

THE KING, THE TRAITOR, AND  
THE CROSS: AN INTERPRETATION  
OF A HIGHLAND MAYA RELIGIOUS  
CONFLICT<sup>1</sup>

Holy Wednesday, 1953, was a great day for Santiago, a village of the Highland Maya Indians in the Central American Republic of Guatemala. On the church porch, strung up on a post decorated with lush tropical leaves, hung a four-foot puppet clothed in Indian costume with a large sombrero and a wooden mask, into whose mouth a long cigar had been planted by his worshipers. This, I had learned, was Judas Iscariot—but a strange Judas it was, for, instead of being burned, stoned, or otherwise reviled and derided as is usually the case with village Judas figures, it was cared for by Indian priests constantly on guard, presented with gifts of fruit, candles, and incense, and altogether made far more fuss of than the saint whose fiesta this bright Eastern week should have been: Jesucristo, the Mayanized Christ. The thousand bananas and hundreds of cocoa beans

1. A short, earlier version of this text was broadcast in 1957 by the B.B.C. Third Programme, the B.B.C. French Service, and the Servizio Nazionale di Roma.

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and other tropical fruit, for instance, which the young Indian municipal officials had gathered in a three-day trek toward the Pacific coast, had been presented to the puppet before being hung up among the gilded wooden columns of the main altar inside the church.

For three long years a battle had been waged between a small group of young men led by the non-resident Catholic priest, who had attacked the Judas worship on the grounds of idolatry, and the large majority of traditionally minded people who had brought back the cult after a series of subtle encounters involving the whole political and religious life of the village. The details of this conflict would themselves require a whole article. Now, however, the president of the republic had himself authorized the cult. There was much quiet rejoicing, and the native priests walked about with knowing airs and prodigious dignity. What had been the meaning of this conflict, and how had it come about that the traitor to Jesucristo was held in such honor among the men of Santiago?

Santiago is situated in the mountainous region lying between the great plantation lands of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. While the Atlantic coast witnessed the rise of the great classical culture of Lowland Maya, the Highlands—crossroads of the economic life of the country since very early times—now shelter the majority of the Indian population of Guatemala. These people, themselves heirs to an old culture not long ago revealed in Kaminaljuyu or Zaculeu, share with Mexican Yucatán the inheritance of a great civilization conquered by Spain some four hundred years ago. The Highland provinces now include hundreds of conservative villages, linked one to another by scarcely more than a system of markets, to and from which Indians travel, bearing agricultural and domestic goods. Life here has maintained a basic peasant or folk pattern for two or three thousand years in spite of imperial superstructures built up at various times, first by local aristocracies, later by Mexican and Spanish invaders. These have yielded now to the Guatemalan Republic, but there is a whole world of social distance between the capital and the villages. Each village shares in an over-all regional culture, but it also enjoys much autonomy and has its own costume and its own economic, political, and religious variations on the basic theme. Because of the general sameness of the culture, because of the frequent (hence incurious) and rather impersonal contact during travel, and because of an over-all tacit acceptance of cultural differences within one broad pattern, the small distinctions that do exist between villages tend to be accepted without question. Men of Santiago “are not like” men of San Juan or San Sebastian, Indians “are not like” Ladinos and

foreigners, so that one man's meat is another man's poison, and some can do with impunity what others will find detrimental to their health or well-being. Local feeling goes even further: a man of Santiago will not grow a vegetable or a fruit produced by a man of San Pablo or San Lucas, not because methods of cultivation or soil quality differ, but because, quasi-mystically, the plant or the fruit belongs to the other villages and not to his own. Curiously enough, then, these villages are so near being identical that they do not wish for identity. This, in a sense, does protect the traditional market economy; it is a barrier to change. It also reveals something about the Indian world view, the villager's way of looking at the world he lives in: individual and cultural differences are part of a larger order, and their acceptance is essential to the continued well-being of human and non-human phenomena alike.<sup>2</sup>

