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In the Land of the Seven Sacred Teachings

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala November 1998

By Chenoa Egawa

THE SPECIAL STONE

One day back in the late 1800's all the men were out cutting the *zacate*, a type of tall grass growing up alongside a dirt road in Guatemala. Suddenly one of the men shouted out in fear, "There are snakes everywhere!" He jumped back, staring at the ground before him in disbelief. Marcos Garcia ran over to see for himself. He looked through the tall grass for snakes, but there were none. Instead, a light caught his eye. It was a *rax ab'aj* — a very special stone, like a crystal, but pale green in color. Marcos knew that this *rax ab'aj* had caused the other man to see the snakes. The stone held special powers. That, he recognized immediately. He picked it up and placed it in his bag. Later that day, Marcos headed for home. Back in his house, he took the *rax ab'aj* from his bag, cradled it in the palm of his hand and held it out before him. "Look," he said to his wife. "Today I found a fortune."

"With that stone my grandfather could see into the future," Abraham Garcia told me. "I don't know," he said thoughtfully, seemingly searching his mind for an image, "I think maybe it could have been jade. If I had it here I could tell you for sure, but it is gone now."

Abraham's grandfather, Marcos, was born around 1880. He was a young man when he found the *rax ab'aj*. Before that day, however, he was already known as an *ajq'ij*, a Mayan spiritual guide. "My grandfather told me that the Mayan ceremonies here used to be very complex. In one ceremony, four spiritual guides would participate, each one carrying out a specific role. My grandfather knew all aspects of the many different ceremonies, but his gift was singing. He was a singer, an *ajb'ix*."

Marcos Garcia was a K'iche' Mayan who lived in La Estancia, a canton of the municipality known as Cantel, which lies just east of Guatemala's second largest city, Quetzaltenango, or *Xelajuj no'* as it was originally named by its K'iche' inhabitants.[1] Xelajuj no' means "beneath the seven sacred teachings." The guardians of

[1] Of ten million (10,322,011 was the official estimate in 1995) Guatemalan people, approximately 60% are Mayan. Within that 60%, there are twenty distinct Mayan language groups, of which K'iche' is one. Abraham thought there are nearly one-and-a-half million K'iche' people, the majority of whom still speak their language, K'iche'. None of these estimates are very accurate, however. A national census has not been conducted in years. Past censuses are inaccurate. When I asked many Guatemalan people to estimate the total population, the estimates ranged from 10 million to 14 million. Breaking down the total into distinct ethnic and language groups has never been done accurately and I do not know if it is even possible.

those teachings are the seven volcanoes surrounding *Xelajuj no'*.

Today, Marcos' grandson, Abraham Garcia, lives in La Estancia with his wife and children. Now in his 50's, and Director of the *Fundacion Metodista para el Desarollo Integral* (FUMEDI — Methodist Foundation for Integral Development) Abraham has written much of his family's history. Through stories passed down to him from his grandparents and parents and through his own vivid personal memories, one can envision another side of Guatemala as it came into the 20th century.

LIBERALS, PROTESTANTS AND MAYANS

In 1873 Justo Rufino Barrios assumed the Guatemalan Presidency. He was the first liberal in a series of late nineteenth century — and early twentieth century — strongmen to rule Guatemala. During his short term in office (June 4, 1873 – April 2, 1885) Barrios issued the *Declaracion de Libertad de Conciencia y de Cultos* (Declaration of Religious Freedom), establishing freedom of religion in the country. This declaration opened Guatemala's borders to foreign missionaries and perhaps more importantly, foreign investors from Protestant, "modern" countries such as the United States and Germany.[2] In actuality, the freedom of worship declaration was initially part of a larger plan to take away the secular dominance of the Roman Catholic Church. As "developmentalists," the Liberals' agenda was order and progress, modernization and industrialization. As time went on, Liberals realized that the ethics and values of Protestant missionaries melded nicely with Liberal goals. So, from the time Protestants entered Guatemala, the government supported their work.[3]

In *el Quiche* (the western highlands), opposition to liberal reforms was particularly strong.[4] As stated by Virginia G. Burnett, "The Liberal leadership gave its greatest support to the development of Protestant missions in rural areas, particularly in the western highlands. These regions were viewed by the government as most in need of the Protestant message, which might transform the traditional, isolated "folk communities" of the hinterland into an assimilated, proletarianized work force." In this time, the *mandimientos*, or forced rotational labor laws, were enacted. Work of the Protestant missions, combined with *mandimientos*, provided "a large, cheap and docile work force" (mainly Mayan) aimed at attracting foreign investment to Guatemala.[5]

By 1900, Protestant missionaries from the U.S. had trickled into Quetzaltenango, a strategic base for entry into other regions of the western highlands. The municipality of Cantel was one of the areas targeted.

