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San Simón and the Evangelicals

By Ezra K. Fieser

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SAN ANDRES ITZAPA, Chimaltenango, Guatemala – From an elevated throne in his candlelit temple, San Simón has granted countless miracles to the residents of dozens of indigenous communities. Plaques line his temple's concrete grey walls proclaiming the kindness he has shown in providing health, good harvests, rain, love, work and even pain to enemies. Along the way, he has smoked thick, hand-rolled cigars, downed unfathomable amounts of cheap rum and accepted plenty of cash donations. He persevered through the challenge of Catholicism and survived a civil war that killed tens of thousands of his followers. But San Simón is facing a new foe in evangelicals who consider devotion to this deity akin to witchcraft.



San Simón, a pre-Colombian Mayan deity accepted by the Catholic church, sits in his temple in San Andres Itzapa.

I went to see San Simón on a Monday morning. Gusts of mountain wind drove thick black volcanic dirt off the abandoned cornfields and into the streets. By the time I reached his temple, the faint steely beats of an evangelical band practicing nearby were replaced by the sounds of Isabel Torres's sobbing, the crackle of small ceremonial fires and the silence of prayer. Isabel offered a plate of chicken and apologies for not coming sooner. If she had, she said, maybe San Simón could have helped her father. Before he turned to an evangelical Protestant church, like many other of the Kaqchikel, Mayans, Isabel's father visited San Simón regularly. But in the months before his death, he asked Isabel not to come here.

The scene strikes me as somewhat comical: an adult woman holding a roasted chicken, apologizing to a 3-foot-tall carved wooden statue that is dressed with a cowboy hat and wrapped in plastic. But the longer I watched the stream of pilgrims enter the simple, concrete temple, the longer I stood in the smoke-filled courtyard in front of his shrine, the more I understood San Simón's importance.

To his followers, faithful Catholics and Mayans, San Simón is a saint and a symbol of the blending of Catholicism and Mayan practices that has long defined the religious balance in rural Guatemala. But as I traveled the small towns that fill the valleys of Guatemala's western highlands, it appeared both Mayan customs and Catholic dominance were losing ground to the novelty of the evangelical movement, which seems to have built a simple concrete church on every third block. I came to San Andres to understand how evangelicals coexist with Mayan Catholics. But after 40 years of evangelical growth,

the longer I stood in the smoke-filled courtyard in front of his shrine, the more I understood San Simón's importance.



A plate of chicken sits on one of the tables in San Simón's temple.

religion in rural Guatemala is not the harmonious equilibrium I expected. It is marked by outward hostility and tension.

The first Pentecostal church I saw in San Andres sat just a few patchwork blocks of potholes and speed bumps downhill from San Simón's shrine. A woman, sitting on a yellowing, cracked paint bucket, was as quick to criticize as she was to smile with a mouth of half-missing teeth. "They call that a god? That's not a god. It's a big doll," she said. "They spend their days up there drinking rum and smoking. This is religion?"



A Kaqchikel woman prays in the courtyard in front of San Simón's temple.

The evangelicals "don't understand us. They don't want to talk to us. To learn," said the cofrade of San Andres, a local leader who watches over San Simón every day. He's head of the local cofradia, a system the Catholic church instituted centuries ago to help organize indigenous communities for religious purposes. "To them, religion is a business. A big business."

As he spoke, a woman prayed before a smoldering fire and a couple paced in circles, pulling on fat, hand-rolled cigars. A man walked past, hands full of small bottles of cheap rum that he'd cleared from the temple.

When I asked about the rum, the cofrade turned angry. "Go back to the United States with your evangelicals," he said.

To him I thought the evangelical movement — with its lively, music-laden services and modern meeting places — is such a drastic departure from the stately

churches and defined traditions of Catholicism that it *must* look like a U.S. import.

