital of Antigua to bring candles and to the coast to bring flowers and palm fronds, as well as processions with saints to the cardinal points of the town, and carrying out of ritual at the calvarium (where they lay to rest the «Crucified Jesus» and dance with the saints) are ritual acts that express much Maya symbolism.

The ritual celebrations of Holy Week by the traditional Maya (*costumbristas*) are interpreted by the modern sector as either a form of folkloric entertainment (*ladinos*) or scandalous paganism (Church hierarchy). When the traditionalists burn copal at the tombs of the dead in the cemetery, they are obviously propitiating the ancestors. On Holy Friday when they perform the *Tz'ulap* Dance («Dance of the *Gracejos* or *Jesters*») to the music of drum and rattle, it is in honor of the Crucified *jesucristos* according to the «authors» of the dance. The *Tz'ulap* dance is clearly Maya (although it also has obvious Spanish patterns as well), and it is overseen by an important traditional Maya priest (*chuchqajaw*) who has propitiated Earth God on behalf of the dancers. The dance recreates the story of Maya jesters wearing ragged clothes and brandishing whips who try to have sexual relations with another man's wife; the jealous husband kills his own brother-in-law (*baluk*) by mistake, and is taken before the town judge (note the similarity with the judicial case presented above). The dance has been widely interpreted as a Maya «fertility ritual» performed just before the yearly planting of maize, although this has been specifically denied by the Maya priest who oversees the dance. The explicit sexuality, drinking, and jesting suggest that in anthropological terms it is a rite of «reversal» or liminality.

Garrett Cook (1981; 1997), in a highly original interpretive study of traditional Holy Week in Momostenango, has unravelled many of the hidden Maya meanings behind the rituals of the *cofradía* and traditional sectors; and, in addition, points to



possible cultural ties with ancient Maya ritual and belief. He concludes that overall, traditional Holy Week ceremony in Momostenango can be seen as a ritual of renewal, symbolizing the transition from the dry to the rainy agricultural seasons. In the ceremony Jesucristo becomes a Maya hero figure who dies (at the calvarium at full moon) and is reborn as the summer sun (at the church at sunrise). Rituals carried out from Wednesday through Friday can be seen as liminal, as they mark the unlucky days at the end of the traditional Maya solar calendar. The key figures during this liminal period are Judas, a representation of San Simón or Maximón, who stands for the death god of the underworld (*Xibalbá*); and the *Tz'ulap* dancers, culture heroes participating in underworld ordeals (and also manifestations of the yearbearers).

Cook is able to connect up the *Tz'ulap* dancers with the Hero Twins who ascend to the underworld, and San Simón with the lord of *Xibalbá* who according to the *Popol Wuj* demanded flowers from the Hero Twins. Since the myths of the Hero Twins and their visit to the underworld have been identified within Classic Maya iconography and writing, the connection between the rituals of traditional Momostenango Holy Week and those of the Classic Maya would seem to be established. According to Cook, the fact that San Simon's body is made out of bunchgrass in the form of a cross would also tie this important Holy Week figure to the «foliated cross» of the Classic Maya!

## CONCLUSIONS

It is impressive that we can learn so much about Maya civilization, even ancient Maya civilization, from the microhistory and ethnography of a single contemporary community such as Momostenango. This attests to the social connections between the Maya across different regions and periods of time, as well as to the cohesiveness of the Maya cultural tradition and the struggle by the Maya people to preserve their rich cultural heritage. A successful historic struggle to preserve cultural tradition, however, is not really exceptional in world history, as more and more we understand the staying power of the ancient civilizations (Huntington 1996). The key to understanding cultural persistence of this kind is to examine the broad social interaction spheres, even world systems, that are universal tendencies in human history. We now know, also, that cultures like economies generate interests, and that human agents will struggle for them and tenaciously adapt them to their changing social conditions.

The guidelines provided by historical anthropology have been useful in studying the relationships between the Maya of Momostenango and the ancient Maya. The stricture that both internal and external factors need to be considered directs us to examine local cultures in wider contexts, in the case of Momostenango the wider context being the ancient Maya social world and associated civilization. The citation above from Freidel about relations between highland and lowland Maya during the Late Maya period points to external nexuses between local peoples like the Maya of Mo-

mostenango and the wider Maya world that made possible shared cultural traditions. Similarly, the ethnographic methods employed by scholars such as Cook and B. Tedlock in Momostenango can lead to the kind of in-depth cultural understanding that allows us to connect up such local manifestations of culture with the larger Maya civilization.