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And so Marcos Garcia was a Mayan spiritual guide who later converted to Protestantism. "It must have been about 1915 when my grandfather converted." said Abraham, "My father told me that he was about ten years old at that time, and he was born in 1905. Our family used to have a lot of land in Cantel, but my grandfather had a drinking problem and over the years he lost all of it."

There are a lot of different kinds of Mayan ceremonies, and in almost all of them, alcohol has some part. Abraham did not think that alcohol in itself was a problem, however, explaining to me that it is regarded as a sacred drink when used in the right way. "During and after ceremonies and fiestas, those conducting the ceremonies drink," Abraham said. "That is to say, they drink, but with measure. But many times, after finishing the activity, they go out, buy more alcohol and continue drinking. This is a weakness of many spiritual guides. Not everybody drinks, but some, yes."

I figured there had to be other reasons for high rates of alcoholism in Mayan communities and asked Abraham to elaborate. According to him, Marcos, like many other Indian people of Cantel, began to drink heavily for several reasons. With the liberal leadership, many changes occurred in the region. Loss or degradation of communal lands held by Mayan communities was common, as they were taken by the government and given or sold to foreign investors, many of who became wealthy plantation owners. The Mayan populace was looked upon as a prime source of labor for these plantations (coffee and sugar), that would boost Guatemala's national economy. With the forced labor rotations, Mayan people of Cantel were required to serve three weeks out of each month working away from home on plantations.

"The government never understands the situation of the people," Abraham said. "Many Mayan people began to drink because they were in such despair, hopeless. They were tired of so much poverty, so much misery. If the people had been allowed to work, they would have never been driven to such a miserable state. They worked, but they worked for free; it was a form of slavery. As a result, many people drank in an attempt to ease their sadness, at least a little, and they would get drunk a lot. Also, Mayan ceremonies were prohibited by most Christian sects, but many people continued conducting them. They were held in secret, in faraway places, up in the mountains and only at night. Alcohol helped people

[2] *Gobierno de Guatemala, Recopilacion de las leyes emitadas por el Gobierno de la Republica de Guatemala*, vo.1, 3 June 1871-30 June 1881
[3] Virginia Garrard Burnett, "Protestantism in Rural Guatemala, 1872-1954, Latin American Research Review XXIV, no. 2: 127-142 (1989); pgs. 128, 139.
[4] Burnett, "Protestantism in Rural Guatemala...", pg. 128
[5] Burnett, "Protestantism in Rural Guatemala...", pg. 13

endure the cold and tiredness of being awake up in the mountains throughout the night. It was for these reasons too, that the people began to drink more. When the government saw this, they said 'these Indians just get drunk because they don't want to work.' In reality it wasn't that at all."

I told Abraham that I had read some articles that stated that in the early 1900's the Protestant Church was practically used as an Alcoholics Anonymous program, and many people converted in order to stop drinking. "Was that why Marcos converted?" I asked.

"Well, yes, I think he was tired of drinking for so long," he said, "He lost everything, and I think when he looked at his situation, he saw those losses as a direct result of drinking. Part of the Protestant moral code was that drinking was a sin, whereas sobriety was linked to God and religion. They were strongly opposed to the use of alcohol. For a long time, my grandmother hoped that my grandfather would quit drinking. One day he came to her and said that he would convert to Protestantism, which was almost the same as saying he would quit drinking. She accepted his decision right away, and from that point on, our family has been Protestant. For many people at that time, it was not so much that they believed in the Protestant religion. Some just wanted help. In addition to promoting sobriety, the Protestants also had hospitals and schools, so there were benefits to converting."

AND WHAT OF THE *RAX AB'AJ*?

