SAN CARLOS DE GUATEMALA UNIVERSITY
CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS FOLKLORICOS

GUATEMALAN TRADITIONS

5

Editorial Universitaria

Guatemala, Central America

1976

CHRONICLES

THE Q'EQCHI' CUATASINC

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The term *cuatasin*, in the Qeqchi' language, although etymologically often associated with magical practices, in practice refers to a set of sacred ceremonies or religious inauguration rites, primarily related to buildings. These are ceremonies typically performed during the inauguration of a house, church, or other special objects.

Our purpose is to narrate in detail the *cuatasinc* rites observed, and above all, experienced by the author during the inauguration of two bells. I will strictly adhere to the narrative, avoiding any kind of sociological or religious interpretation or commentary, in order to present the ceremony as objectively as possible, free from any external interference. Purposely, photographs were excluded due to the extreme respect that we observed at all times during this event

Place, date, participants, and purpose of the rites

The purpose of the *cuatasinc* rite, as previously mentioned, was the inauguration and commissioning of two bells at the chapel located atop a hill in the village of Chacté. Chacté is a village located 38 km from Poptún (El Petén), situated along the main road that connects Puerto Cadenas, the entrance to El Petén via Izabal, with *Ciudad Flores*. The village, founded about thirty years ago, was settled by the large Q'eqchi'

migration that began around eighty years ago from Cobán and significantly intensified in the last twenty years, especially from San Pedro Carchá. The people from San Pedro have peacefully settled vast areas of El Petén, and even parts of Belize, in search of farmland. They descended to the lowlands of El Petén from the high mountains of Alta Verapaz, following the Sebol and Cahabón routes, and entered the dense jungles of El Petén, where they have founded countless villages. They currently occupy a vast area bounded by the Pasión River up to Sayaxché, the Santa Isabel or Cancuén rivers along the border with Alta Verapaz, and the Sarstoon River, already within Belizean territory. Although there are no official figures, it is estimated that around 25,000 Q'eqchi' people are now settled in El Petén.

The main officiants of the *cuatasinc* ceremony that will be described were three Qeqchi' individuals: Domingo Pop, the religious administrator, and main organizer of the rite, who covered the expenses, and two elder companions, one of whom came specifically from Belize due to his specialized knowledge of the ceremony. Alongside the Q'eqchi' celebrants were the Catholic priests Waldo Fernandez and Jestis Garcia, who performed the strictly Catholic rites.

The ceremony took place during the night of March 25 to 26, 1975, between Holy Tuesday and Wednesday of what is known as Holy Week.

Preparations for the *cuatasinc* ceremony

Around eight o'clock in the evening on March 25, coming from Poptún, we priests Waldo Fernandez and Jesús Garcia arrived to Chacté. Domingo Pop, the religious administrator in charge of the celebration, was waiting for us at the entrance to the village, accompanied by several local Indigenous people. After a brief greeting in their language and in Spanish, we walked silently along a path to their house, built on top of a small hill, and consisted of an open shed with adobe walls and a tin roof. Their reception was marked by the sobriety, refinement, and respect that characterize Q'eqchi' hospitality: greetings with crossed arms and bowed heads. Once inside the house, there was a brief time of prayers before the images placed on an altar to the right, while the Q'eqchi' officiants offered

copal incense and murmured prayers in their language. They offered us hammocks to rest. Little by little, guests began arriving, men, women, and children, seating themselves on the floor in respectful silence, interrupted only by children's cries and running. The musicians who were already present began playing traditional tunes in our honor using harp, guitar, and violin. Shortly after, some boys appeared offering us water and *guacales* (gourd bowls) to wash the dust from our journey. A little later, they brought us their finest refreshing drink, cacao, as they prepare it, made from trees they plant themselves.

Domingo Pop then addressed us with a welcome on behalf of himself and the entire community. He expressed his joy at having us among them to participate in the *cuatasinc*. To him, we came as bearers of truth, and he was glad we respected and accepted their old and cherished traditions. He told us he had waited forty-seven years to perform that night's ceremony, passed down through the tradition of his ancestors. He made a profession of faith in his Q'eqchi' beliefs and declared he would give his life for them.

We thanked him for his sincere hospitality and expressed our happiness to be with them that night, reaffirming our stance of acceptance and respect for their traditions. Then dinner was served, an exquisitely seasoned chicken, which we shared with Domingo Pop and the two other Qeqchi' officiants. Following Indigenous custom on such occasions, we spoke very little.