* * *

If a symbol of the strength and the modernity of the evangelical movement in Guatemala exists, it is La Mega Fratér. Its auditorium, which holds more than 12,000 people, is flanked by a parking garage built for 1,000 cars, and libraries, a cafeteria, and dozens of rooms for Sunday school and daycare. It sits on a hill in a commercial district in the Guatemala City suburb of Mixco behind a World Gym and Home Depot-like hardware store. Its shell crawls from the earth like the back of an enormous cockroach, earning it the nickname *la cucaracha*.

A week after visiting San Andres, I stood in an aisle (all 12,000 seats were taken), holding hands with two strangers who swayed to the sounds of a five-piece-band.





La Mega Fratér, said to be the largest church in Central America, opened last year in a suburb of Guatemala City.

The crowd was young and excited. A group of children sprinted up the stairs as the music started, camera bulbs lit up the auditorium and arms stretched to the ceiling without warning.

The growth of its congregation — more than 20,000 today from a meager 25 in 1978 — is an extraordinary example of the rise of evangelicalism in Guatemala.

Physically, La Mega Fratér is a rarity, encompassing 1.2 million square feet at a cost of more than \$20 million. It is, according to most estimates, the largest church in Central America.

The enormity stands in sharp contrast to the simple evangelical churches in rural towns throughout the country. Within the proverbial shadow of looming Catholic churches built hundreds of years earlier as the showpieces of Spanish rule, evangelical congregants receive the sermon while sitting on folding chairs, rising often to encourage the Christian rock bands that bounce on the small stage.

It is here, in rural towns like San Andres, where evangelical Protestants began to make inroads

into a Catholic-dominated country.

Their presence is hardly new. Evangelicals have been in Guatemala since the early 20th century and began growing quickly in the late 1960s as the result of a confluence of events.

Guatemala's population was growing rapidly in the second half of the 20th century, from 3 million in 1950 to 5.6



Frequently men and women would stand, unprovoked, and raise their arms during the service.

million in 1970. The size of farms and the number of landowners were shrinking and large landowners began to lay claim to communal land that had been worked by indigenous farmers. The result was an economic struggle, particularly within indigenous communities. Without land or jobs to work, tens of thousands were displaced. They left their homes and with them went the social egalitarianism that had provided a sense of community and self worth, even amid poverty. When they settled, evangelical churches were waiting, doors open, offering to restore the lost emotional security.¹

In 1976, an earthquake hit, killing 20,000, displacing countless others, prophetically toppling more than a few Catholic churches, and bringing hordes of faith-based aid workers from U.S. congregations who helped encourage the popularity of evangelicalism.

But as much as the evangelicals welcomed their new followers, the Catholic church gave them away. They failed to cultivate a native



(Above) Typically, evangelical meeting spaces are concrete buildings such as this one in Santiago Atitlán, distinctly different from the opulence of the Catholic churches, which are often the centerpiece of a town's layout. (Below) In La Antigua, as in most colonial cities and towns, a Catholic church is adjacent to the principal government building in the main square.

clergy, particularly in the rural areas already struggling with land consolidation, and left an opening for the evangelicals.

Evangelical Protestantism took hold, particularly Pentecostalism.

Today, more than 10,000 evangelical churches, ranging in size from La Mega Fráter to the small congregations consisting of a few dozen, blanket Guatemala, a country roughly the size of Tennessee. Membership is from 30 to 40 percent of the nation's population of 12.7 million.

But unlike Catholics, evangelicals are not tolerant of some Mayan practices, such as San Simón. And now in the same rural towns and villages where the growth of evangelicalism began decades ago, friction is growing with those holding onto indigenous practices.

* * *

In San Andres Itzapa, women crowd the sidewalks in front



¹ Edward L. Cleary and Hannah Stewart-Gambino, "Conflict and Competition: The Latin American Church in a Changing Environment."



The entrance to San Simón's temple in San Andres Itzapa.

of the temple, peddling flowers, rum and San Simón dolls.