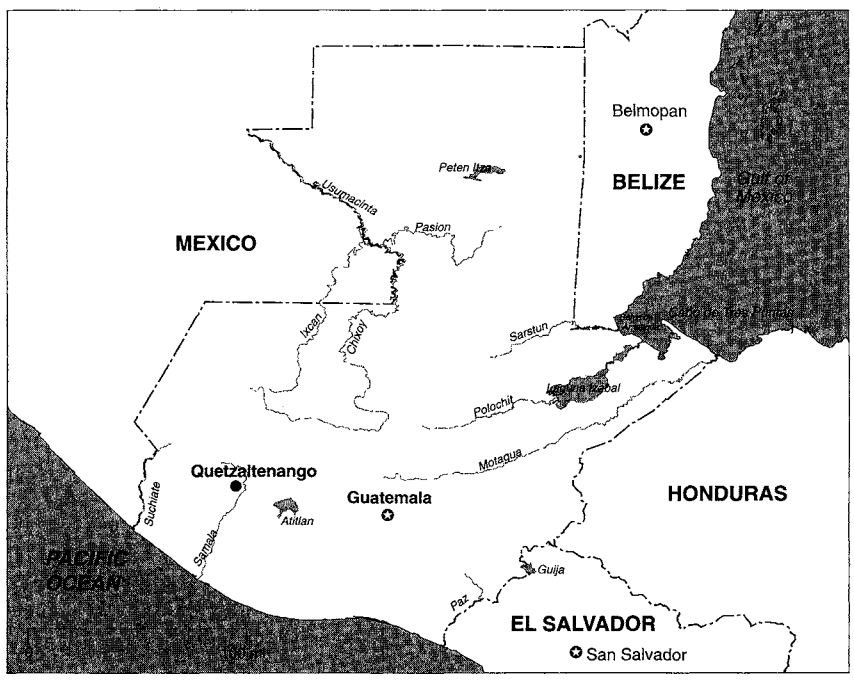
Marcos became a Protestant, but according to Abraham, never gave up his Mayan beliefs and traditions. He still went by the Mayan calendar, and he still kept his *rax ab'aj*. At special times, he would take the stone out and conduct small ceremonies. "They were not big ceremonies like he used to do, because now he was a Protestant," Abraham said. "After my grandmother passed away, my sister took care of my grandfather. I used to go with her and I can remember sometimes, he would take out that stone. When I think about it now, I am sure that he worked with the stone on special dates of the Mayan calendar, but it is a shame, because my siblings and I never learned what he was doing, or why."

Abraham told me that Marcos had a special table, a little one that he used only when working with the stone. He would put a cloth down first and then place the stone in the center of the little table. On the four-corners of the table he put candles representing the four directions. Sometimes they were white, sometimes yellow; other times they were many different colors. The colors he chose depended on the purpose of the ceremony. "Once everything was in place, he would begin to pray, and he would talk and talk and talk" Abraham said, smiling. "Since we were kids, we would go outside to play and come back in later. We didn't see what he was doing and I don't know how long he prayed, but after he finished, he would put the stone away again.

"Sometimes after one of these small ceremonies, he would say, 'Oh! It is too bad, this neighbor is going to die, or there will be an accident with this person.' I remember my grandfather knew a lot of things through working with that stone, but we never paid much attention to what he was doing. We weren't really interested. We were just kids. But it is true, I remember he was always right on his predictions.

"When my grandfather died, my brother, Guillermo, took the *rax ab'aj* from his house without telling anyone. Why? I don't know. As Protestants, we were raised completely different than our grandfather. Guillermo didn't know what to do with that stone, but he wanted it anyway. He took it and hid it at our house in the closet.

"Our house had two rooms, one that was the family kitchen and the other the bedroom where we all slept. My parents were bread makers — bakers — and we had a big oven in our bedroom. Almost every weekend our house was full of people who would come to make their bread. My mom and dad would bake it for them in our oven for a few *centavos*. The closet where my brother kept the stone was in the bedroom too. It was soon after Guillermo hid the stone there that people began to complain to my parents. 'Look,' they said, by that point quite irritated, 'we don't know what is happening here, but we have been



seeing a young boy in your house recently. We don't know who he is. He isn't one of your children and he isn't from this town. He is scaring us and we want you to tell us who he is.' My mom didn't know who it could be and she told them that she had not seen anyone else in the house. 'Nobody can come in here without me noticing,' she told them. There were only four of us living in the house at that time, my parents, Guillermo and I. My other brothers and sisters had already moved out."

"But the people began to complain more and more, because they were really scared. The boy would appear one moment, then suddenly vanish. He never talked to anyone. He was there, though; they all saw him. 'There is a ghost in the house,' they insisted. One day my mother was cleaning out the closet when she discovered the *rax ab'aj*. She knew that it was the one that had belonged to my grandfather. Later that day, she came to my brother and me, asking which one of us had brought this stone to the house. Guillermo confessed that it was he. 'And why did you bring this here? You shouldn't have done that,' she told him. 'This stone can serve no purpose anymore. It belonged to your grandfather. Get rid of it right away,' she told him. "Early the next morning, Guillermo left the house and went down to the river to throw out the stone.