After dinner, we left the table and approached the altar. Beneath the altar, completely wrapped in sacks, lay the bells, which could not be unveiled until they were installed in the chapel. With great reverence, they brought them out, only after offering incense, and Domingo Pop and one of the celebrants carried them on their shoulders using a *mecapal* (sash with two ropes at the ends used to carry loads on the shoulders). At that moment, a procession began, led by the bell carriers. The people held lit candles as we followed right behind. The silence of the night was broken by the melody of the *chirimia* and the beat of the *tun*. These are specifically sacred instruments of the Indigenous people, used only in religious solemnities. That procession, under a splendid full moon, wrapped in absolute silence and walking along jungle paths to the solemn, deep, plaintive, and monotonous melody of the sacred instruments, was a profoundly moving spectacle.

After walking a considerable distance, we finally climbed a high hill where the chapel stood, and where the bells would be blessed and installed on its facade. The hill was cleared of trees and carefully trimmed. The chapel was about twenty-five meters long and ten meters wide. Countless candles burned inside. The altar was filled with saints. At the center, I noticed a very old crucifix—pure Indigenous artistry. Next to the chapel was a large open shed, used as a shelter and resting place for those who spend the night performing rituals and prayers there. Nearby were smaller structures used for cooking.

Meanwhile, the Q'eqchi' people gathered inside the chapel and spread out along the slopes of the hill. Some had come from very distant villages, entire families with children. The women wore their finest *huipiles* (embroidered blouse), adorned with their characteristic headpieces. It was a spectacle of color and devotion, the result of deep-rooted traditions of a people proud of their culture. I realized there was not a single ladino; only Q'eqchi' Indigenous people. It was a ceremony by them and for them. If we were allowed to attend, it was because we were priests, whose role was an essential part of the *cuatasinc* rite.

The *cuatasinc* ceremony

The rite is divided into two essential but distinct parts: the sacrifice and enshrinement of the pig, with whose blood the bells are blessed, and the sacred communion meal.

Upon arriving from the chapel, the bells were placed, well covered, beneath the altar. The effort was evident on the faces of the carriers, as the bells were quite heavy and the journey had been long, with many climbs and descents. The three officiants knelt before the images. They offered incense and candles, praying in their native tongue. Their prayers were completely unintelligible to the onlookers. These are inherited prayers, passed down through special initiations and kept strictly secret by the officiants.

Afterward, we left the chapel. For about an hour, people entered and exited the building, said their prayers, lit candles, and always spoke in hushed tones. Others waited outside. Meanwhile, in one of the designated kitchens, the pigs to be used in the ceremony were slaughtered.

We spent that time chatting with the people. Inside the chapel, the music of the harp, violin, and guitar played continuously.

Around eleven o'clock that night, we were told to get ready because the cuatasinc was about to begin. We went to the chapel and vested ourselves in white albs. There we awaited the arrival of Domingo Pop and his two companions. They led a solemn procession, carrying large containers filled with the blood of the slaughtered pigs and the cooked bodies of two hens. They approached the altar and placed everything on the table. They offered more copal incense than usual. They knelt and prayed for a long while. The chapel was filled with people. Those who couldn't fit inside peeked through doors and windows. The emotion and importance of the moment could be felt in the air. Suddenly, Domingo Pop stood and signaled for us to follow him. The bells were lifted again, now along with the pots containing the pigs' blood and the hens. From the altar, we moved, still inside the chapel, toward the main entrance. The indigenous members of the brotherhood dressed in purple and white robes worn during Holy Week, cleared a path for us to walk. A wooden platform had been erected where the bells were to be placed. We climbed it using a ladder. Only the three Q'eqchi' celebrants and we, the priests, were allowed up. No other person was allowed to witness the rite. The people remained below, silent and waiting. Again, the chirimia and tun began to play.

Once at the top, they uncovered the bells and securely placed them in position. Then, with great solemnity and care, they uncovered the pots. They recited prayers rapidly and fervently. Incense was burned. Then Domingo Pop, following the instructions of his companions, dipped and soaked his hands in the blood. With his hands dripping with the blood of the sacrificed pigs, he began to cover and anoint the bells inside and out, more and more rapidly. His expression was transformed. It was clear that he was performing a ceremony of profound religious significance. It was the climax of the rite. From then on, there would be no danger of the bells cracking. The spirits, those minor spirits, both good and bad, believed in the Maya tradition to inhabit all places, would now be favorable. They had been appeased and pacified. There would be nothing to fear in that place. The Maya belief in the living world of spirits, so deeply felt and enduring among the Q'eqchi' people, was made manifest and evident in this ceremony.

