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Chenoe Egawa has been a Fellow of the Institute studying the marketing of Native American products and produce in MesoAmerica.

A Glimpse into Another Realm Part 1- Don Julian Lopez Mendez

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala

March, 2000

By Chenoe Egawa

Don Julian Lopez Mendez is a Pocomam Mayan elder, now 74 years of age, an *ajq'ik*, or *guía espiritual* [spiritual guide] from the town of Palin, municipality of Escuintla. He has been working as an *ajq'ik* since he was 34 years old. Over the past 40 years, he has healed thousands of people. According to him, he was chosen to do so, selected by God. As he told me on several occasions, healing was not something he had learned through books and long hours of study; instead, he received his knowledge and abilities through dreams and visions, and what he describes as personal relationships to certain Mayan forces and Catholic Saints and Virgins. Since Don Julian was raised with Mayan and Catholic spiritual beliefs and practices, he uses both in his work as an *ajq'ik*. He expressed to me that *San Miguel El Arcangel* [Saint Michael the Archangel] is his personal connection to the spirit world, coming to him in dreams and meditations, advising and guiding him. *San Miguel* is not Don Julian's only guide, however. I have been with him on several occasions during *concentraciones* [meditative prayers] when he was communicating with many other entities and forces, both Mayan and Catholic.

Don Julian has been gifted with his own unique ways of healing. In an attempt to define what is sometimes indefinable, I would say that he has three '*done's*' [gifts]. One is his knowledge of medicinal plants. Oftentimes he prescribes remedies to his patients to cure physical, as well as spiritual ailments. Plants can be used in different combinations as teas or cooked up in a large pot of water and used for medicinal baths. A second, rather special *don* that he uses is his ability to *encaminar a la gente*, [to guide the people]. He uses this ability to help those individuals who carry within *la luz* [the divine light]. By guiding them, Don Julian explained that he 'opens their path, or road,' to clarity and higher understanding. His third *don*, like many Pocomames before him, is the gift of working with the forces of nature — fog, rain, storms and wind in particular.

I met Don Julian during my first week in Guatemala — the week of May 17th, 1998 — introduced to him by a friend. He and six other *ajq'ik* had just returned from Tikal National Park in the Peten. They had been flown there from the Western Highlands two days earlier by one of the park directors of Guatemala's National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP) — all expenses paid — to conduct a rain ceremony at the ancient Mayan ruins. Fires had been burning out of control for months, already engulfing immense tracts of the Mayan Biosphere Reserve, the largest continuous tract of tropical rainforest left in Central America. At that time, raging fires were threatening Tikal. Following the spontaneous suggestion of a friend, the CONAP director quickly rounded up the funds for the *ajq'ik* to travel to Tikal, going way above and

beyond the parameters of CONAP's usual and customary beliefs and practices. As the saying goes, "desperate times call for desperate measures." Maybe the *ajq'ik* knew how to call upon and bring in the badly needed rains to squelch the fires before they consumed Guatemala's world-renowned, ancient Mayan city.

And so, the *ajq'ik* carried out their ceremony in the Main Plaza of Tikal, in the midst of the temples of the Sun and Moon, and before the "North Acropolis" that houses the huge stone carving of *Chac*, the God of rain and water. There they prayed for the onset of the rainy season, already one-month late in coming. A large color photo of Don Julian praying for rain in Tikal's Main Plaza appeared the next day in one of the local papers. One week after the ceremony, the rains came, with a fury.

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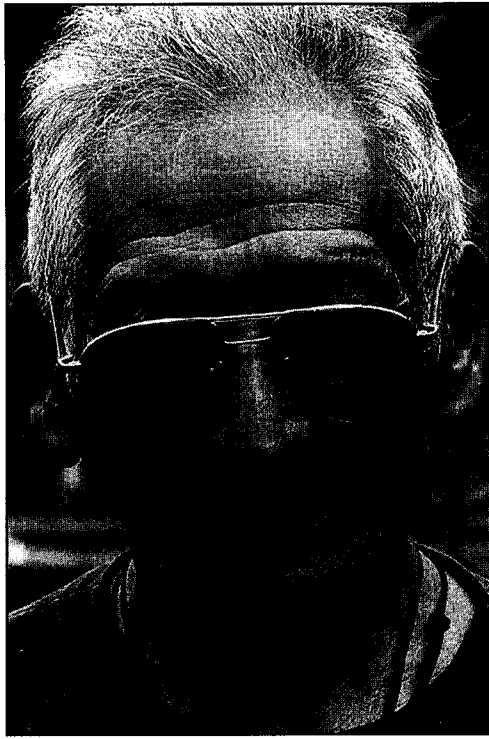
Throughout my fellowship, I made frequent visits to Palin, heading southwest out of Guatemala City, down the mountains toward the coastal lowlands where the air is warm and humid. Palin sits in the foothills on the south side of the massive *Volcan de Agua* [Volcano of Water] or

Aj'pu, as it known to the Pocomames. There, in his humble, tidy, home, housing three generations of his family, we would sit and visit.

People from throughout Guatemala traveled to Palin seeking Don Julian's counsel, his curative powers and his medicinal plant remedies. Every time I went to see him, several people were sitting on the low wooden bench in the shade of the covered entryway outside his small bedroom. They waited their turn quietly, patiently, as the chickens and roosters bobbed around before them on the earthen central patio, searching here and there for bits of dried *maíz* [corn]. Don Julian's poor dog always seemed to be lying out in the hot sun, too exhausted to drag her worn-out body into the shade, as yet another new litter of puppies tugged at her incessantly. Around the back of the house was the small stable where the two horses were kept, awaiting the next trip to the family's *milpa* (cornfield) and citrus orchards up in the hills above Palin.

