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HOLY WEEK IN SANTIAGO ATITLÁN

(Customs and Ceremonies)

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In the town of Santiago Atitlán, an Indigenous community located on the southern shore of Lake Atitlán, there exist beliefs and customs of particular interest, among them, those expressed during Holy Week, which reflect a profound religiosity.

This brief work is by no means exhaustive, given that Indigenous religion is a subject difficult to probe in depth. Accordingly, we do not aim here to draw conclusions but rather to offer a succinct description of one of the most significant religious festivities for the *atitleco* (from atitlán) Indigenous people. The Director of the *Instituto Indigenista Nacional*, *Licenciado* Juan de Dios Rosales, with his customary interest in guiding me into the field of ethnography, authorized me to use materials from the Institute's archives for this work and ultimately supported me in presenting this description to the reader in its current form. Nevertheless, I take personal responsibility for any errors in judgment I may have made in interpreting the material I used.

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And now, after this brief introduction, let us turn to the development of our subject.

Preparations for the ceremonies of *Semana Mayor* (Holy Week) begin the week prior. On the Wednesday of that week, ten *Mayores* and eleven *Alguaciles* depart for the southern coast to gather loads of *flor de corozo* and fruits such as bananas, peaches, *pataxte*, among others. Days earlier, the organizers of these celebrations entrust this mission to the appointed individuals and instruct them to sanctify themselves by observing sexual abstinence.

They return on Saturday morning of the same week and, upon reaching the entrance to the town, wait until the senior members of the municipal organization arrive to receive them with *marimba* music, drums, and *aguardiente* (schnapps), which is distributed among the group. They then bring the cargo to the house of the *Primer Mayor*, where it is left exactly as it was brought. There, they are served lunch and more *aguardiente*.

In that house, a *velación* (night vigil) is held for the cargo, during which each carrier places his portion beside him and dances to the rhythm of the *marimba* music. From then on, they refrain from drinking alcohol until Tuesday morning of *Semana Santa*, when the fruit is formally delivered.

On *Lunes Santo* (Holy Monday) at night, twelve *Mayores* head into the mountains to collect *pacaya*¹ leaves and cypress branches to decorate the parish church. They return around midnight, always arriving to the town amidst shouts and lively commotion. At the same time, another group of ten men departs for a lakeside spot, bringing with them special stones used as washing slabs to launder the clothing of *Maximón*², after that they return at dawn, leaving the stones behind.

In earlier times, the *kapojos* (young unmarried women) would drink the water used to wash the image's clothes, believing it would make them fertile. It was also drunk by those seeking to alleviate sorrow or heal illness, as the water was thought to possess miraculous properties.

On *Martes Santo* (Holy Tuesday) at noon, the *Mayores* and *Alguaciles* leave the house of the *Primer Mayor*, carrying large *matracas* (wooden noisemakers), a drum, and a reed whistle to invite civil and military authorities to inspect the fruit and determine whether it is ripe. Along with these officials, both Indigenous and *ladino*³ townspeople attend. Once all the guests have arrived at the *Primer Mayor's* house, the authorities are seated at a large table where several bottles of *aguardiente* are placed and shared among the attendees. When this is finished, the table is set aside, a new *petate* (woven mat) is laid on the floor, and the *Cabecera del pueblo* (community leader), also known as the principal, rises and addresses the first and second Church Steward⁴: "Well then, honorable Church Stewards, I bring word from the people asking that you kindly inspect the fruit." The Church Stewards then rise and examine the fruit. It must be in perfect condition, not green, overripe, or damaged, otherwise, the person who brought it is judged to be someone who lives a disorderly life, who may have had intercourse the night before the journey, or who was reluctant to go. In such cases, the reviewing authorities summon the man and his wife to issue a stern reprimand. In earlier times, this offense was punished on Holy Saturday with a public whipping in the town square.

1 Pacaya is a variety of palm native to the coastal region, whose green leaves are used as decoration during festivals.

2 Maximón is a carved wooden figure, dressed in the traditional male attire of Santiago Atitlán. The Indigenous people say it represents the image of Judas Simon. It dates back many years, though its exact origin is unknown. The Tz'utujil people of the region, along with others from nearby areas, worship him and attribute supernatural powers to him. They believe he has the ability to give and take life, to cause or cure illnesses, including madness, and to control the fate of travelers, whether alone or in groups. In short, there is no human act or movement that is not believed to be governed and overseen by Maximón, which is why his fame has spread so widely and why he is venerated with deep and intense devotion. Pilgrims come to pay homage to him from across the Lake Atitlán region, and even from more distant towns such as San Juan and San Pedro Sacatepéquez, in the department of Guatemala.

Etymologically, "Maximón" means "Don Simón," a name derived from the Tz'utujil words ("ma don") and ximón ("Simón"). In Santiago Atitlán and San Pedro La Laguna, he is also known as Don Pedro de Alvarado, the Spanish conquistador of the region. Many Atitlecos refer to him as Mam, a term meaning old one, ancestor, or grandfather, while others call him Quimón, a variation of Simón.

At ten in the morning on Holy Tuesday, the *Telenel*⁵, accompanied by three assistants, leaves his house for the place where Maximón's clothes were washed the previous night. They gather the stones used as washbasins and return them to the *Cofradía de la Santa Cruz* (a lay religious brotherhood that organizes and sponsors local Catholic rituals), to which they belong.