As lively as the scene is, I can't find it. I am lost in the small town's maze of narrow one-way streets. The man I ask for directions is slogging up a steep hill, dragging branches and using a rusty machete as a makeshift walking stick.

"Why do you want San Simón," he asks. "San Simón is nothing. He can't help you."

He is wheezing now, I assume from the uphill climb.

He gestures to his throat, where a mix of fresh and dry blood is spreading on a gauze pad loosely affixed to his neck with browning surgical tape. Throat cancer nearly killed him. He says he asked San Simón for help when he became sick. "Now look at me, I'm an animal," he says. "I sound like an animal and that devil did not help."

He's since joined an evangelical church that his daughter joined years ago. He no longer speaks with a neighbor who used to go to the temple with him regularly, nor anyone else associated with San Simón.

Others who stood in front of the handful of evangelical churches would simply dismiss San Simón as "devil worship," without elaborating.

In front of San Simón's temple, followers associated

evangelicalism with Rios Montt, a former Pentecostal minister and military general, who ran the country from 1982-83 and oversaw the brutal scorched-earth campaign that destroyed rural indigenous villages and killed tens of thousands.

The strain between evangelicals and indigenous religious leaders has been common enough in recent years to catch the attention of international observers. The International Religious Freedom Report has noted "widespread disagreement" and evangelical leaders discouraging indigenous religious practices.

* * *

Indigenous practices revolve around a system of gods responsible for how the earth behaves. The creator, Ahau, rules all. Roughly 25 percent of Mayans worship those gods in private ceremonies. (Mayans make up slightly less than half of that nation's population.)

San Simón is the Mayan religion's public persona. Numerous accounts detail his creation, each tracking the idiosyncrasies of the religious story of a particular Mayan tribe. San Simón, which is the Spanish name given to the deity and the way he is referred to in San Andrés Itzapa, is also known as Maximón to ladinos — those of mixed ancestry — and as Rilaj Maam to the Maya. Several villages have a version of San Simón. In many cases, his home changes locations annually.

The story of Maximón of Santiago Atitlán, which in-

In Santiago Atitlán San Simón is known as Maximón and his home changes place each year.



cludes sufficient parts of other stories, says the first father and mother, or “Old Couple,” created a small group of husbands and wives that were to serve as the model for humanity. The couples were designed for each other and each loved to work hard, the men traveled to work as merchants and the woman ran the homes and community. But at some point the men began to suspect unfaithfulness on the part of their wives. They needed a watchman. So from a magical tree they carved an image of *Mam*, the guardian of people on earth. And this carving was transformed into human form. He was dressed in fine clothing and renamed. But Maximón is only one of Mam’s many forms. And he was not all pure. He began to seduce the wives. The men cut off his limbs and rid Maximón of his earthly desires. Without the preoccupation of sex, Maximón’s powers grew. He took on his current form and developed the ability to heal, provide jobs, make it rain, grow crops, and inflict harm, among other things.

Much like the Jesus Christ for Christians, San Simón accepted death to save humanity. While he is much more earthly than Christ, which explains the drinking and smoking, he seems of equal importance to those Mayans who follow indigenous practices and Catholicism. Indeed, on *Semana Santa* (which ends on Easter Sunday), Maximón is paraded in front of the Catholic church.

The Catholic church did not always accept him. Shortly after the Spanish conquest, many Mayan religious practices went underground, including worship of San Simón. But to encourage Mayans to join the church, the Catholics permitted more customs and San Simón became more publicly accepted.

Today San Simón is clearly less important than he was

during that pivotal time when Catholicism was first expanding. People do not visit his temple as often as they once did. They do not believe as vehemently in his power.

But, as Isabel put it as she asked for forgiveness on that Monday morning, by praying to San Simón his followers are keeping alive a unique religious system.

San Simón “is one of few things that we still have. A thing that is only ours.” □

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