I have stressed continuity between ancient Maya civilization and local Momostenango culture in the account above, but it is also clear that change is just as much a part of the story. Thus, while there has been remarkable preservation of hamlet, district, town, and province levels of settlement patterns in Momostenango, the actual features of these settlement levels differ greatly from the ancient forms. The Momostenango town, for example, to a large degree is no longer culturally Maya, even though it still functions as an elite control center over rural Maya. And the old Momostenango province is now a township far more integrated into a state administrative hierarchy than was the case in the Maya past. It has been pointed out, too, that while segmentary lineage structure has continued to define much of traditional politics in Momostenango, this structure generally operates at a level lower corporate sector than it did within the ancient Maya polities. But the co-existence of both continuity and change in the Maya culture of Momostenango is probably most evident in the field of ritual, especially the Holy Week celebrations. There we find ancient yearbearer symbols and meanings that hark back to ancient Maya civilization, clothed almost entirely in Christian trappings and hidden among rituals that are emphatically modern (especially those carried out by the reformed Catholics).

Hopefully, our review of traditional Maya culture in Momostenango will cast light on some of the patterns of ancient Maya civilization that perhaps have not received the attention they deserve. One such pattern might be that of the patricians, and what they can tell us about the social organization, ritual activities, and conflicts of the ancient Maya peasantry (see McAnany 1995). Another pattern would be concerned with traditional law and judicial process, and the role they might have played within ancient Maya society. Still another pattern might have to do with the priestly specialists, and their relations with shamans; surely references to ancient Maya kings as «shamans» is questionable in light of the well-established priestly functionaries in traditional Momostenango.

It might be objected by some that Maya culture in Momostenango can have little to do with the highly developed political states and civilization of the ancient Maya. After all, the Maya of Momostenango are no longer politically subject to Maya elite, and are themselves largely peasants. Garrett Cook (1997), who is sympathetic to the idea of cultural continuity, wonders whether traditional Maya culture in Momostenango might not be primarily the remnants of an ancient peasant Maya culture and not of its elite civilization. This line of reasoning has much to recommend it, but it is also evident that through the mediation of the *caciques* and dialectical opposition to them by other leaders, the Maya of Momostenango through the centuries have been able to reconstitute a great deal of the ancient Maya elite civilization. Were this not the

case, I think it unlikely that we would find so many similarities between the cultures of the traditional Maya of Momostenango and the ancient Maya.

Discussion of the relationships between local Maya culture and ancient Maya civilization is relevant to efforts by new Maya elite struggling to establish a modern Maya state in Guatemala, and who have begun to draw from cultural traditions in places like Momostenango in their attempt to create a modern Maya nationalism. Will such a resurgent cultural tradition contribute to the development of an axial-type (Eisenstadt 1986) Maya civilization? Only time will tell, but these new nationalistic Maya are clearly trying to build a «bridge», as Coe put it, between the past and the present. If they are able to succeed in this, surely the Maya of Momostenango will have contributed to the construction of that bridge.

#### REFERENCES

- BOSSEN, L. (1984). *The Redivision of Labor: Women and Economic Choice in Four Guatemalan Communities*. SUNY Press. Albany.
- BURKE, P. (1992). *History and Social Theory*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca.
- CARLSEN, R. and M. PRECHTEL (1991). The Flowering of the Dead; An Interpretation of Highland Maya Culture. *Man* 26: 23-42.
- CARMACK, R. (1967). Análisis histórico-sociológico de un antiguo título quiché. *Antropología e Historia de Guatemala* 19 (1): 3-13.
- (1981). *The Quiché Mayas of Uatlán: The Evolution of a Highland Guatemala Kingdom*. University of Oklahoma Press. Norman.
- (1984). Spanish-Indian Relations in Highland Guatemala, 1800-1944. In *Spaniards and Indians in Southeastern Mesoamerica: Essays on the History of Ethnic Relations*. Eds. M. MacLeod and R. Wasserstrom, pp. 215-252. University of Nebraska Press. Lincoln.
- (1986). Ethnohistory of the Guatemalan Colonial Indian. In *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians* V. 4, pp. 55-70. University of Texas Press. Austin.
- (1990). State and Community in Nineteenth-Century Guatemala: The Momostenango Case. In *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540-1988*. Ed. C. Smith, pp. 116-136. University of Texas Press. Austin.
- (1993). Perspectivas sobre la historia antigua de Centroamérica. In *Historia Antigua de Centroamérica*, Tomo I. Ed. R. Carmack, pp. 283-326. FLACSO. San José de Costa Rica.
- (1995). *Rebels of Highland Guatemala: The Quiché-Mayas of Momostenango*. University of Oklahoma Press. Norman.
- CARMACK, R. (Ed.) (1988). *Harvest of Violence: The Mayan Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*. University of Oklahoma Press. Norman.
- CARMACK, R., J. GASCO and G. GOSSEN (1996). *The Legacy of Mesoamerica: History and Culture of a Native American Civilization*. Prentice Hall. Upper Saddle River. New Jersey.
- CHASE, D. and A. CHASE (1992). An Archaeological Assessment of Mesoamerican Elites. In *Mesoamerican Elites: An Archaeological Assessment*. Eds. D. Chase and A. Chase, pp. 303-316. University of Oklahoma Press. Norman.

