

## **Kaqchikel Maya people of Santa Maria**

### **Where are they located?**

The Kaqchikel (local spelling) are located at the foot of the volcano called Agua (Volcan de Agua). The volcano, Agua, is located directly South of Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala. The Kaqchikel name of Santa Maria de Jesus is Junapu, meaning "one volcano" because they lie at the base of Agua. Kaqchikel Maya are one of many Maya ethnic people groups, each are distinctive based on their language and other factors despite many shared beliefs.

### **What are their lives like?**

Many Kaqchikel Maya people of Santa Maria de Jesus ride the 40 minute bus ride to Antigua, Guatemala where the job opportunities are more open due to the high level of tourist activity in Antigua. These Kaqchikeles sell artisan products such as woven fabrics, jewelry, scarves, paintings on the streets of Antigua and/or in the artisan market in the West part of Antigua. I personally knew a family where the male was my Kaqchikel teacher, a primary school teacher, and a Spanish teacher for elderly Kaqchikel people from his town, Santa Maria de Jesus. There are many others, like most Maya, who are in agriculture: coffee and chocolate are big agricultural cash crops in the Guatemalan highlands near Antigua.

The family structure is such that the man is the main financial provider and oftentimes wears "modern" clothing to appeal to employers while the woman is the main homemaker. She cooks, cleans, cares for the children, weaves the clothing, and sometimes sells additional crafts or tortillas. It is also the Kaqchikel Maya woman's role within the market to sell the produce or the craft and typically the man's role to farm and transport the produce. She is almost always seen in traditional clothing, or traje, as well as the children. The children grow up speaking Kaqchikel in the home with Spanish being taught in the education system and used outside of the town and as such, Kaqchikel is their primary language, Spanish is their secondary. Most Maya children are minimally educated in a formal setting but almost always learn the craft or trade of their parents, depending on gender.

### **What are their beliefs?**

[note - This section cannot be labeled as "specific to the Kaqchikel people of Santa Maria de Jesus" but rather as Maya beliefs. The Maya, as a whole, share most religious beliefs with probable variations depending on region and influence. An attempt has been made to make this as accurate as possible. Many of the cofradias are specific to the area around Lake Atitlan, or primarily Tzutujil or Quiche' areas, yet all Maya have knowledge of these practices mentioned below.]

The Maya have their own indigenous beliefs that they have held for the past 2,500-3,000 years or so that still permeate their beliefs today. In the early 1500s, Cortes, Alvarado and other conquistadors came to "conquer" the New World. The Maya were the last group to be "conquered" or rather subdued (although we know this submission was only superficial) because

of the many different Maya people. Unlike the Aztec Empire, the Maya never had an empire but rather were made up of many different Maya kingdoms that the Spaniards had to conquer. As such, the Spaniards would "conquer" a kingdom, establish a Spanish town and enlist the natives to construct a Catholic church, oftentimes on top of the Maya's sacred temples. The history of constant clashes between Maya kingdoms and then this new kingdom of Spaniards simply carried on the tradition of establishing political and religious power in place of an old religious order. Therefore, the Maya simply adapted and adopted this new "God" into their repertoire of gods. The Catholic saints made great additions to their idols of various gods and goddesses and quite honestly Catholicism was easily adaptable to Maya beliefs. The emphasis on adaptation instead of adoption is key because the Maya never gave up their former beliefs but rather morphed Catholicism within their Maya worldview.

In Maya mythology (which, if you want more info about I could go into detail and site my sources, too) there was this god Hun Hunapu who became a god by defeating the god of the underworld, Xibalba in a ballgame. Then Xibalba beheads Hun Hunapu but Hun Hunapu is resurrected from his head which turns into a seed (feeding into the Maya's belief in ancestor worship, rebirth from the old, emphasis on the grandparent-grandchild relationship) and a maize plant grows from the Underworld, from the Earth, and into the middle world. Thus, Hun Hunapu is now the Maize God and is a symbol of fertility, sport, rebirth, and youth. So, when the Maya hear about this Jesus character from the Catholics, about how he dies and is resurrected...They automatically adopted him as the reincarnation of the Maize God, Hun Hunapu. So while you will see Jesus's carved image everywhere within the Maya towns and homes of Guatemala, many times it is a skewed version of who Jesus actually is.

