

MAXIMÓN **(Santiago Atitlán)**

It is a late Sunday morning when the motorboat from Panajachel pulls up to the dock at Santiago Atitlán. We meander along, stopping to admire the paintings done in a rather 'naif' style which are exhibited in the three art galleries we find on the main 'calle.' Many of these are quite good and would certainly fetch a good price in the USA or Europe. We continue to wend our way through the offerings in the stalls, all the while trying to lose ourselves in the crowd in order to steal a few worthwhile photos of the dignified feminine figures who brighten the scene. These women's headgear consists of a brightly-colored strip of cloth about two inches wide wound tightly to about the size of a long-play record with a head-sized hole. Their 'huipiles' are white with multicolored embroidery which represents quetzales and flowers.

Many men wearing the classic below-the-knee pants (Bermuda-style white cotton shorts with black or cobalt blue stripes and multi-color embroidery) are clustered among the stalls or in the doorways talking. They speak Tz'utujil, one of the more than 20 Mayan languages which has survived to the present day and is spoken in various villages in the departments of Sololá and Suchitepéquez.

We go to the church where some 'cofrades' are lighting candles, kneeling in front of one of the side altars. We ask about *Maximón*, sometimes called San Simon, Santiago's own Saint (or Divinity?). They tell us that he is a guest in one of the houses just a few 'cuadras' away.

We go down the stone steps which lead to the large central plaza and are instantly accosted by a group of noisy little boys asking for money to take us to the house which is hosting the peasant God. We turn down their offer but some of them follow us down the little alleyway which leads to the house. There is dense smoke, redolent of 'copal', the local incense, coming out of the courtyard of one of the houses. There is no mistake, *Maximón* is within those walls.

Facing the doorway which gives onto the tamped-down dirt courtyard, we see laundry and weavings hanging to dry, fluttering in the breeze, now revealing, now hiding, the figures seated inside. We ask permission to go in and it is granted. A young boy accompanies us to one of the side rooms from which the dense smoke is emanating. The incense burner, which sits in the threshold of the doorway, is a large tin can in which holes have been punched.

Just inside the door, sitting on an armchair made of wood, sits a figure completely covered with various garments and pieces of cloth. Directly in front of this armchair, the wooden face of *Muximón* stares out of the mass of brightly colored scarves in which he is wrapped. There is a cigarette between his lips, and a sombrero obscures his craggy face. The figure of *Muximón* sways back and forth, propelled by the two 'cofrades' seated at his sides.

We go in and sit down on a wooden bench in the corner. A third devotee gets up and stands right in front of the rag-covered worshipper and begins to recite a litany, in Tz'titujil naturally. A fourth person goes around the room with a liter bottle of 'Gallo', the most popular local beer, and offers the various people seated against the wall a drink from a single glass. Meanwhile, the covered figure is revealed one layer at a time. When his sweat-moist visage is finally uncovered, the devotee in front of him sprays his face with a mouthful of beer.

The dense smoke perfumes the air, the marimba music which issues forth from the cheap cassette player and the numerous candles all go to create an unreal atmosphere which ignites the fantasy and carries one away. We wonder if we have wound up somehow on some strange film set or if we're just imagining everything.

The figure now rises, free from the rags which covered him. He is a young father and husband. Whatever the meaning of the ceremony he has just undergone, his wife approaches him with a grateful air. The wide black

eyes of their tiny son peer out from the carrying cloth in which he is wrapped onto his mother's back.

When we finally step back out into the light of the sun, the sense of the unreal, of having just returned from a leap into the past, accompanies us to the dock. Rocking back and forth to the movement of the motorboat which carries us back to Panajachel, we notice the cloud strips which partly obscure the tip of the Volcan de San Pedro.

This land of contrasts hides a magic which continues to surprise. Centuries of oppression haven't managed to wipe out the beliefs of this ancient people and perhaps the dawn of the new millennium will bring their ancestral wisdom back into the light.



Rituales a Maximón / Sacred rituals for Maximón / Cerimonia a Maximón Santiago Atitlán, Sololá