It is, I think, the *campanalismo* inherent in this world view which gives us the most important reasons for that basic resistance to change which anthropologists have noted in Guatemala and which recent governments have found it difficult to break down. But the causes of this *campanalismo* appear to be deeply imbedded, not so much in religion, as in the whole system of beliefs concerning the organization of the natural, social, and paranatural or parasocial aspects of the universe, which finds a privileged expression in the myths, rituals, and symbols of the religious life. The study of a religious conflict may thus help us to explain the basic causes of resistance to change in the shape of new techniques and ideas emanating from the cities. But, before considering this possibility, we must note an important difference between the Indian's point of view and that of the observer. The latter knows that the present religion of Santiago is the product of a blend or mixture of ancient Mayan ideas with those of a simple rural form of Catholicism which could well be called "Folk Catholicism." One difficulty is that these two systems have influenced each other to such an extent that neither is as "pure" as it was at the moment of Conquest, and it is easy to mistake an item of belief or behavior as belonging to one system when it might well have originated in the other. The Indian, on the other hand, does not remember this blending process as such; for him his present Catholicism is the true religion—to such an extent, indeed, that the Catholic priests who fought the Judas were dismissed as "Protestants"—and he is totally unconcerned with dissecting

2. For a trial summary of the whole history of politico-religious organization in the Highlands see E. M. Mendelson, "Les Maya des Hautes Terres," *Critique* (Paris), No. 115, December, 1956.

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his beliefs according to analytical methods which remain foreign to his mentality. Thus the observer's problem lies in harmonizing his own attitude to a religion seen from the outside without underestimating or leaving out of account the essential unity of the true believer's attitude toward his own creed.

In Indian thinking the whole world is fragmented, divided up into classes of things and people and placed under the protection of various powers who own the diverse aspects of nature. Each man, to begin with, is born with an immutable fate, a *suerte*, which determines his character, his profession, and his degree of, or capacity for, social success in this *Santo Mundo*, this "Holy World," basis of all life, matrix of all phenomena, past, present, and future, of this universe. *Suerte* is an atomistic notion, one which scarcely heeds, or, at any rate, does not stress, the moral problems of social contacts with other persons. If it encourages a peaceful and tolerant attitude toward life (for, since one cannot help being what he is, how should he be blamed for so being?) it also discourages any feelings of responsibility for the other person and for one's neighbor and, indirectly, any concerted efforts at bettering society. Each aspect of nature, moreover, has a *dueño*, a supernatural master, who regulates its progress and its role in that yearly game of life and death waged in the milpa fields between the sowing and the harvesting of Indian corn. These *dueños* are usually ambivalent sexually (they may be male and female at the same time—an ancient Maya idea) and ethically ambiguous (there is no means of knowing whether they are essentially good or bad). Man, then, cannot know the essence of the *dueños*, but only their existential manifestations for or against the fertility and regular healthy growth of plants, animals, and children. All he can do is to pray, regularly and accurately, according to an ancient system which does not and "must not" change (*costumbre* signifies both ritual and custom) and hope for the right exchange from the *dueños*. The Indian love of order, it is worth noting, is extended to the realm of speech, and the *suerte* of a native prayermaker includes the ability to mediate between men and *dueños* with accurate prayers, just as some old men mediate between parties to a marriage contract and as midwives mediate between women and the *dueñas* of childbirth. But love of accuracy does not necessarily yield accuracy. Indeed, the more a culture has been wounded by conquest and the more it forgets old customs, the more there would seem to be insistence on "accuracy," even in ignorance, and the more following *costumbre* becomes itself *costumbre*.

Since the Catholic priest rarely goes to the village, and only then for

Mass or baptism, the population relies on native priests, who combine the functions of prayermakers, healers, and fortune-tellers for the legitimate yearly round of individual and communal *dueño* ritual. Thus they pray to *dueños* of wind, cloud, river, lake, hill, volcano, rain, corn, wild and domestic animals, and, above all, to the chief *dueño*, the *San Martín*. This is a bundle wrapped in velvet and containing sacred objects. Under the orthodox Catholic saint's name it hides an ancient Mayan earth divinity which has survived four centuries of acculturation to Ibero-Catholic culture and may well be one of the oldest ethnographical objects as yet discovered in the area. As I hope to show elsewhere, there is some evidence of its rain-bringing ritual deriving from the ancient worship of the flayed god Xipe Totec.<sup>3</sup>