Inside his small, dimly lit room, Don Julian tended to patients. They talked with him first at his consultation table before moving over to take a seat upon the little, handmade wooden chair he placed before his altar. The





Don Julian Lopez Mendez

altar was filled with colorful images of Catholic saints and virgins, ceramic figurines of Mayan gods and goddesses, the big wooden *cruz Maya* [the Mayan cross signifying the four directions] bouquets of white and yellow flowers, several votive candles, two large glass goblets of water and Don Julian's medicine bundle. There at the altar he prayed, blessing the patient first with a heavy application of highly perfumed floral waters. Each patient brought two raw chicken eggs and two white candles. While he prayed, Don Julian passed the raw eggs — in the shell and unbroken — over the patient's entire body. He told me that the egg has the *siete poderes* [seven powers]. By passing an egg over a person's body, it would absorb and record an energetic reading from that person. After praying with the two eggs, he continued the same process by rubbing the person down with the two white candles. Following a consultation, he burned the candles at his altar to draw in healing energy for the patient. To bring the prayer to a close he doused more of the flower waters over the person's head, shoulders, arms, hands and legs. He then half-filled two small glasses with water and broke one egg into each glass. Floating in the water, he could 'read' about the illness of the person as it was depicted in the formation of the yolk, the surrounding white, and any bubbles or filaments. One time, I was with Don Julian when he opened the egg from a deathly ill patient and inside, tangled in the yoke, was a small fruit fly! He explained to me that this person was the recipient of another person's black magic.

"Unfortunately, many people with such powers abuse them, using them in a negative, harmful way,"

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rather than in a positive, healing way," he said.

A diagnosis and treatment — usually a prescribed mixture of medicinal plants — followed his consultations. Afterwards most patients return for a 'checkup' to make sure the illness had been cured. Don Julian usually knew how to heal his patients, but there were incidents where he needed assistance. For special cases, he would do a *concentración* with his 18-year-old granddaughter, Gloria, a 'spiritual medium.' I witnessed such *concentraciones* on numerous occasions. Gloria would focus on one of the goblets of water while Don Julian began to pray. She described it to me as going into a concentrated state of being. In that state, her spirit was able to vacate her physical body, making way for another spirit entity to come in. When the entity entered her body, it announced its arrival and Don Julian could begin to have a conversation, or spiritual consultation, with that entity. He would inquire about the health of his patient and receive the information he needed to prescribe a successful treatment.

I spent a lot of time with Don Julian and he told me stories about growing up in Palin, about the healing way, about his visions. He shared a great deal with me, and over the course of time, he, Gloria and the rest of his family became dear friends of mine. Through his teachings and guidance Don Julian helped me to further my own search for clarity and higher understanding. During my time in Guatemala, I went to several Mayan celebrations with Don Julian and Gloria: the Mayan New Year, the Day of the Children and rain, planting and initiation ceremonies.

Before I returned to the United States at the end of my fellowship, I asked Don Julian to tell me more about his childhood, and how and when he came to receive his power as an *ajq'ik*.

"If it is all right with you," I said, "I would like to write your story in one of my last newsletters." Just as I thought he would, Don Julian liked the idea very much and consented wholeheartedly. This is rare. It is not often that an *ajq'ik* will talk about how he or she works, let alone allow it to be written for publication, but Don Julian is different that way. He enjoys sharing his life's work with others as a way of bringing hope and reminding others, from all walks of life, that there are numerous ways of interpreting, expressing and relating to the world around us. The following is just a small sample of what he shared with me.

* * * *

"When I was five years old, I knew how to fly, perfectly, in my body," Don Julian said. He paused, taking a puff on his *Rubio* cigarette. He is a slight man, and stands about 5'3" in height.

"I was just a kid," he continued, squinting and tilting



"Aj'Pu" (Volcano of Water) as it is called in Pocomni. The town of Palin can be seen in the foreground.

his head back as he exhaled a big cloud of smoke, "but I knew already that I had something special. "Here in Palin, back in the 1920's when I was a little boy, the Pocomam area was just land and mountains. There was no town then, just a few *ranchitos* [small wooden homes with grass roofs]. We had some dirt roads that went through here, but there weren't fences or walls dividing up the land and property. People used to plant *izote* [short, thick, palm-like trees] along the perimeters of their *ranchitos*, but they didn't plant them to keep people out. You could go anywhere you wanted to in those days.

"Of fourteen brothers and sisters, I was the youngest. I never knew my older siblings very well. Juana was the oldest, and I hardly knew her at all. She died when I was very little.

"Mom and my youngest sister, Pancha, used to sell *tortillas* in the market at the central plaza by the church. They would take me with them in the morning and leave me on the road along the way near the *posito de agua* [a freshwater spring] because there were always a lot of people coming and going. She thought it was better to leave me there than at home alone. 'Stay right here, my son,' my mom would tell me, 'and wait for me to come back for you.' Every day I would wait there near the *posito* where all of the people from Palin would come to fill their *tecomates* with water and carry them back home."

"What is a *tecomate*?" I asked.

"The *tecomate* is the sacred gourd plant that God gave

us to carry and store our water. It grows on a certain kind of bush along long, winding vines that grow close to the ground. We didn't use plastic and metal like we do today, but the *tecomates* were a lot better anyway. You could fill one up with cold water from the spring in the morning and carry it to work with you in the *campo*. That water would stay fresh and cool all day long, even on hot, muggy days. The women used them for everything, to prepare *nixtamal* for tortillas, to store food. We had the *tol* too, a similar type of gourd plant, but much smaller than the *tecomate*. *Tol* was used to make plates, cups and bowls. There are still many people in the Highlands who use the *tecomate* and the *tol*."

He returned to his story. "So that is what it was like when I was a little boy. It was around that time that I awoke one morning and remembered that I had been flying in my dream. 'Can this be,' I wondered? 'Did I really fly?' That day, like every day, my mom left me there along the road to wait for her and Pancha to return from the market. 'I dreamed that I was flying,' I said to myself. 'Today I'm going to try it.' Even though my mom told me to stay by the *posito* and wait for her, I often wandered off to play. Nearby, there was a huge mango tree that I liked to climb. It had big roots all wrapped and coiled around it and they went deep into the earth like snakes. That day I ran to the mango tree, climbed high into the upper branches and jumped...and I flew! *Tranquilamente*, I flew," Don Julian said, tipping his head back, closing his eyes momentarily, and smiling his broad toothless grin, recalling that cherished childhood memory.

