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The Mayan Studies Journal / Revista de Estudios Mayas

En este número / In this number:

Rapture or a Turn of the Wheel? Kaqchikel ajq'ija' daykeepers and the end of the 13th B'aq'tun 1-14
Judith M. Maxwell

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Address: 298 Hagerty Hall, 1775 College Rd. Columbus, OH, 43210-1286 Phone: 614-292-4958 Fax: 614-292-7726

Email: lopez@marshall.edu or lopez.26@osu.edu

URL: <http://MayanArchives-PopolWuj.osu.edu/>

Sponsored by The Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, and the Center for Latin American Studies at OSU.

Volume / Volumen 3
Number / Número 10
June / Junio 2012
ISSN 2150-3273

A juried online journal for the study of Maya texts and culture with issues appearing on an occasional series basis after peer-review.

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Rapture or a Turn of the Wheel? Kaqchikel ajq'ija' daykeepers and the end of the 13th B'aqtun

Abstract

Much has been written, imagined, filmed, published, distributed, rumored, and argued about the end of the current b'aqtun. There have been workshops, conferences, and summits with Maya and non-Maya participantes, but the voice that has predominated is that of the non-Maya who proclaim celestial alignments, world apocalypse, cataclysms, and disasters. Basing my analysis on interviews with over 50 ajq'ija' "Mayan spiritual guides", I offer a collage of Mayan interpretations of this end of a cycle. The majority of ajq'ija', specialists in keeping the sacred day-count, the count of time, expect the completion of the current count of 144,000 days and the beginning of the next b'aqtun. Many hope for a new dawn as foreseen in the prophetic Mayan books written in the early years of the Spanish colonial period. Others, coordinating with international spiritualists, await more radical changes, rapture or ecstasy, the good life or suffering. "The Mayan voice" is heteroglossic and complicated, in tune with the 21st century and the 13th b'aqtun.

Resumen

¿Fin de los tiempos o un nuevo ciclo de la Rueda? Kaqchikel ajq'ija' guardianes del tiempo y el final de del B'aqtun 13.

Mucho se ha escrito, imaginado, filmado, publicado, distribuido, murmurado, y argumentado sobre el fin del b'aqtun actual. Ha habido talleres, conferencias, y cumbres con participantes Mayas y no Mayas, pero la voz que ha predominado es la no Maya que anuncia alineamientos celestiales, un apocalipsis mundial, cataclismos y desastres. Basándome en entrevistas con unos cincuenta ajq'ija' "guías espirituales Mayas", ofrezco un collage de interpretaciones mayas de este fin de ciclo. La mayoría de los ajq'ija', especialistas en llevar la cuenta sagrada de los días, del tiempo, esperan la finalización de esta cuenta de 144.000 días, y el comienzo de un nuevo b'aqtun. Muchos esperan el nuevo amanecer previsto en los libros proféticos mayas escritos en los primeros años de la colonia española. Otros, coordinándose con espiritualistas mundiales, esperan cambios más radicales, cataclismos o fin de los tiempos, buena vida o sufrimiento. "La voz" Maya es heteroglósica, y complicada, afinada al siglo 21 y al treceavo b'aqtun.

Much has been written on the end of the current b'aqtun. A Google search of Oxlajuj B'aqtun yields 36,000 hits; with the plain b initial and velar first syllable closer, i.e. baktun, spelling we add 25,300; switch to the Yucatec Maya spelling *oxlajun baktun* we get 148 more. Amazon has 81 books treating the subject of the end of this cycle. There are over 30 movies on DVD dealing with the subject, including 2012 *Zombie Apocalypse*. The states of Campeche, Quintana Roo and Yucatán in Mexico are preparing for a deluge of tourists. By the winter snowbird season of 2010, billboards decorated Carretera 307, the coastal archaeological/beach resort road, welcoming people and inviting them back for the dawning of the new era. The Guatemala Tourism Bureau (INGUAT) along with the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, the national association of daykeepers *ajq'ija'*, the Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes (the government department responsible for dealing with indigenous cultures) and associations of tour guides have launched a web-page: 2012guatemala.com, which counts down the days until December 21, gives information