I soon found that there were three major *dueños* in Santiago: the *San Martín*, who is called the most ancient of all and frequently referred to as *el Rey*, "the King"; another idol which spends most of its time dismembered and wrapped in a bundle on the ceiling trellis of a chapel (*cofradía*) and is called the *Maximon*—both of these have their own special native priests—and Jesucristo, that is, the Christ Mayanized as *dueño* of the Divine Justice and the ritual of Holy Week. If the *San Martín* can be accepted as a symbol of the closest available approximation to a system of ancient Mayan ideas under the name of "the King," and if Jesucristo (passing over the Maya cult of the cross of the four directions) can stand for the new religion symbolized by the Cross, the *Maximon* would appear to belong to the two religions, since he is credited with various personalities, some belonging to one, some to the other. While he is sometimes known as St. Andrew, St. Michael, or St. Peter, not to speak of Pedro de Alvarado, *Conquistador* of Guatemala, he is also known by the name of *Mam*, "the Old God," which, according to Bishop Landa and other sources, the ancient Maya worshiped on the five last days of the pre-Columbian calendar year.<sup>4</sup> Another Christian alias adds itself to these, for during Holy Week the objects within the *Maximon* bundle are brought out and clothed in Indian costume to form none other than the puppet strung up in the church patio as Judas Iscariot.

This *Maximon*, who is father of the prayermakers and *dueño* of madness

3. See E. M. Mendelson, "Religion and World-View in a Guatemalan Village" ("Microfilm Collection of Manuscripts on Middle American Cultural Anthropology," No. 52 [Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1957]), p. 477. A short version of this thesis is ready for publication.

4. See A. M. Tozzer, *Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* ("Peabody Museum Publications," Vol. XVIII [Cambridge, Mass., 1941]), p. 139, n. 646.

and some other things which we shall discuss, is not an easy figure to analyze. Bearing in mind his treachery to the Indians as Alvarado and his treachery to Christ as Judas, and also, incidentally, as St. Peter, I am here labeling him "the Traitor." What can we make of this enigmatic figure that appears to represent at one and the same time the ideas which have bound two religions together for more than four centuries, as well as those which have made the partnership so uneasy?

Let us first look at those aspects on which the two religions have been able to agree. Regarding ideas about nature, Maya paganism and Christianity have been able to live together through the device of ascribing to patron saints (*santos*) those realms of ownership previously ruled by *dueños*. Thus, when a statue of St. Peter is seen to include a rooster, the saint becomes the *dueño* of farmyard fowl, or a St. John carrying a lamb may become *dueño* of animals. The processions which come and go between the *cofradías* of the *santos* and the church which serves as the headquarters of the *cofradías* echo similar processions among the ancients, where the idols, emerging from their caves in the surrounding hills, visited the central temple from time to time. Indeed, the origin of the *cofradías* can be traced to old sodalities responsible for Indian fiestas, or *guachibales*, as they were known in colonial times.<sup>5</sup>

What about ideas of time or of history? Here it seems that a historical coincidence has linked the two religions in an equally satisfactory manner. There is an old Mayan legend—fully extant today, it appears, only in the Huasteca region of Mexico—which tells the story of the year's agricultural cycle in a theomorphic fashion.<sup>6</sup> The young "godlings" of nature are born and grow up, travelling about like the winds and the clouds until they unite in the depths of caves with their females, producing lightning and the life-giving rain. It is said that they emerge from this union somehow punished—old gods who like to rest on certain plants, have high-pitched voices, and bring illnesses (the Santiago *Maximon* is said to do this) and then die, to be reborn later, when the cycle recommences. These gods when young, as we can tell from several myth fragments of Santiago, are not unlike the subordinate *dueños* ruled over by the *San Martín*, a mixed host of nature spirits who, in modern terminology, have become "angels." (We note in passing that, while Stresser-Pean calls his godlings "divinized

5. See Mendelson, "Les Maya des Hautes Terres," *op. cit.*, p. 1085.

6. See Guy Stresser-Pean, "Montagnes calcaires et sources vauclusiennes dans la religion des Indiens Haustèques de la région de Tampico," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* (Paris), Vol. CXXI, No. 1 (January-March, 1952).