Another tell-tale sign that there is heavy Maya influence within a Catholic church is if the Catholic carved idols are dressed with fabric and flowers or if they are just regularly carved. The Maya are hung up over traditions and rituals (i.e. their many offering and ritual ceremonies that continue to this day) and they take the washing and dressing of the saints and of Jesus and of Mary very seriously. I will attach an image below for reference if you would like it. So, Jesus is clothed and a crown of flowers adorns his head. During Semana Santa, or Holy Week (from Palm Sunday to Resurrection Sunday--although there are no processions on Resurrection Sunday), big floats are made and adorned with scenes from the Bible and mainly scenes from Jesus carrying his cross to Calvary. These huge floats are transported atop of as few as 50 to as large as 150 men's shoulders and are half-walked/half-danced atop of alfombras, or temporary "carpets" made of sawdust, flowers, and other items which are laid on the cobblestones of important historical cities such as Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala City, and others. The movement that these floats take, this sort of rocking motion, and the processional mindset is also very Maya as dancing and long hours of patterned walking or dancing was and still is common within Maya ceremonies.

Another important key to understanding the Maya religious viewpoint is the institution of Cofradias (or "brotherhoods"). When the Spaniards came in 1500s and converted a few natives (using fear tactics and religion as a political power) they left to go "conquer" another town and ordained these few as leaders of the Cofradia. These leaders were to convert their fellow Maya people to Catholicism for when the Spaniards came back to check their progress. The leaders would essentially buy their own freedom for the town by paying the Spaniards and assuring them

that everyone was being a good Catholic. This freedom from the Spanish checking on their conversion status allowed for a Catholic superficiality to permeate their culture and adaption of certain Catholic beliefs into their own to occur. Today, the *cofradías* still exist but now are the institutions that are semi-Catholic on the surface level but are breeding grounds for Maya shamans to practice.

After being lead inside three different *cofradías*, I have seen more than enough to know that there is no Catholicism and certainly no Jesus inside of these small buildings filled with incense, saints, candles, offerings, and prayers to false idols. Maximon is a common Maya belief. Let me explain, Maximon is an idol made of a tree-trunk (as expected there is a Maya myth behind the formation of Maximon, and it is filled with magic and 'divine' intervention). He wears a hat and has a carved face (although the legend says that the external carving is in reality a mask for what lies beneath as his true face...which some say is simply a chunk of tree) and is always dressed with many scarves. He always has a lit cigar in his mouth and accepts booze, cigars, and money as payment. Maximon is partially believed to represent John the Baptist as a saint of wild things but also answers prayers of those faithful enough to him and who offer the right amount of the right things. Maximon is kept safely guarded by one or two shamans at all times and stays in an alternating *cofradía* each year around Lake Atitlan. So, these *cofradías* are put in place for shamans to intercede on behalf of people who offer things to these saints dressed in clothes. One example: We were in one *cofradía* and the woman, the wife of a shaman who was herself a midwife and had 'magical powers', told us what each of the saints were symbols for or what they had power over. She pointed to two statues of angels (keep in mind all of these statues of saints and such are hundreds of years old from when the Spaniards brought them, adding to their "authenticity") and she said, "this one is in charge of the rains and that one is in charge of thunder and lightning."

### **What are their needs?**

The Kaqchikel people need prayers more than anything that they would know the true, unadulterated JESUS of the Bible and truly who He is. I am unaware of the religious material available to them in their language but that certainly does not mean that there are no materials available. I am doubtful that the Bible has been fully translated and distributed to the Kaqchikel people of Santa Maria de Jesus primarily because like most Maya peoples and languages, Kaqchikel is an oral language and many cannot read the language on paper. It has been formulated into an oral language for the purposes of the Spanish in 1500s and for people like myself who are learning the language. There are programs and pushes for the Kaqchikel people to learn how to read and write within their own language, but most cannot. Even if Kaqchikel has been written down there are so many variants of spelling due to it being an oral language and each person spelling words how they speak the language, etc. which obviously poses a difficulty in a written Bible for this people.