on the Mayan calendar, on archaeological sites, and tips on travel to the country for this “relaunching” of Maya culture. In the midst of the hoopla, many Maya feel that once again their patrimony is being co-opted. YouTube has a wonderful documentary, just over 64 minutes long: 2012 The Maya Word, available also in Spanish as 2012 La Palabra Maya. This documentary features Maya scholars and spiritual guides from Mexico and Guatemala. Early on Maya interviewees ask the telling question, where is the Maya voice amid the hype. Thereafter in the video the daykeepers provide that voice, trying to explain in sound bite intervals, the time-space continuum as instantiated in Mayan calendrics and associated spiritual practice.

‘Over the past three years, I have spoken with over fifty daykeepers, mostly Kaqchikel speaking, but including two K’iche’, two Tz’utuujil, one Q’eqchi’ and one Mopan, practitioner. The uniformity of their responses to my comments about the “end of the world” on December 21st, 2012 was, at first, surprising to me. I then considered that there are several active associations of ajq’ija’ in Guatemala: Wuqu’ Kej, Oxla’uj Ajpopi’, La Asociación de Sacerdotes Mayas de Guatemala, La Gran Confederación de los Principales de los Ajq’ijab’, Fundación Kakulha’, para el Desarrollo Sostenible e Identidad de los Pueblos Indígenas Mayas, Xinca y Garífuna de Guatemala. These groups meet regularly to consider strategy, political and cultural, as well as spiritual. It is worth pointing out that the last group named, Kakulha’, includes xinca and Garífuna as well as Maya peoples. It must also be pointed out that there are many non-Maya practitioners, who perform ceremonies based on the 260-day sacred calendar, *cholq’ij* or *tzolk’in*. Their ceremonies contain many of the same elements present in those performed by Maya ajq’ija’, though the prayers are usually recited in Spanish. While the non-indigenous celebrants do not attend the regional summits on spirituality, Maya ritual specialists do. The K’iche’ center of Momostenango emerged in the early post-war years as a spiritual beacon. Ajq’ija’ there had retained much traditional knowledge, had maintained many of their mountain shrines, and were willing to help fellow Maya across Guatemala reconnect with their ancestors and ancestral practices. Thus, when I attended a blessing ceremony for a two-day conference on language revitalization in San Luís Petén the Mopan daykeeper performed the midnight *kotzi’j* “ceremony, lit. flower” entirely in Mopan until he got to the count of days. In this count, all the day names were given in K’ichee’ rather than Mopan and the numbers above four were also recited in K’ichee’. The daykeeper associations have consciously sought to unify current practice.

A 92-year old daykeeper from Pa Răx Tz’ikin, an aldea of Tecpán, complained of this homogenization of practice, recounting a ceremony he had co-officiated with several ajq’ija’ from the town center. After the celebration, one of the urban leaders drew him aside and noted that “we” no longer do certain things in “our” *kotzi’j*. He was shocked and indignant. Used to mutual respect among practitioners and understanding that each had a unique calling, a personal relationship to the spirits and the ancestors, and his own knowledge passed down from mentors, he was chagrined to have his participation criticized and vowed never again to co-officiate with any town-ajq’ija’. Nonetheless, the number of *ajq’ija’* is mushrooming. In Tecpán, one or two new daykeepers are invested each *Waqxaqi’ B’atz’* (8 Howler Monkey). There are over 40 daykeepers in the urban center of Tecpán and the three closest aldeas who are in their 20s. These young daykeepers have learned from urban daykeepers and are led by their local association. Shortly before his death in 2005,

Waykan Colo' confessed to me that, driven by the militancy of the new young daykeepers, he had purified the Kaqchikel he spoke during rituals, culling Spanish loanwords and references to the pantheon of Catholic saints. *Dios Mundo*, *Santa María*, and *Jesús* are now seldom invoked by daykeepers in the Tecpán area, though they are still appealed to in the prayers of older daykeepers in Santa Catarina Palopó. While there is still variation in practice, a canon is evolving and being promoted by the daykeeper associations, and the regular publication of *agendas*, pocket datebooks using the Mayan calendar, and containing quick summaries of the days, their properties and the attributes of those born on them.