ancestors," many of the *San Martin* angels are prayermakers who died some fifty years ago.) In many other Guatemalan places they are called *Mam* (plural *Mames*). Now, previous scholars have found no connection between these *Mames* and the *Mam* of the five last days of the year.<sup>7</sup> When one reads the sources, however, and finds that this five-day *Mam* grew older as each day of the old year passed and was then considered as dead and abandoned, presumably to be reborn in the new year, it looks as though the ancient Maya were representing the yearly cycle of nature as a crisis and as though this big ceremony, involving some chief or head *Mam*, were nothing but a summary of a longer process. True, the sources do not speak of rejuvenation in the case of the five-day *Mam*; but it is difficult to believe that there was no link or even identity between the *Mam* of one year and the *Mam* of the next. If the hypothesis is correct, we would have a historical link between the Santiago *San Martin*, with his angels or *Mames*, and the *Maximon*, also known as *rilaj atcha*, "the old man." This summary, enacted in a moment of crisis between the end of one year and the birth of the next, suggests an additional merger. The sources, indeed, provide reasons for thinking that, at some point in history, the *Mam* summary was fitted by the Santiago people into another crisis: that of the death and rebirth of the new God, Jesucristo.<sup>8</sup> Thus not only does our data bring closer together the *Maximon* and the *San Martin*—the former being, as it were, the "old age" of the latter—but we are also nearer to an explanation of our original question about the honor in which Judas is held in Santiago. The *Mam* can be adored at the same time as the Christ, because a cyclical system, in adapting itself to a crisis system, has been able to merge two "critical" rituals, thus inserting, without destroying, itself at the heart of divine intervention into the human world. The price paid

7. See J. E. S. Thompson, *Ethnology of the Mayas of Southern and Central British Honduras* ("Anthropology Series," Vol. XVII, No. 2 [Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1930]), p. 60. Since then (*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* [Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1950], p. 133) the author has changed his mind and accepted a connection. While we can, then, probably discount Highland-Lowland differences (see also Stresser-Pean. *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89), the problem of why different myth fragments remain in different Highland villages is worth pursuing. Has it anything to do with the low degree of communication between the villages mentioned earlier?

8. See Mendelson, "Religion and World-View in a Guatemalan Village," *op. cit.*, pp. 472 and 478-81. Thompson (*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, p. 133) tells us that the Kekchi of Alta Verapaz, while no longer retaining their old calendar, now situate the five days in the Easter period and bury a *Mam* during those days. The Kekchi and Pokomchi *Mam* is said to live under the earth, where he lies bound. Santiago informants, however, rejected Lothrop's translation of the *Maximon* as "the great lord (or grandfather) who is bound" ("Further Notes on Indian Ceremonies in Guatemala," *Indian Notes* [New York: Heye Foundation], VI, No. 1 [1929], 20), giving instead *Mam-Shimon* (Simon). The word for "bound" is *shimon*.

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for survival by the old system is the branding of the *Mam* as "Judas the Traitor." Needless to say, Folk Catholicism has always and everywhere involved cyclical as well as crisis ritual; earlier remarks on the adaptation of Indian to Catholic fiestas have already underlined this point.

But where can disagreement have entered? I think that it is in the realm of ideas about the human personality, about the self and its ethical relations to others, that the two religions failed to see eye to eye. We have already spoken of the asocial nature of the notion of *suerte* and have pointed out that the world of the King includes no ultimate judgments of a moral or ethical nature about the *dueños*; one can only hope that these "guardians" will be good to plants, animals, and children, but there is nothing like a good god here, a god of love. Indians, for instance, are full of notions about irrevocably bad deaths (the drowned among others automatically become bad ghosts, dragging down the drowning) and are troubled when one points out that Jesucristo of the Divine Justice would not damn a man merely for falling in the lake. Here the passive determinism of *suerte* overrules any possibility of salvation by good behavior. In a similar context, but in the active voice, Robert Redfield has written of the discovery of an essentially Protestant ethic among the Catholic Maya of Yucatán.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps we can take as our main example the simplest relationship of self to other, the sexual relationship, a one-to-one affair which usually includes most moral issues relevant to a society. Sex, to the Indian, is a *delicado*, "a delicate matter," full of dangers, open to magic and supernatural interferences. It would appear from our little story about the *Mames* who were somehow punished by becoming old that some kind of sanction against disorderly sexual indulgence existed early in Indian thinking. But this disorderly conduct, belonging to a cyclical system, only seems to endanger the order of nature and its mirror, the social order, for its outcome is a fertilization of the earth, which is a good thing, and nips in the bud any emergent notion of sin.<sup>10</sup> The world of the Cross, however, takes a clear-cut stand on sexual sin, and fertility is here subordinated to the basic problem of man's fall and subsequent salvation. Here we have