He chuckled, then leaned forward and shook another *Rubio* from the pack on the table. He had told me many times before that he doesn't usually smoke, only when he has visitors. "That's when I really enjoy smoking," he told me. I always thought that was funny, because every time I was there he seemed to have plenty of visitors and plenty of smokes.

He struck a match, lit the *Rubio*, and leaned back in his chair again. "How beautiful! I thought to myself," he said exhaling, flicking out the match and dropping it into the ashtray. "A *saber* [who knows] what God has given me. I never told my parents about how I used to go flying, but from that point on, whenever nobody else was around, that's what I would do. I was so content! I'd watch mom and Pancha go, wait until they disappeared in the distance, and then I would run up into the mountains and fly. I would fly and fly, passing over the whole *pueblo*, seeing it all from above. The harder I kicked my legs, the higher I flew. When I wanted to lower myself back down to the earth

again, I would simply ease up, just barely kicking.

"Sometime later," said Don Julian "I got a sickness that nobody could cure. I was still very young and my parents were worried. My dad told my mom to go find a *curandera* [healer] and early one morning she came to see me, a healer from the neighborhood of San Pedro. I was so ill that my whole body was shaking uncontrollably. Our family was really poor. We didn't have sweaters, jackets, or anything, so my mom used to cut burlap bags in half, the ones that were used for packing and hauling beans, rice and coffee. That's what we used to cover ourselves when it got colder.

"The *curandera* asked my mom to bring her two white candles. Then she began to work on me. She passed the candles over my entire body, from head to toe, praying all the while. 'Ay, Dios!' she said. 'This child is carrying a great gift! He will be a powerful man someday, but the *hechiceros* [practitioners of black magic] saw his divine light and they took it from him. They have robbed him of the force that God gave him.' She came back to visit me from time to time, to work on me with candles and prayers, and slowly she brought me back to health.

"When I was better, I went with mom and Pancha again, and they dropped me off at the *posito* along the dirt road. I watched them go, waiting until they disappeared in the distance. 'I'm going to see if it's true,' I thought. 'I want to see if the *hechiceros* really did take away my gift.' When my mom was out of sight I ran to the big old mango tree, climbed up and jumped! BOOOOM! I hit the ground. I couldn't fly! I didn't want to believe it and I climbed up again, jumped, and BOOM, fell again. I tried over and over, but I couldn't fly anymore," Julian said sadly, as if he were reliving the disappointment he had felt so profoundly as a child.

"It was true what the *curandera* told me," he said. "They took away my power. I couldn't fly anymore. In my dreams I still flew, but in the material world I never flew again. As the years went by I simply forgot about how I used to fly.

"As I got a bit older, I began helping my mother with chores. Each day I went out into the hills in search of wood for the cooking fire. One day I was down by the cemetery gathering wood, when I saw Juana! She came out of the cemetery, walking towards me. 'Ah,' I said, 'here comes my sister to talk with me!' Juana had died more than one year earlier and I was so happy to be seeing her again. As she approached me, I could see that she was smiling. I smiled back and began talking to her, asking her all kinds of questions, but she wouldn't respond.



Don Julian's dog napping again as one of the chickens stands guard

She just kept looking at me and smiling. We even laughed together, but never did she utter a word. After a short while, she simply walked away, disappearing into the trees. It was strange, because she looked so real. I mean, she didn't look like a spirit; she was exactly as I had remembered her when she was living.

"I loaded up my bundle of firewood and headed for home. Mom was there. When I told her that I had just been with Juana down by the cemetery she went into a panic. 'Come with me,' she said, practically shoving me out the door, 'we're going to the pharmacy.' The only things they sold at the pharmacy in those days were aspirin, quinine, Castor Oil, Epsom Salts and floral-scented perfumed waters. We used the floral waters back then, like we do today, to cleanse and purify a person's spirit, to attract the good spirits with the pleasing aromas and drive off the evil ones. Mom bought *agua florida*, *agua de siete expíritus*, *agua de claridad* and others, then rushed me back to the house and frantically began stripping me down. 'What are you doing?' I asked her. I couldn't understand why she was so worried. 'I'm going to cure you,' she said. Back then it was believed that anyone who saw the dead would be cursed and die within 24 hours! She opened up all of the bottles of floral scented waters, poured them all over me, completely soaking me from head to toe, then gave me a thorough scrubbing. 'You aren't feeling weak are you?' she asked. 'Are you dizzy?' I remember how terrified she was, but I felt fine.

"Three days later, I was still living!" Don Julian exclaimed, laughing out loud. "Nothing happened to me. I believe that my encounter with Juana's spirit was possible, because of my ability to 'see.' It wasn't something bad. I had many other experiences like that later on too. It was my gift," he said matter-of-factly.

"School was never a part of my childhood and so I grew up *tonto*! I couldn't even count. My life was miserable. I didn't have money; nothing," Don Julian said. "I didn't even own a second pair of pants. Finding work was a constant struggle. When I did find a job, it was slave labor. The pay was so low and the conditions so horrible that working did little, if anything, to improve my situation.

"I met Maria Esqit, my wife-to-be, when I was eighteen. She came from a good family that owned plenty of land. I didn't think that she would ever leave her parents to come and live in misery with me, but we fell in love and I stole her away from them. Before, that's how it was. We used to steal our girlfriends from their parents and run away with them. A boy 'captured' his girlfriend early



Don Julian's altar

in the morning and the two of them went up to the mountains together. Late in the afternoon, he brought her back home. Once at her house, he had to go before the girl's parents and ask for forgiveness. 'I'm sorry for stealing your daughter,' he would say. A girl's parents worried a lot over this, because sometimes they wouldn't know who had taken their daughter.