Figure 1: The daysign Q'anil (*Lamat* in Yukatek), symbol of beginnings, base sign for most light-side ceremonies

With regard to December 21st, 2012, daykeepers in Guatemala consistently report that this is NOT the end of all days, just those of this b'aqtun. They do not have prophecies of cataclysms or a cessation of being. Most of today's daykeepers have read the *Popol Wuj*, most in Recinos' Spanish translation. The K'ichee' daykeepers have often also read the works of Adrián Inés Chávez (1904-1987), a K'ichee' scholar, who reinterpreted the *Popol Wuj*, and wrote many studies of his own. Many of the daykeepers have also read one or more of the Books of Chilam B'alam, again in Spanish translation. These works contain prophecies which the Guatemalan daykeepers with whom I have spoken interpret as suggesting that the coming b'aqtun, 394.25 day period, may be the dawning of a new age for the Maya, marking an end to the period of suffering and domination heralded by the arrival of the Spanish. The political machinations of the daykeeper associations, including also the group founded by Premio Nobel Rigoberta Menchú, K'amol B'ey, are designed to provide the legal underpinning for a new equality for Maya of Guatemala. They note the passage in 2003 of the Ley de Idiomas guarantees Maya peoples the right to their languages, within their home communities, and commits the State to provide police, judicial, educational and health services in the 22 officially

recognized Mayan languages as well as Xinca and Garífuna. 2002 also saw the establishment of CODISRA, Comisión Presidencial contra la Discriminación y Racismo contra los Pueblos Indígenas de Guatemala. In 2010 the Ministerio de Educación established a policy requiring all public schools and private schools with government accreditation to teach an indigenous language as part of their curriculum, preferably that of the local community.

Of course, not all the political groundwork which the Maya daykeepers sought to have laid for the “new dawning” has gained Congressional approval. In 2009, Representative Rosa Elvira Zapeta Osorio introduced a proposal for the protection of Mayan sacred places. This bill would have, not only, safeguarded Mayan altars from destruction, but also would have guaranteed unimpeded access to these sites. Reintroduced in each successive year, this bill has failed to reach the three “readings” required for passage. Mayan sacred places are still at risk, though daykeepers and home communities have managed to protect a few through individual legal action. A cabal of *ajq'ija'* won an injunction that placed on temporary stay on the mining concession ceded to Goldcorp, a Canadian mining company that would have blasted *Pixab'äj, María Tecún*, a mountain top sacred to the K'ichee', out of existence. The daykeepers of San Pedro La Laguna won a legal battle over the central pyramid in a quincunx of post-classic mounds just outside of town, enjoining the owner from removing more blocks to level the ground on which he plants coffee. It should be noted that the owner remains free to plant on the structure and is free to further level the four surrounding archaeological structures.



Figure 2: Initiating a blessing ceremony. Ajq'ij Waykan Colo' uses sugar as the medium for drawing Q'anil.

Still it should be noted that the daykeepers have not been idly counting off the days until the new dawn, rather they have been actively working to produce a solid legal basis for the coming age of equality.



Figure 3: Offerings are aromatic and tasty: incense, herbs, flowers, chocolate, bread, cigars, and ten “colors” of candles (directionals– east: red; west: black; north: white; south: yellow; heaven: blue; earth: green– and representations– pink: female; blue: male; lard: ancestors; purple: protection)