9. See Robert Redfield, *The Little Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 68.

10. See Melselson, "Religion and World-View . . .," *op. cit.*, p. 460, for a Santiago story in which an angel who has overindulged in sex is punished, while climbing a tree for fruit, by a flying snake that tries to strangle him. A passing merchant kills both snake and angel with the latter's "angelic gun," whose shot is the original lightning and provokes a storm and flood. Is there here an echo of the Genesis tree? Stresser-Péan writes (*op. cit.*, p. 86) of a Huasteca godling getting stuck in a split tree. Normally, the godling's weapon, a prehistoric stone or metal tool, is found near a tree split by lightning.



two different attitudes toward one problem and two different answers, leading us to expect conflict symptoms in the blended, present-day system of Santiago.

But what, you may be saying, has all this to do with our three major *dueños* or, more specifically, with our pivotal *Maximon*? Among his various duenoships, there is one that we have not yet examined—his dominion over sexual affairs and love magic. And in the Santiago legend of his origin we find that the village ancestors created the puppet in the first place to save a sexual order endangered by frequent adultery among the early inhabitants of Santiago: the *Maximon* was set up as guardian of morals in the land. The idol, once created, however, seems to have run away with his powers and, by becoming man or woman, not only frightened adulterers by taking on the appearance of the beloved and then revealing himself and driving them mad but also began to unite indiscriminately with youths and maidens, becoming the major contributor in breaking the order which he had been created to preserve! An excellent legend of origin for the dismembered state in which the *Maximon* today spends most of his time, but how revealing as well for the study we are making of conflict within a mixed system of beliefs! Thus the *Maximon* with, on the one hand, the prostitute wife he is said to live with and the thinly disguised fertility ritual aspects of his participation in Holy Week and, on the other hand, with the terrible sanctions of illness and madness which he still is said to wield against sexual offenders embodies both the similar problems and the different solutions of the two religions in an almost incredibly self-contradictory manifestation of religious symbolism. Lord of that primal relationship between self and other, the sexual relationship, he seems to stand for all the unresolved questions about the moral nature of men and gods with which a blended religion confronts the modern inhabitant of Santiago. Vortex of a cyclical conception of history and the ultimately progressive vision which is the hallmark of Ibero-Catholic culture, the *Maximon* appears to hypnotize the people and to consume the energies which could be channeled into more profitable endeavors. In many ways paganism and Christianity could not have remained united without him or his like, since he voices both their anxieties; with him they are destined to remain unsatisfactorily united in the discordant tones of their different responses. In the same way as a psychological complex may block the development of a human personality, it may be that we have here a cultural complex of a highly treacherous nature which “blocks” the evolution of Santiago’s culture, preventing change at the same moment that it per-

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petually calls for it through the conflict which its ambiguity occasions.

The Conquest, then, was only the first step in the long process of acculturation which Santiago has faced and still faces. We shall see in a moment why it is not easy to follow the usual anthropological procedure of relating religious behavior to specific social groups. New ways must be devised for dealing with conflict in terms of symbols in order to get at the complex and deeply imbedded causes of a very old battle whose traces are more and more difficult to locate. The King, the Traitor, and the Cross survive simultaneously, and it is no easy matter to tell them apart, let alone to reshuffle them with any view to smoothing the path of social change. One authority has suggested that pre-Columbian Indians had already evolved patterns of social relations very similar to those which the Spaniards brought with them. He has held that, insofar as we Europeans imposed upon Indians our world view alone, and not our pattern of social relations, change has been both healthier and less rapid; we have avoided a breakdown of all aspects of native culture.<sup>11</sup> While this is so in the main, we must be careful not to overestimate the extent to which our world view has in fact been imposed. Both in beliefs and in ritual the old world of the King is still strong, and it is to that which is still "royal" in the demeanor of the Traitor that the fruits of Holy Wednesday were first offered in Santiago.

11. See Sol Tax, "World-View and Social Relations in Guatemala," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. XLIII, No. 1 (New ser., 1941).