"The next day he was outside when my parents heard him scream and ran out to see what was wrong. He stood in the field near our house shaking with fear. 'What happened?' they asked him. 'Look at all these people,' he said. He told my parents that there were many people all around him who he didn't recognize. Although he didn't know them, they were all calling out to him by name. My parents didn't know what he was talking about. 'There isn't anyone here,' they told him. But he insisted. Apparently, they were spirits who were trying to communicate with him. Anyway, they scared him a lot. He was 17 or 18 at that time, nearly an adult.

"Later on, my mother found the *rax ab'aj* in the house again. She figured it was the stone that must be scaring my brother. My dad got mad at Guillermo. 'You never went and threw the rock away at all,' he said to my brother. But Guillermo assured him that he had, that he had thrown it out in the river. 'If you did, then why is it still here?' he asked. The stone had returned by itself. I don't know how; it is inexplicable.

"The next day, my dad decided that he would take the stone himself, and go throw it out. That afternoon it was in the house again. All the while, my brother continued seeing the spirit people around the house, and they were always calling out to him.

"I have another brother, who is a pastor. He told my dad that he knew a Mayan spiritual guide he could bring the stone to, that perhaps this man would know what to do with it. After that, the *rax ab'aj* never came back to the house. Maybe it found another owner, who knew how to work with it. I'm not sure, but I think the stone was trying to tell Guillermo that it wanted to be used. All those people kept appearing before him, trying to communicate with him. Later on, we talked to people in La Estancia about what had happened. They too thought that if Guillermo had talked with the people — those spirits — that they would have told him what to do. He could never overcome his fear of them, though. Yes, a lot of people say that it was a special gift for him, that he was to be the successor of my grandfather as a Mayan spiritual guide. Many people thought we were crazy to have given that stone away. It would have brought our family great luck, they said. Our family was really poor in that time too; we could have used a blessing like that."

GIANTS IN THE MOUNTAIN CALLED Q'IYAK

My second day in *Xelajuj no'*, Abraham invited me to his home in La Estancia to meet his family. Before lunch, we walked up to the little mountain near the edge of town known as *Q'iyak* (or *Q'eq* for short) and Abraham shared more stories with me.

As I mentioned in the previous story, the Guatemalan governments of the late 19th and early 20th centuries enacted mandatory labor laws requiring citizens of the nation to serve on forced-labor crews. According to Abraham, these laws affected the people of Cantel, and required Marcos and many others to work without pay on coffee and sugar plantations or on construction crews, building roads and bridges throughout the country. Three weeks out of each month were spent on these work crews; the remaining week people were allowed to return home. "My grandfather didn't think that one week per month was enough time with his family, though," Abraham said. " Here in La Estancia, local governmental authorities used to go from house to house at night and round up people for the work crews that would be sent to the coast. In order to avoid the authorities and the work crews, my grandfather used to flee to the mountains at night to sleep."

As we neared the top of *Q'eq*, Abraham pointed out some of the sacred sites where *quemas* (burning of copal and candles on altars) were conducted. The first one we passed had remnants of flowers and fruits from previous prayer offerings. The second one was no longer in use. Abraham had a story about this one.

"Often times, this is where my grandfather would come to sleep when he was hiding from the authorities," he began. "One time he said he was here on a clear, crisp night and the moon was really bright, lighting up the whole valley. He laid out his blanket here near this altar. When he was almost asleep, he was startled by the sound of a *chicote* (small whips used to herd sheep). Figuring it was just a sheepherder who was out walking, he got up and looked around. It was then that he saw the legs of a giant man who was dancing at this altar. As he danced,

he would crack the *chicote*, setting off a series of sharp snapping sounds. The giant was so tall that Marcos could see only his legs; his head was somewhere way up in the sky. The giant danced and danced for a long time. My grandfather was really scared and stayed perfectly still, hiding in the shadows, watching. When midnight arrived, the giant suddenly stopped dancing and left the mountain. After that, my grandfather couldn't sleep for the rest of the night, because he was too afraid. My grandfather knew that it was a spirit. That is how he told it, told me this story.