"This is what I did with Maria when she was my girlfriend. We went up into the mountains for the whole day. At sunset, we came back down. I brought her to my house first, so that we could eat dinner with mom. After that, I took her home and asked her parents for forgiveness. Her mom was furious with her for having anything to do with me. 'How could you run off with this *pelado* [derogatory term for a poor man]?' she shouted. 'If you choose to go with this bum, then you can forget that you ever had this family! Don't ever ask or expect anything from us again!' One of Maria's aunties tried to stand up for me. 'This man may be poor,' she said, 'but he works. You never know what can happen, a poor man

can become rich, and a rich man can become poor.'

I was so poor I didn't have anywhere else to go but up!" Don Julian added. It sounded pretty tragic, but when he said it that way, I could not help but laugh. He joined in.

"No," he said, becoming serious again, "it was sad. We felt really bad about her mother's reaction to me, but Maria chose to stay with me anyway. We struggled through a lot of hard times," he said flicking the long ash of his *Rubio* onto the cement floor. "We lived in such poverty. 'Look,' I told her, 'I have my health. I can work. We have enough to eat, even if it's only *tortillas*, grilled tomatoes, chilis and salt. Can you bear a life like this?' I asked her. 'Let's just see what is in store for us,' said Maria. She endured it all; she never left me. That's how we were.

"My first formal education began at the age of eighteen when I joined the *cuartel* [army].¹ General Jorge Ubico was in power then. It was 1944."

In the spring of 1944, Guatemala's growing middle class, primarily schoolteachers, students, skilled workers and small business owners, rose up in a series of protests against the ruthless Ubico, demanding freedom to organize. "They had emerged almost overnight as a powerful force after over a century of silence."² Influenced by news of World War II and new promises of freedom and democracy, Guatemala's bourgeoisie demanded an end to tyranny. Ubico, shocked by the rising public outrage, declared a state of siege at the end of June. On July 1, 1944 he resigned, turning over power to yet another military dictator, General Federico Ponce. A few months

later, Ponce was ousted in the "October Revolution." The ground was set for the first free elections in Guatemala's history under a democratic constitution. On March 15, 1945, a schoolteacher, Dr. Juan Jose Arévalo Bermejo, became the first popularly elected President of Guatemala. Arévalo was described as "a modern liberal of a socialist bent," and as "a visionary, a serious thinker whose heroes included Simon Bolivar, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt"³ When he began his term in office, it



Don Julian and his wife, Maria Esquit

was reported that he first "abolished laws, exiled enemies and cleaned house."⁴ Following the 'cleanup,' a new liberal constitution was drawn up, "embodying the aspirations of the 1944 revolutionaries, the mass of Guatemalans and the idealistic young President elect."⁵

"At that point, I took a good hard look at my life," said Don Julian. "I wanted so desperately to find a way to make something of myself. I had heard about the trade unions and cooperatives, and I knew that many people were meeting in the *pueblos* to discuss workers' rights. I began to pay more attention to these talks, and decided to join a local labor union. Under Ubico we weren't allowed to organize for anything without getting permission first from whoever the local military command was

¹ *Cuartel* is the colloquial term used in rural areas of Guatemala to refer to the national army.

² Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit, The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, 1982, p. 25.

³ *Ibid*, p. 30.

⁴ Mario Rosenthal, *Guatemala: The Story of an Emergent Latin-American Democracy* (New York: Twayne, 1962) p. 216

⁵ Schlesinger and Kinzer, *op. cit.*, p. 35

at the time. The labor unions created from 1945 to 1954 during the governments of Arévalo and Arbenz changed a lot of things. In 1946, the Social Security Law was passed and for the first time workers were guaranteed the right to safe working conditions, compensation for injuries, and basic education and health care among other things. The Labor Code was enacted in 1947, guaranteeing workers the right to organize unions, to bargain collectively and to strike. Under Ubico, we only earned ten-to-fifteen *centavos* per day, children five *centavos* per day. Under Arévalo our wages doubled.

"I went to every training course and seminar I could. I learned to read and write. My Spanish improved a lot at that time! I always spoke some Spanish," he clarified. "Just not very well. My first, and more predominant language has always been Pocomam.

"In the trade union I also began to learn how to speak in front of people," said Don Julian. "It was something I had never imagined I would do before. I used to stutter and was very self-conscious about it. Thanks to the trade union, I began waking up little by little. I started participating in meetings. I began making suggestions, and presenting my ideas to the organization. I got more and more involved, and eventually became one of the local leaders. The National Confederation of Workers (CNT) funded me to go to Costa Rica and Nicaragua to meet with other union members from around the world. They talked about democracy and revolution. They talked about forming cooperatives and unions, about going before the government to state our needs and demand our rights. I was in Nicaragua when the dictator, Somoza, was in power. Life was still a struggle, but things were getting better.

"When I was 27, I fell ill again. It started with headaches, fever, body-aches, nausea; the same symptoms I had suffered as a child. Once again I was thrown into turmoil. Over the next seven years, I was so sick that I couldn't keep up with my work. Sometimes my whole body went numb, completely paralyzed. What did I have? All of the *curanderos* told me the same thing, that the illness was put on me by *hechiceros*. 'But why?' I asked. 'I haven't hurt or mistreated anybody and I don't have anything, so there's no reason for anyone to be jealous or envious of me.' I wasn't a drinker. Hell, I couldn't even afford to keep food on the table, let alone squander money on booze.

"The illness became madness, and deep depression. It went on for so long that I thought I was going to die. It was as if my very soul was being eaten away. A great *ajq'ik* used to live here in Palin, a man named Catarino Lo Juarez. One morning, he came to see me. '*Cojol* [friend]' he said to me in our language, 'what is happening with you?' 'I'm screwed,' I told him. He began to work on me, first doing a cleansing by passing two white candles over my body, in the way most that most Pocomam healers

work," said Don Julian. "It's different than the *K'iches*; they mainly work with the sacred fire. After awhile, he gave me his diagnosis. 'Look, *cojol*, you have a strong spiritual force, and it is this force that is making you sick.'

"My wife and I had two children at that time, Pedro and Isabel," continued Don Julian. "Don Catarino called them into my room. 'Do you kids know *la lengua de vaca* [cow's tongue]?' asked Don Catarino. 'Yes,' they said, 'dad showed us that plant before.'