Little of the international hoopla over the winter solstice this year, however, focuses on Mayan activities beyond “mythic” base and a folkloric approach to ceremonialism. Columbia Pictures’ blockbuster movie, “2012”, depicts the eruption of the Yellowstone super-volcano and an earth-shattering flood. Many more people have seen this movie than have read the inscriptions of Kobah stela 1. As the Maya in the YouTube video, 2012 La Palabra Maya, rightly complain the Mayan voice is largely silenced; their writings modern and glyphic are used as emblems rather than read as texts. One daykeeper from Tecpán explained his concern in this way: “What will happen on the 21st? We will celebrate the end of one cycle and the beginning of the next. We will do this with proper reverence, sharing with our ancestors. But what will the non-Maya say? They will say, “Nothing happened. Those stupid Maya, they were wrong again.” It is not us who is saying the end will come, but we will be blamed when it doesn’t.” This concern is shared by many daykeepers. In 2009 they asked me to help them get a set of their statements published to counteract the growing hysteria. However, when I contacted my friends at University of Texas Press about such a volume, I was told that the market was already

flooded with 2012 hype. I agreed but argued that the Mayan voice should be heard. My friends at the Press rightly responded that the public would not be able to detect this “wheat” among the chaff. The internet became their best and most successful outlet.



Figure 4: Offerings laid out to start the fire, with additional cigars and candles to be proffered during the count of the days.

Of course, though this “end of cycle, dawn of a new era” interpretation is the mostly widely held and accepted among practitioners in Guatemala and in the Yucatán peninsula, there is still variation. I would like to share with you some of the elucidation shared with Dr. Little of SUNY-Albany and me by Kawoq Cuma Chávez. Kawoq is a Kaqchikel daykeeper. From a traditional family, he grew up celebrating Mayan ceremonies in his father’s fields and joining townspeople in the Catholic Church. He received his *vara* of office, becoming a spiritual guide eight years ago. His sister, Ixq’uq’, is also a daykeeper and has travelled internationally to attend Native American summits, performing ceremonies in Montana, Arizona, California, Louisiana, and Massachusetts, as well as in Europe. She has been invited to officiate at 2012 ceremonies in Thailand, but has refused as she has seen that she must be in her hometown for this celebration. Similarly, Kawoq has travelled widely, though primarily within Guatemala. He has two university degrees and is a board-certified lawyer. Both Kawoq and his sister are published authors, writing to share their spiritual insights with those hungry for enlightenment and guidance.

Over the past five years, Kawoq has been working closely with a group of New Age practitioners based in Chimaltenango. He has inaugurated three altars for them. He is the *warinel, chajinel* “guardian” of a strong altar located a scant block from Antigua’s central plaza, serving a clientele of Guatemalans (Maya and non-Maya) as well as *gringos*. He has read widely, including archaeological treatises, articles on epigraphy and the Mayan staples of the *Popol Wuj* and two of the Chilam B’alams. In studying the Cábala, he has revisited some of the Mayan mathematics and calendrics. His view of the coming solstice differs from that of the majority of his daykeeper colleagues. He believes that there will be cataclysms. In fact, he believes that these have already begun.

1. *Qatz’eton yan juley. Qatz’eton yan ri kab’raqän, qatz’eton yan ri nusiloj ri’ ri palow. Qatz’eton chuqa chi k’o chik k’ayewal pa taq tinamit. Ja ri’ kib’in kan qati’t qamama’.*

We have seen [some] already. We have seen the earthquakes, the tsunamis. We have seen the problems in the cities. This is what our grandmothers, our grandfathers predicted.

He positions himself in opposition to those who seen the 21st as simply a date on which the “odometer” of time merely clicks over.

2. *Man nqab’ij ta chi manäq k’ayewal. Man nqab’ij ta chi xe nik’is jun b’aqtun, noqa chï(k) jun.*

We do not say that there [will be] no difficulties. We do not say that one b’aqtun is just ending and another will come.

Rather he sees that the new era coming brings with it judgment. He believes that part of his responsibilities as a daykeeper is to proselytize, bringing all people, Maya and non-Maya, into line with Mayan precepts for living.

3. *Roma ri’, nk’atzin chi wakamïn chupam ri qana’oj nqajik ri winaqi’, nqajik ri ak’wala’.*

Because of this, it is necessary that we pull the people, the children into the our understandings.

According to Kawoq, some of the change of state or change of being has already begun. People who have been living correctly may already have raptured out; those who are still here preparing the way will to the new dimension by or on the 21st.

4. *Ja re’ nqab’ij röj- chi yojoqa pa junch dimensión, o pa junch raqän q’ij.*

This is what we say- that we enter another dimension, another ray of the sun.