"The name of this little mountain, *Q'eq*, literally means flea. That is how we pronounce it now," Abraham said, "but *Q'eq* was shortened from the original name, *Q'iyak*, which means thrown off, or knocked off. In *K'iche'*, we are always trying to abbreviate the words, but usually the original word is much longer. Like *Xelajuj no'*. Most people today just call it *Xela* for short. The people who still speak *K'iche'* today, but do not study it in order to understand the origin of these names, are losing the real meanings.

"A long time ago, the Quiche people say that giants inhabited this land," he said. "This is written in the *Popol Vuh* too, the book of Mayan creation stories, religion, philosophy and history. These giants, they say, were always cruising around these lands. Across the valley you can see the volcano called the *Serro Quemado*," he said, pointing directly across from our lookout point on the top of *Q'iyak*. "They say that when the giants were here, one of them was walking across this valley when he tripped and stubbed his toe on the top of *Serro Quemado*. He had so much force in his stride that he knocked the whole point of the volcano off and it landed way over here on this side of Cantel. That is why this mountain we are on is called *Q'iyak tirado*, thrown off, or knocked off. You can see too, that if one was able to pick Q'iyak up and place it on top of *Serro Quemado*, it would just fit, right in that space."

CANTEL, OR *Q'ANTIL*.... AND *AJ'XIN*

"Cantel doesn't mean anything now," Abraham said, " but before, this place was called *Q'antil*. *Q'an* is yellow, and *til* is serpent — yellow serpent. The people say that this area used to have a lot of poisonous snakes. There was a dance or *fiesta* held here known as *Aj'xin*, or dance of the *grosero* [rude, or bad-mannered person]. *Grosero* is the closest word I can think of in *K'iche'*, but it is not an exact translation. It was called *Aj'xin* because during the fiesta, the participants danced with snakes. They also used *chicotes*; little whips that snapped loudly. Marimba music always accompanied the dancers while they put on a show for the people, wrapping snakes around their necks or putting them down their pants and having the snakes come out at their feet. Dancers would go up to the people and wave the snakes in their faces, scaring everyone. Because of this they were called *groseros*, or bad-mannered people, but the dances produced pleasure. Sure, they were afraid, but it was fun. There was a lot of screaming and laughter."

Although one of the purposes of *Aj'xin* was to provide pleasure for the people, the act of being a dancer was a serious spiritual communion with the forces of nature, mountain spirits and serpents, in particular. To be a dancer was like providing a service to the community and each year there were different dancers. Preparation to become a dancer required great discipline and continuous practice for the entire year leading up to the next *Aj'xin*. As the celebration neared, the discipline became more and more strict. Forty days before the *fiesta*, dancers were required to leave their homes and go to live and sleep in the mountain called *Q'iyak*. During this time, they became a part of the mountain. From that point on, they were forbidden to sleep with their wives again until all ceremonies were completed. While living on the mountain, the men conducted *quemas* (burning ceremonies) where prayer offerings were made to the mountain spirits at specific sacred sites by burning large quantities of copal incense and candles of various colors. Flowers and fruits were left on altars as well. According to Abraham, this preparation served the purpose of gaining the confidence of the mountain. The dancers, through their preparation and discipline, demonstrated to the mountain their sincerity and intent. In return, the mountain confided in the dancers, and allowed them to "borrow" the venomous snakes for the *Aj'xin* festivities.

One week before *Aj'xin*, the dancers began to look for snakes in the mountain to use in the *fiesta*. If all rules of preparation were respected, a dancer would not be bitten or harmed by the snakes before or during the celebrations. On the other hand, if a dancer disregarded any part of his spiritual commitment, he would have problems. For example, if a man went back to his house and slept with his wife at any time during the 40 days when he was supposed to stay on the mountain, he would almost certainly face danger when handling the snakes.

Aj'xin lasted one week. When the snakes were not being used in the dances, they were kept in special baskets. They were not fed at all during the week of *Aj'xin*. When the fiesta was completed, dancers conducted another ceremony to thank the mountain for lending its' creatures to them. All snakes were finally returned to the mountain where they had been found.

"I think that this story might have something to do with why this area was originally called *Q'antil*, but there are other stories, too," said Abraham. "Some say that the name *Q'antil* originally meant yellow cave, that somewhere in these mountains this cave exists, but I have never seen it," he said with a smile of one who knows better. "There are others who talk about *Q'antil* coming from a certain type of bird that used to live in this area. It's song sounded like *'q'antil, q'antil, q'antil,'*" he sang. "I tend to believe the first one though — yellow serpent."❑

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