Immediately after the bells were washed in blood, they were rubbed with the freshly killed bodies of the hens. Then we to sprinkle them with holy water. Incense was offered. From that moment on, the bells could be rung. We were asked to do so for the first time, and we did. Then the rhythm of the tun and the chirimia became faster and more joyful, in clear contrast to what had come before.

We descended from the wooden platform, while the celebrants carried the remains of the blood and hens. At the foot of the main entrance's lintel, in the center, they quickly began digging a hole. When it was deep enough, they buried the blood, and hen remains there and covered everything with earth. In front, they placed a wooden stake. This marked a prohibition: no woman was allowed to step over that spot for fifteen days. No woman could break the taboo; doing so would nullify the ceremony and bring misfortune upon the place and its people. With these rites, the first part of the ceremony was concluded.

After about half an hour, used as a break and to calm the spirits, the sacred meal rites began. Domingo Pop's wife, along with other women related to the main participants of the ceremony, led the opening of this part. They began a procession from the place where the pigs had been sacrificed, carrying their cooked meat in clay pots. They made their way to the chapel and approached the altar, where very slowly and with great reverence, they placed the pots of meat. They knelt, offered incense, and prayed for a while with lit candles, Then, in silence and with the same calm, they took the pots of meat and left the chapel to head to the kitchen. No music was played during this part of the ceremony. It is worth noting the participation of women in the rite, as the Q'eqchi' priesthood is exclusively male, and women usually play a passive role. This may be explained by the fact that they were the ones who cooked and seasoned the pigs.

We moved to the hall near the chapel, which served as a gathering and resting space. There, a makeshift table had been set up using wooden planks. We were the first to sit, along with the Q'eqchi' celebrants, and the first to be served. We were offered a plate with a piece of pork. In silence, and using our fingers, we ate our portions. Since it was a sacred communion meal, everything on the plate had to be eaten. Leaving any behind would have been seen as disrespectful. Almost immediately, the rest of the gathered people came forward,

standing in silence, they quickly ate their portion. The entire community shared the same sacrificed meat, a symbol of their unity as a community and cultural entity. Only through sharing that meat could all members be joined together through their union with the divine. The meat was divine, as it had been offered and blessed in a deeply sacred rite in connection with the supernatural world, setting it apart entirely from an ordinary meal. It was the people's communion through the meat of the sacrificed pig. It was the final rite of the *cuatasinc*, which concluded with a sacred feast. A feast that strengthened communal bonds and deeply united the people with the divine.

Around three in the morning, we were able to rest. In hammocks, inside the same shed and surrounded mostly by Q'eqchi' women and children, we slept for a while. The unity and deep communion developed throughout the ceremony continued with the utmost simplicity and spontaneity: the whole community had prayed together, eaten together, and now rested together. Very nearby, the constant sound of the harp and violin could still be heard from inside the chapel. The men played them without pause throughout the night. As Domingo Pop told us, that night they needed to express through music everything they felt and carried in their hearts, their emotions and the intense communal and religious experience of the *cuatasinc*, an experience unlikely to ever be repeated with such solemnity. It is worth noting that not a single drink of alcohol was consumed that night, unlike the Indigenous custom of mixing important religious events with drinking. Domingo Pop, the religious administrator and organizer of the *cuatasinc*, did not allow it, saying that the night was to be solely for God. And they took the prohibition so seriously that they expelled a man who had arrived with alcohol.

At five in the morning, we were awakened by the ringing of the bells announcing the celebration of Mass. Although the cuatasinc ceremony, purely of Q'eqchi' tradition, is clearly distinct from the Catholic Mass, for them the Mass remains a fundamental part of their faith. The cuatasinc concluded with the Eucharistic celebration. It was a living example of how Indigenous people have managed to embrace and integrate their own rites with the Christian ceremonies introduced during the Conquest. The Mass was held in the chapel, with the entire

village present and singing. The homily was delivered in Q'eqchi' language, and many received communion. Around six in the morning, farewells began. Each family returned to their homes, some very far away. Several men stayed behind to watch over the chapel in shifts, at least for a few days. Coincidentally, the most solemn days of Holy Week were approaching, during which they gather for their processions and rituals.

In Chacté, a small Qeqchi' village in El Petén, we had witnessed the celebration of an ancient ceremony, filled with that special essence the Indigenous people bring to their rites, and deeply infused with the heartfelt spirituality that so often permeates their lives.