'Go find me *la lengua de vaca*,' he said, 'and bring it to me.' Pedro and Isabel ran off, returning a few minutes later with two small bundles of *lengua de vaca*, holding them out for Don Catarino to see. 'Yes, that is the one,' he said. They eagerly handed over the plants to Don Catarino, smiling at each other, proud that they could be of help. 'Now I need the top of a pineapple,' he told them. Off they ran again, this time to the market. You see, Chenoa, in those days, Palin was known as the land of pineapple. They didn't grow them in any other part of Guatemala then. Nowadays, all of the pineapple comes from the coastal region."

One of Don Julian's chickens wandered into the room where we sat visiting.

"Eh! Psssst, psssst, '*fuera* [out]!" he shouted, then went back to his story.

"Don Catarino talked with my wife next. He told her how to prepare the remedy, how to use the top of the pineapple, how to cook it together with *la lengua de vaca*, how much water to use, how long it should simmer, and so on. When it was ready, she carried the big, heavy pot of steaming hot liquid to my room. 'Take off your shirt,' Don Catarino told me. 'We are going to cover you with hot compresses.'

"He soaked some rags in the mixture and applied them over my whole body. Right away I could feel the soothing heat dissolve away my aches and pains. His remedy left me feeling peaceful, and for the first time in ages I was able to fall into a deep sleep. I woke up later that afternoon and Don Catarino was still there with me. 'How are you feeling now, *cojol*?' he asked. 'I am doing much better, Don Catarino. I feel good, relaxed. Thank you.' He passed more candles over me. Then he covered me with another round of hot compresses. 'I'll be back tomorrow morning to check on you again,' he said.

"He was there by my bedside when I awoke the next morning. 'Look, *cojol*,' he said, 'you have a great spiritual force. You are going to work with the mists and the storms. This is what I have seen. You will need help to open this road. I will try to guide you.' 'Thank you Don Catarino,' I said.

"It was in that moment that I remembered for the first

time in years how I used to fly when I was a little boy. I realized that the spiritual force I had had years earlier was coming back to me again.

"Don Catarino made a red sash for me, like the one *San Miguel El Arcangel* wears," said Don Julian pointing up to the big picture of Saint Michael above his altar. "He always had me put the red sash around my waist before he began working on me with his candles and prayers. Catarino tried and tried to help me open my road, but to no avail. Even though he was a great healer, he didn't have the ability to help me go any further. 'But why?' I asked, pleading with him. 'Your force is too strong,' he said, apologetically. 'Look for another who is better than I, someone who is stronger in these ways. I'm truly sorry, *cojol*.'"

"And so I went to Vicente Char. 'Don't worry,' said Vicente. 'I'll open your road for you.' But he couldn't help me either. He knew I was desperate and tried to encourage me. 'I'll always be here to help you with anything else, but in this case I do not know how to guide you any further,' he said. 'Thank you,' I told him, but his kindness was little consolation, and I fell terribly ill again.

"There was nowhere left to turn. Depression took hold of me. I cried and cried, pleading with God, begging that He take my life. Seven long years! The suffering was no longer bearable. My thoughts turned to suicide and I went out to the mountains and collected *hierba del sapo* [toad's herb], a poisonous, deadly herb. I prepared the herb, then waited until my wife and children were out of the house. At three different times I had that poison in my hand, ready to ingest, but each time I was completely overcome by a presence that was so strong, powerful and insistent; it would not permit me to take my life.

"Instead I would crumble to the ground, sobbing like a child. 'But why?' I cried. 'Why, God? Why, *Madre Santísima*? Why are you punishing me? What sin have I committed? I need to know.'"

"It was eight days after I attempted suicide for the third time that I got the answer. In the night, the *Madre Santísima* came to me in a dream and explained what I was to do.

"Look, *hermano* [brother],' she said, 'your time has come to begin your work as an *ajq'ik*. You have been chosen to guide people, to help them on their own path of light, knowledge and clarity. Many people are suffering in the same way that you have been suffering,' she said. 'They have this storm welling up inside, this pain, and they too find no cures. They carry a great gift, yet they block it from blossoming. They block it with doubt, doubt in my Father, doubt in themselves, doubt in their powers. These people carry within a divine light. They too need help to open their road. To work in this healing way, one has to have absolute faith, to trust the connection

that one has with higher powers, to trust one's own ability and the divine nature of all things. Now you'll begin to work in this world.' 'But how can I do that, *Madre Santísima*? I don't know anything.' 'God gave you this gift,' she said. 'Now you must use it. If you do not you will suffer until the end of your days.' 'But how do I begin?' I asked. 'Begin with seven purification baths, one each day for seven consecutive days. Follow those with seven clarification baths, also one each day for seven consecutive days. After you have completed these fourteen baths you will do seven *presentaciones*. For your presentations, you need only this, *agua de la reina*, *agua florida*, *siete machos*, and *agua velva*. Mix these essences together and bless yourself with them before you present yourself to my Father. You will present yourself to Him before your own altar. On your seventh presentation your road will be opened and you will begin to work with us. People will come from all over to seek your help. Here, before your altar, the people are going to be paralyzed, they are going to be desperate, they are going to cry, pray, plead, laugh, go mad, but don't be afraid, *hermano*. You will know what to do for each one of them.'

"I was feeling panicked," said Don Julian. 'And the seven purification baths?' I asked her. 'What will I use, *Madre Santísima*? And for the seven clarification baths?' 'You already know,' she said. 'I don't have to tell you.' 'But no, I don't know,' I said. 'Yes, you know,' she insisted firmly. 'Do what I tell you and you will save your life. Do these things and you will become healthy again.'

"The *Madre Santísima* left and *la Virgen of Candelaria* appeared at my bedside next. '*Hermano*, do what the *Madre Santísima* tells you. Your life will change. You haven't even dreamed of what you will have.' 'But how?' I said. 'I'm a poor man. I have nothing.' 'You'll see,' said *la Virgen de Candelaria*. 'My Father will give you all that you need. But do what the *Madre Santísima* says. This is critical. You will see. Your life will change, but first you must do these things. We will see each other again.' And with that she disappeared.