People who are left behind will face the full brunt of the cataclysms, which include a mighty waterspout and more earthquakes. But those who are living non-urban lifestyles as well as those born on favored days of the *cholq’ij* need not worry.

5. *E k'o jujun taq tátas nkib'ij chuqa chi chupam ri b'aqtun konojel ri winaqi' e k'o pa taq tinamit, pa nimatinamit, ja ri' k'ayew xtib'an chke. Po ri winaqi' e k'o achi'el pa q'ayis, o e k'o pa k'echelaj man kan ta k'ayew xtikib'an. Ja re' ri xqa ta pe.*

There are some elders who say that in this b'aqtun all the people who are in towns, in big cities, will experience difficulties. But the people that are in the bush, or in the forests, it will not be so hard for them. This is what will come to pass.

6. *Ri winaqi' xe'alāx pa ri q'ij achi'el Ajmaq, o ri winaqi' xe'alāx pa ri q'ij Ajpu', chuqa' ri Tz'ikin, konojel ri' man xtikixib'ij ta ki' tāq petenāq ronojel ri nijalatāj chupam ri k'aslem.*

The people born on days such as Ajmaq or people born on the day Ajpub' and also Tz'ikin, all of these will not be afraid when the change of everything in life comes.

7. *To re Ajmaq nuchojmij pe ruk'aslem.*

Thus those [born on] Ajmaq amend lifeways.

In addition to city dwellers, those born on unfavored days are at risk.

8. *Ri Kej, ri K'at, ri Kan yalan xtikixib'ij ta ki' ta xtaqon ri k'isib'al ri taq q'ij. Po ri winaqi' ri kan qitzij, ri Ajmaq, ri Ajpu', ri Tz'ikin, ri Aq'b'al, ri kaji' ri' man xtikixib'ij ta ki' tōq xtaqon ri ruchuq'a' ri q'aq'.*

Those [born on] Kej, K'at, and Kan should be very afraid when the end of days arrives. But, truly, the people [born on] Ajmaq, Ajpu', Tz'ikin, and Aq'b'al, these four [days], will not be afraid when the force of the fire arrives.

To the counsel of the daykeepers and elders he adds that of the crystal skulls. At the date of this interview, July 2009, one of the skulls was active in Antigua, though it was demanding to be returned to Tikal by our upcoming winter solstice.

9. *Po ri jun jolomaj ri nusiloj wi wawe' Pan Q'an, Pan Q'an k'o wi. Nuchāp ri' ruk'in ri Venus, ja ri Marte. Ri Venus, ri Ulew, ri Marte, i ri Jupiter. To ri jun nīm samaj k'o chi ri jun jolomaj ntzolin ke la pa este, richin ri Tikal.*

But this skull is active hear in Antigua; in Antigua it lies. It communicates with Venus and Mars. Yes, Venus, Earth, Mars and Jupiter. So there is one great task: this skull must return to the east, to Tikal.

Other signs of the change in times include political moves, such as opening travel for Maya between Guatemala, Chiapas and the Yucatán peninsula, an advance earned briefly in 2009, and the birth of the white buffalo in Lakota territory.

10. *Roma ri' wakamïn manäq ri q'atb'äl richin yatik'o ri fronteras; man nik'atzin ta visa richin yab'e Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatan, Kintana Ro, ri maya' taq tinamit.*

Because of this [lifting the requirement for visas for the Maya], now there is no hindrance to crossing the borders; a visa is not necessary for you to go to Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatán, or Quintana Roo, the Mayan settlements.

11. *Roma rije' nkib'ij chi ri búfalo xaläx yan. Ri saq búfalo.*

Because they [the Lakota] say that the buffalo has already been born, the white buffalo.

A contingent of the Lakota is planning to come to Guatemala for December 2012 and will celebrate with Kawoq and his family.

Kawoq ended the interview with this hopeful statement:

12. *Eqal, eqal qujakatäj kan qitzij.*

Slowly, slowly we arise in truth.