- (1996). More Than Kin and King: Centralized Political Organization among the Late Classic Maya. The Maya State: Centralized or Segmentary. *Current Anthropology* 37: 803-810.
- COE, M. (1993). *The Maya* (fifth edition). Thames and Hudson. London.
- COOK, G. (1981). *Supernaturalism, Cosmos and Cosmogony in Quichean Expressive Culture*. Doctoral Dissertation. State University of New York at Albany.
- (1997). Jun Ajpu and Jesu Cristo in Momostenango: Mythic Themes, Ritual Symbols and Mayan Tradition (tentative title). Manuscript under consideration for publication.
- EISTENSTADT, S. (Ed.) (1986). *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*. SUNY Press. Albany.
- FOX, J. and G. COOK (1996). Constructing Maya Communities: Ethnography for Archaeology. *Current Anthropology* 37: 811-821.
- FOX, J. *et al.* (1996). The Maya State: Centralized or Segmentary. *Current Anthropology* 37: 795-830.
- FREIDEL, D. (1985). New Light on the Dark Age: A Summary of Major Themes. In *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*. Eds. A. Chase and P. Rice, pp. 285-309. University of Texas Press. Austin.
- FREIDEL, D., L. SCHELE and J. PARKER (1993). *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*. William Morrow. New York.
- GEERTZ, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Harper and Row. New York.
- GOSSEN, G. (1974). *Chamulas in the World of the Sun: Time and Space in a Maya Oral Tradition*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge.
- HAMMOND, N. (1982). *Ancient Maya Civilization*. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick.
- HENDERSON, J. (1981). *The World of the Ancient Mayas*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca.
- HILL, R. and J. MONAGHAN (1989). *Continuities in Highland Maya Social Organization: Ethnohistory in Sacapulas, Guatemala*. University of Pennsylvania Press. Philadelphia.
- HUNT, L. (Ed.) (1989). *The New Cultural History*. University of California Press. Berkeley.
- HUNTINGTON, S. (1996). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon & Schuster. New York.
- KERR, J. (1992). The Myth of the Popol Vuh as an Instrument of Power. In *New Theories on the Ancient Maya*. Eds. E. Danien and R. Sharer, pp. 109-121. University of Pennsylvania. University Museum. Philadelphia.
- MARCUS, J. (1993). Ancient Maya Political Organization. In *Lowland Maya Civilization in the Eighth Century*. Eds. J. Sabloff and J. Henderson, pp. 111-183. Dumbarton Oaks. Washington, D.C.
- MCANANY, P. (1995). *Living with the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society*. University of Texas Press. Austin.
- MENDELSON, M. (1956). Religion and World View in Santiago Atitlan. *Microfilm Collection on American Indian Cultural Anthropology*. Series 8, n. 52-54. University of Chicago. Chicago.
- (1965). *Los escándalos de Maximón*. Seminario de Integración Social Guatemalteca, Pub. 19. Ministerio de Educación. Guatemala.
- POZAS, R. (1959). *Chamula, un pueblo indio de los altos de Chiapas*. Instituto Nacional Indigenista. México.
- RE CRUZ, A. (1996). *The two milpas of Chan Kom: escenarios of a Maya village life*. SUNY Press. Albany.

- REDFIELD, R. (1941). *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago.
- REDFIELD, R. and A. VILLA ROJAS (1934). *Chan Kom: A Maya Village*. Carnegie Institution of Washington, Pub. 448. Washington, D.C.
- SKOCPOL, T. (1984). *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- SCHELE, L. and D. FREIDEL (1990). *A Forest of Kings*. William Morrow. New York.
- SCHELE, L. and M. MILLER (1986). *The Blood of Kings*. George Braziller. New York.
- SHARER, R. (1994). *The Ancient Maya* (5th edition). Stanford University Press. Stanford.
- SMITH, C. (1997). Review of *Rebels of Highland Guatemala*. *American Historical Review*, 102.
- SMITH, C. (Ed.) (1990). *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540-1988*. University of Texas Press. Austin.
- TEDLOCK, B. (1982). *Time and the Highland Maya*. University of New Mexico Press. Albuquerque.
- TEDLOCK, D. (1985). *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Maya Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of God and Kings*. Simon and Schuster. New York.
- VILLA ROJAS, A. (1945). *The Maya of East Central Quintana Roo*. Carnegie Institution of Washington, Pub. 559. Washington, D.C.
- VOGT, E. (1961). Some Aspects of Zinacantan Settlement Patterns and Ceremonial Organization. *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 1: 31-45.
- (1969). *Zinacantan: A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge.
- WOLF, E. (1982). *Europe and the People without History*. University of California Press. Berkeley.