"*San Miguel El Arcangel* came to me next. He too told me to do what the *Madre Santísima* advised. 'Do all of it,' he insisted. 'You have already been chosen to work with me among the fog, the rains and the storms, but this you knew already, didn't you?' 'Yes,' I said. 'I dreamed about it when I was a boy.' 'No, you did not dream it. You have done it!' said *San Miguel*. 'Do what the *Madre Santísima* tells you. You are going to work with me.'

"When I woke up, I thought to myself, my God! What is happening to me? What am I going to do? I felt a strange peacefulness come over me, almost a sadness. 'Ay! What will I do?' I thought. 'It's not as if I can run out into the street and shout out to the people, Hey, come over here! I am an *ajq'ik*! I can help you! Who's going to believe me? Nobody.' I decided to begin with the baths, but I still didn't know what plants to use. I had to let go of reason



(left to right) Don Julian, Don Pantaleon, Gloria and a friend seated in Don Julian's room

and begin to trust. I approached my altar and began to pray for guidance. I prayed and prayed, when all of a sudden it came to me. I picked up a pen and began to write the names of all the plants to use for the seven baths of purification and the seven baths of clarification. Some of the names I recognized. For instance, I knew of *San Benito* and *Siempre Viva*, but most of the plant names were new to me. I had never heard of *Geranio de Santísimo*, *Flor de Gericón*, *Manito del Señor*. For the baths of purification, I was to add a certain number of limes and cigars to the herbs and plants. For the baths of clarification, I was to add a certain number of red roses and white roses.

"Fourteen days later I had completed all of the baths and proceeded with the seven presentations to the altar. For each presentation I used the mixture of four *aguas* that the *Madre Santísima* had specified.

"It was twenty days after my seventh presentation to the altar, when my first patient arrived at the house. My daughter, Tina, was here. She was still little then. 'Who are you looking for?' Tina asked her. 'El señor, Don Julian,' she said. 'I need to see him.'

"Tina brought the young woman into the house. 'Good afternoon, *señorita*,' I said. 'Please have a seat. What can I help you with?' 'I have had an illness since I was nine years old,' she told me, 'an excruciating pain in my stomach. I am twenty-two now, and to this day I haven't found one doctor or *curandero* who has been able to help me. Some say I have cancer, others say I have an ulcer or a tumor. I am at a dead end, between the wall and the sword,' she said. 'I can find no relief for my suf-

fering.' 'Look *señorita*,' I said, 'you will be fine. You do not have a grave illness. What you have is *tu luz, tu vision*. [your light, your vision].' 'What do you mean?' she asked. 'You will be a *curandera*,' I told her, 'A spiritual medium.' 'I don't understand,' she said.

"I offered her a chair before my altar. It was very plain then. The only things I had on it were two pictures, one of *San Miguel* and one of *la Virgen de Candelaria*. I didn't even have flowers. I crossed myself and began to pray. When I passed my hand over the top of her head her whole body began shaking, trembling violently. She became dizzy and nauseated and threw up everything from her stomach, more water than food. 'You have cleaned it out,' I told her. 'You have rid yourself of that pain you have been carrying for all these years.'

"She stayed for a short while to regain her composure. I think she was shocked that she had such a strong reaction before the altar. 'Come by tomorrow,' I said.

"She was back early the next morning. 'I am feeling much better,' she said. 'The pain in my stomach is gone. Thank you, Don Julian.' 'Yes,' I said, 'It was the sacred cross that you were carrying all along.'

"She was the first person I cured. I guided her, opening that path for her just as I had done for myself, following the same instructions that I received in my dream of *la Madre Santísima*. Sure enough, the woman became a spiritual medium.

"After her, more and more people began seeking my

help for all sorts of illnesses. They came from all over, from Chimaltenango, Tecpan, Chiquimula, Sacapa, Guatemala City, San Martin, Santa Lucia. It was incredible! I couldn't understand how all of these people knew that I was an *ajq'ik*. The whole thing happened so fast! I began asking different ones how it was that they had heard about me. 'A kind old man passed through town this afternoon,' said one man, 'and I began talking with him. We talked for awhile, and he noticed that my son was ill. 'Take the boy to Palin,' said the old man. 'There is a man there who is a healer and he can help your son.' 'That man gave us your name, sir. Then he asked me for a glass of water, wished me and my family well, and went on his way.'

"I asked another family from Chiquimula the same question. They too had a similar story, but this time it was an old woman, a stranger who happened to pass through town. One of their children was sick and the old woman told them to go to Palin and look for me," said Don Julian. "Apparently she told them that I would know how to help them. Before she left, she asked them if they could spare a couple of *tortillas*. She thanked them for their kindness and off she went.

"All the people told me of an old man or an old woman who just happened to pass through town and recommended me as a great healer. They were Saints, or angels, speaking on my behalf. That is how I got started. From there, the people, themselves told one another about me and soon I had a steady flow of patients coming to my home. It was incredible," said Don Julian.

"At 34 years of age I dedicated myself to this work. It didn't take long before I had earned and saved enough money to buy land. On that land I grew corn, beans, tomatoes, chilis, onions, mandarins, oranges, *jocotes* and other crops. My harvests were so abundant that my family had a wide variety of foods year round, plus plenty of surplus to sell in the market to buy other things. I traveled to other parts of the country and met with other *ajq'ik* too. For the first time in my life I had everything I needed!"

Don Julian told me that when he began to work as an *ajq'ik*, he developed a special connection to *San Miguel El Arcangel*, just as *San Miguel* told him he would in that first dreamlike vision. According to Don Julian, *San Miguel* told him that he needed to connect to the other divine Saints, angels and forces as well.