Kawoq is not alone in his international vision, connections and travel. Mayan daykeepers are on the lecture circuit; many have met with indigenous groups in North and South America; some have travelled to celebrate with the Sammi, partners in Indigeneity since the UN decade of indigenous people began in 1992. Is it cosmic that the decade ends this year? Is it cosmic that Mars, Venus, Jupiter, Earth, and the black hole at the center of the university are going to align, more or less? Dr. Anthony Aveni, Russell Colgate professor of astronomy and anthropology at Colgate University, says it is poor astronomy, reducing cycles of 26,000 years to mere days and months. In his 2009 article in *Archeology*¹, he writes: "... the glorious achievements of the Maya and other complex cultures of the ancient world are appealing enough on their own. We don't need to dress them up in Western or apocalyptic clothing. And the responsibility for educating the public about what we really know about the Maya and other extraordinary cultures--such as the ability of the Maya to follow the position of Venus to an accuracy of one day in 500 years with the naked eye—should fall squarely on the shoulders of those of us who spend our lives studying them." To this I would add the glorious, but less glorified, achievements of the Maya of the modern world are important enough in their own right and they deserve to be heard, seen, and appreciated for what they are rather than what non-Maya popular culture would prefer them to be.

As Kawoq's comments excerpted here indicate, the Maya today are active participants in the world intellectual marketplace as well as in penny, dollar and yen capitalism. They travel and read internationally. They are contesting ownership of their

¹ Anthony Aveni (2009) *Apocalypse Soon?* *Archeology* Volume 62: 6.
<http://www.archaeology.org/0911/2012/> accessed May 14, 2012.

myth-history with INGUAT, with the Guatemalan State, and with non-Maya academics. The majority of daykeepers believe that December 21st will mark the end of this b'aqtun and the beginning of the next. They hope that their efforts, political and spiritual, have laid the foundation for a new dawn, a new day for the Maya in which they can participate in their respective countries as full citizens.



Figure 5: Tecpaneca, *aj Iximche'*, during a Waqxaqi' B'atz' ceremony.

Failing to find a US academic press to serve as their platform, they have successfully turned to the internet. For the intellectual outliers, such as Kawoq, private publishing houses in Guatemala have offered them outlets for the dissemination of their ideas. Kawoq preaches his truths with fervor, hoping to still bring in strays to the fold of Mayan spirituality. Of course, we are getting short of time. We have the vernal equinox coming up, then some quarterdays and then the winter solstice.

We can hope for a new dawn for the Maya on the 21st, but like them, as Dr. Aveni and Mayan daykeepers agree, we have a *patan* “a responsibility”. We, as scribes and scholars, hence, under the aegis of B'atz', need to be more dedicated to *na'oj* and *etamab'äl*, “understanding” and “knowledge” than to popularity and fiction. Of course, we should also acknowledge that the day B'atz' has “Howler Monkey” as its patron. This day is propitious for scholarship, particularly writing. However, it is also auspicious for fun, games, and mischievousness. It is perhaps encouraging that December 21st this year falls on 4 Ajpub'. The day Ajpu' “lord” is dedicated to leadership. According to this

year's *cholq'ij* from Cholsamaj²: *Es el día que da la fuerza, valor y energía para vencer los obstáculos*. “It is the day that vies the strength, courage and energy to overcome the obstacles”. We should also note that 4 Ajpu' was the date of seating of the current long count, or great cycle in Mayan calendrics.

So in good cyclical fashion we return to our initial query: December 21st, 2012: Rapture or a Turn of the Wheel? A few daykeepers like Kawoq have joined with their New Age colleagues to await the rapture; most expect the beginning of a new b'aqtun. All are hoping for a new dawn, one in which the Maya participate as full members.



Figure 6: Author at ceremony at Nimajay, cave above San Jorge La Laguna.

I hope to be at Iximche' tending the fire that will feed the new sun, pitting the fire's warmth against the December cold of the Highlands. *Tichajij iwi'*. Take care. Hope to see you on the other side.

² *Cholb'al Q'ij: agenda gerencial, diary agenda*. 2012. Cholsamaj: Guatemala. p. xv.

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Judith M. Maxwell
Tulane University
June, 2012