As the years went by, Don Julian's connection to the Catholic Saints and Mayan forces became stronger and stronger. He learned how each one worked, which one he should call upon and for what purpose. Some of the Saints he told me about are synonymous with some of the Mayan forces; others are unique to one or the other. For example, Don Julian told me that *La Princesa de Ix'kik* is a Mayan princess, with no Catholic counterpart. She is the keeper of the mountains and volcanoes, and although

she is the spirit of a little girl, her personality is strong and authoritative. *San Benito*, a Catholic Saint, does have a Mayan equivalent — the spirit of the fog. *Santa Majom* is said to be the spirit, or force of the wind. *Majom* is a Mayan name, but this Mayan force is referred to as one of the Saints.

"This area here used to be called the Canyon of Palin," said Don Julian. "At that time, there was a great wind that would come blowing down through here from the mountains. The wind was so strong that it would blow down our homes, take down small trees, rip branches off the bigger trees and destroy our crops.

"I learned that *San Benito* is the one who manages the fog. I know this is true, because one time I dreamed about *San Benito* and that is what he told me. *Santa Majom* is the engine, the wind, the one that pushes the fog and mist. The winds were too much here, so I decided to do something about it. I put up a ceremony for *Santa Majom* with my candles and did a *concentración* to call on him. 'We are poor,' I told him. 'Please, don't knock down our crops and our homes.

"Out of respect and acknowledgment, I asked him to lower his force and strength a bit when he pushes the air through our canyon. I don't want to throw you out, *Santa Majom*,' I said. 'I know that God gave you your power. I just want you to lower your force a little bit. Forgive me for asking this of you, but please, lower the air *Santa Majom*.

"He heard me, he heard it all, and he did as I asked. We don't have those strong winds through here any more.

"It was Don Catarino who showed me to do the rain ceremonies," said Don Julian. "We would do them at his home. He knew how to work with the fog and mists too. After I began working in this way he really took me into his confidence and taught me many things. We worked together as a team. When somebody carrying *la luz* came to him for help, he would send him or her to me so that I could *encaminarlo*. 'Don Julian is the road of the light,' he would say. 'Go see him and he will help you.' He did most of the other curing, but *encaminando a la gente* was my special *don*.

"I was with Don Catarino when he died. I thanked him for everything, for being like a brother to me, and for being like a father. He was always there for me. From his deathbed he told me that his work with the fog and mists would now become my work.

"'Ask for the water,' he said. 'Ask for the rain blessing. You know how to do it now.'

"When he died, *San Miguel* told me to make my ceremonies in the *campo*. 'Don Catarino made his offerings with candles,' said *San Miguel*, 'but now you can make

the offerings in your own way, Julian. Bring me fruits and breads,' he said. 'Take them to the mountains and do your rain ceremonies upon the land.'

"I bought fruits, breads, candies, *pom* [copal incense], *guaro* [alcohol] and Pepsi. I bought flowers to make the *cruz Maya*. I collected bottles of seawater and fresh water. With all of these things in my bag, I would go to the mountains and make my offering and ask for the rain blessing. This was how I began to do my own rain ceremonies. I still do them the same way today.

"After a ceremony, I always dream and *San Miguel* comes to me. 'Thank you, *hermano*,' *San Miguel* tells me. 'Thank you for such a wonderful offering. My Father appreciated it. We all appreciated and benefited greatly from your ceremony. The sacred mists have taken nourishment from your gifts, *hermano*. Thank you.'

"Then *San Miguel* tells me when I can expect the rains," said Don Julian. "Sometimes it is in a few days, sometimes in a week. And boy, does it rain!" he said with his big contagious smile.

I went with Don Julian one time when he conducted a rain ceremony. It was a beautiful way, an offering to the earth, the elements and the spirits, a gesture of giving and receiving, demonstrating the understanding that we are dependent on all things in this life. This I knew before, but what I had not thought of was how this life depends just as much on us — our respect, prayers, sacrifices and offerings — as we do on it. It rained four days after our ceremony.

* * * *

I thought about what a spiritual guide from Mexico had told me once. 'The sun rises each morning, because somewhere on this earth someone is praying, asking for the dawn of a new day,' he said. I thought about all of the different ways of worship on this earth, and that on any given day, there are probably thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands of people praying for the sunrise. 'When those prayers stop,' he said, 'the sun won't come up anymore.'

* * * *

Don Julian has experienced many miracles on his road of life. He has been given different abilities, some of which have only been temporary, seemingly testing his faith and belief in the power of the connections he has with spirits of other realms. He told me about how he used to have visions when he looked into the glass goblets of water that sit upon his altar. They gave him insight, helping him to understand the nature of a patient's illness. He

considered his visions to be key in his ability to heal. One day, however, the visions stopped. Don Julian was greatly concerned about this and called upon *la Madre Santísima* in a *concentración* to ask her what had gone wrong.

"I told *la Madre Santísima* that I could no longer see anything, that I could no longer do anything," said Don Julian. 'Why have I lost my ability to see, *Madre Santísima*? How will I be able to help people now?' 'Why do you say that?' she asked. 'You have not lost anything, *hermano*. Your power is full, complete now. You don't have to see anything that way anymore, because now you know. On a gut level, you know. In the glass there are lies, in the frijoles [beans]⁶ there are lies, in the cards there are lies.' 'Yes, it's true,' I said. 'Don't ask me questions then,' said *la Madre Santísima*. 'What you feel, and what you say to your patients is correct. Quit asking *San Miguel* and me what you should give this person, what you should do for that person! Why are you still asking? I'm here next to you all the time! You already know this!' 'Yes, *Madre Santísima*. You are right. Forgive me,' I said.

I thought this was funny, because I was with Don Julian one time during a *concentración* with *San Miguel*. As usual, he concentrated on his granddaughter, Gloria, and called upon the Saints and forces through prayer, that they might come to him for consultation through Gloria. The purpose of that particular *concentración* was to get any final instructions regarding a ceremony that Don Julian was going to conduct for a person who was about to receive initiation as a spiritual guide. According to *San Miguel*, everything was in order. Don Julian had just one final question. He wanted to know if it would be all right for him to take a small drink of *guaro* following the ceremony as was the custom. Don Julian is diabetic and well aware that alcohol is extremely harmful to his health, but he misses having an occasional *traguito* [little drink]. He asked his question even though he already knew the answer. 'No,' replied *San Miguel*, 'I don't think it is a good idea. You know how much alcohol weakens you.' 'I know *San Miguel*, but I was thinking if it was just a small one...' Don Julian persisted, but he was cut short by *San Miguel* who responded bluntly in an impatient tone. 'You know what to do and what not to do,' said *San Miguel*, 'You don't need to be asking me these kinds of questions. Now, if there's nothing else, I am going.' "No, *San Miguel*, there is nothing else," said Don Julian.

* * * *

Two weeks before I left Guatemala, I asked Don Julian if he would help me conduct my own ceremony before I returned to the United States. He thought it was a good idea and said that he would be happy to help me. "Go to the market and pick up your *pom*, candles, fruits, can-

⁶ There is a special type of small red bean that many *ajq'ij* use for divining.

dies, flowers, *guaro* and Pepsi," he said. Together we looked at the Mayan calendar and chose a favorable day to hold the ceremony.

I arrived early in the morning and we headed off to the Pocomam and Quiche altar on the other side of the cemetery. With *Aj'pu* looming up behind us, we knelt before the fire we had built with candles of many colors. We prayed to the heart of the earth, the heart of the sky,

and the four directions, to the Mayan spirits and deities and the Catholic saints and virgins. I made my offering to give thanks and appreciation for all that I was shown, for all that I had learned, for having been accepted and protected throughout my journey in the sacred lands of Guatemala. I asked that the heartfelt connections I had made, both physically and spiritually, remain open to me always, and that the road ahead be clear. And that is how it was. □

INDEX

A

Acteal 12.1
agricultural training 6.4
Agua Fria 10.14
aguas negras ("black waters") 11.1
ajq'ij (a Mayan spiritual guide) 7.1
ajq'ik, or *guia espiritual* [spiritual guide] 17.1, 17.2
alcohol 7.2, 7.3
alcoholism 3.3
Alonzo, Maria Eugenia "Cheny" 9.2
Alta Verapaz Province 10.7, 10.14, 13.3, 13.10, 13.11
Amatitlan 8.2, 8.6
Arbenz, Jacobo 17.8
Archbishop Juan Gerardi 10.3, 10.8
Arévalo Bermejo, Juan Jose 17.7
Arizona 2.2
Arzu, Alvaro 10.2, 10.6
Association of Resettlement Reasent (*Asociación de Reasentimiento*) 13.9
automated plumbing 9.3

B

backstrap loom 5.4, 9.6
Baja Verapaz Province 10.6, 10.15
bee-keepers 4.5
Belize bridge 8.2
bow 3.4
Buff bellied hummingbirds 4.2
Burnett, Virginia G. 7.2
buses 13.1

C

cacao 2.5
Calzada Roosevelt 13.2
Cantel 7.1
Cantihá 13.3, 13.10, 13.11
cardinal directions 10.2
Catholic Padres 10.6
Catholic Tepehuans 3.5
Catholicism 3.1, 10.6
CENDEC 13.2
Center of Legal Attention for Human Rights (*Centro de Atención Legal para los Derechos Humanos-CALDH*) 10.7
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 10.3, 10.4
Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios en

Superiores en Anthropologia Social (CIESAS) 2.2, 2.4, 2.5
Chac, the God of rain and water 17.2
chapina 9.2
Chiapas 2.5, 12.1
Chichicastenango 9.2
chicken pox 13.11
chicote (small whips used to herd sheep) 7.4
Chimaltenango 9.2, 13.1
Chol 12.1
Chol Mayans 2.4
Civilian Self-Defense Patrols (*Patrulleros de Autodefensa Civil, PAC*) 10.7, 10.10, 10.14, 13.3
Coban 10.7, 10.14, 10.18, 13.10, 13.11
coffee 2.5, 13.9
Commission for Historical Clarity (CEH) 10.1
Committee for Integrated Development (*Comité de Desarrollo Integral*) 13.9
communal bank program 9.2
communal banks 5.1, 5.2, 5.3
communal lands 7.2
communications 13.3
composting toilet 13.10
concentraciones [meditative prayers] 17.1
Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP) 4.5
Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Cafetalero 2.5
Coordinator of Widows, Widowers, Orphans and Displaced Maya Achi People of Rabinal (*Coordinadora de Viudas, Viudos, uerfanos*) 10.13
cortes 5.4
Corzo, Dante 13.2
credit 13.13
crocodiles 2.4
cruz Maya [the Mayan cross signifying the four directions] 17.3
Cuban Government 10.4

D

Day of the Children 17.3
Day of the Dead 9.4
Declaracion de Libertad de Conciencia y

de Cultos (Declaration of Religious Freedom) 7.2
deforestation 6.2
delantales 5.4
Department of Agriculture (MAGA) 11.3
depression 17.8
dreams 15.1, 16.1
driving 13.1
drought 6.5

E

ecotourism 2.4, 4.1
Ecotourism and Adventure Specialists 4.1, 4.6
Egawa, Jim 9.3, 9.4
Egawa, Keith 9.4
Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) 2.1
Ejido Emiliano Zapata 2.4, 2.5
el kej (deer) 10.2
El Quiche 13.3
el Quiche (the western highlands) 7.2
El Sombrero Ecological 4.3
el tequio 6.6
El Trebol 3.1, 12.3
El Trebol bus stop 13.2
el Periodico 10.1
emergency food aid 13.12
Erickson, Kali 13.2
Escuintla 17.1
Evangelism 8.4
Ex-Communities of Populations in Resistance, or Ex-CPRs [*Ex-Comunidades de Poblaciones en Resistencia*] 13.2, 13.3, 13.5, 13.9, 13.10
exhumations 10.5, 10.18

F

FAFIDESS (the Foundation for Financial Advising to Development and Social Service Institutions). *See La Fundacion de Asesoría Financiera a: Instituciones de Desarrollo y: Servicio Social*
fecal coliform 13.6
Flor de Gericón 17.10
"Food for Work" 13.13
food security 13.3
forced labor 7.2

Entries refer to ICWA Letter (CE-2, 3, etc.) and page, with letter number given before each entry

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