That evening, at approximately nine o'clock, members of the town municipality, invited authorities, the *Tercer* and *Cuarto Mayores*, the *Cabecera del pueblo*, the Telenel and his assistants, and other important people go to the *Cofradía de la Santa Cruz* to witness the assembly and dressing of the image of Maximón. Once gathered, bottles of beer and cups of aguardiente are passed around, and the *Cabecera del pueblo* orders the ceremony to begin. Immediately, the three assistants of the Telenel ascend to the *tapanco* (attic) of the cofradía's chamber using a ladder. They begin by untying a suitcase, carefully unwrapping the image's components, and assembling Maximón. They then wrap him in *rebozos* (shawls), re-enclose him in the *petate* in which he was stored, and drop the bundle from the attic onto another petate laid out on the room's floor. As the bundle lands, the Telenel mounts it and, with help from two assistants, begins to dress Maximón: he puts on shoes, then multiple layers of shirts, pants, and jackets, followed by a dancer's mask, several hats stacked one over another, and numerous silk scarves around the neck. It is important to note that all this attire is brand new, Maximón is never dressed in used clothing.

Once Maximón is fully assembled and dressed, the Telenel begins to "converse" with him, inviting him to rise. He lifts him and sets him on his feet, to the amazement of those present, the elegantly dressed figure stands upright without anyone holding it. Then, through a hole specially made in the mouth of the mask, he places a *puro* (cigar).

- 3 In Guatemala, ladino is the term used to describe individuals who do not identify with Indigenous culture and instead follow a Westernized way of life.
- 4 The Church Stewards are part of the local organization responsible for administering the church and its ecclesiastical goods.
- 5 The *Telenel* is the person appointed to care for Maximón for one year. During the Holy Week celebrations, this individual is responsible for dressing and carrying the image. The Telenel must be a *zahorín* (a ritual specialist or seer) and must know the ritual prayers perfectly. The organizers of the celebrations appoint the Telenel along with other individuals to assist him, who are also referred to by the same title.

On *Miércoles Santo* (Holy Wednesday). In the morning, a delegation departs from the Primer Mayor's house, preceded by the sound of a *tamborón* (large drum). They go to invite the authorities to join the procession of the adorned fruit, which also departs from the Primer Mayor's house where the offerings had been stored. The authorities accept the invitation, and at eleven o'clock, the procession proceeds through the main streets of the town.

It is striking to see how well organized the procession is: more than forty men line each side of the street, each carrying a new basket of decorated fruit on their shoulders. Women do not participate but watch from street corners, curious. A large drum leads the

procession, followed by two *Alguaciles* carrying their *acias* (a kind of whips) acting as masters of ceremony. Behind them, two men carry baskets of crabs on their shoulders, these are intended for the twelve apostles'⁶ lunch on Maundy Thursday. The procession ends at the office of the Municipality, where the fruit and crabs are deposited.

Shortly, thirty minutes before noon, the same group returns to the *Cofradía de la Santa Cruz* to bring Don Pedro de Alvarado, or Maximón, to the municipal office. Unlike the previous procession, this one is chaotic, a crowd of about 1,500 people, men and women who accompany *Quimón* with loud cries, *matracas* (noisemakers), and drums.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, a new procession takes place: Maximón, the fruit, and the crabs are taken from the Municipality to the church. Upon arrival, Maximón is hung in the church atrium; the fruit is left inside the temple and arranged into a decorative altar-like display, while the crabs are brought to the convent to prepare the apostles' meal for Maundy Thursday.

At nine in the evening, the *Texeles alumbradoras*, who are the wives of the *cofrades* (members of the religious brotherhood), arrive at the convent to grind corn and make *tortillas* for the apostles' meal the following day. The events of this day conclude at two o'clock in the morning on Maundy Thursday.

On *Jueves Santo* (Maundy Thursday). From the early morning hours, the First and the Second Church Stewards, with several assistants, arrive at the convent to prepare the apostles' lunch.

At eleven-thirty, a procession called the *Procesión de la Reseña* takes place inside the parish church and lasts about twenty minutes. The order of participants is as follows: first, a group of about fifty Indigenous catechist girls singing in alternation with the men, directed by the Second Church Steward; followed by the *cofrades*, or heads of the *cofradías*, wearing ceremonial attire; then the twelve apostles; after them, the image of Jesus carried on an *anda* (processional platform) by six men; behind them, a group of forty male catechists singing; and finally, the image of the *Virgen Dolorosa* (Our Lady of Sorrows). At the end of the procession, all attendees proceed to kiss a cushion placed on the floor in front of the main altar.

In the afternoon, after three o'clock, the ceremony of *la última cena* ("the Last Supper") begins. A table is placed along a corridor in the convent of the Church, covered with a new bedspread used as a tablecloth. Two vases with fresh lilies are arranged upon it. In the courtyard, a procession of the twelve apostles is organized. They walk in two rows toward the table amid a large crowd of men and women. Once seated, they make the sign of the cross.

6 The Apostles are represented by children chosen by the *cofrades*, dressed in white tunics, with their heads wrapped in red cloths and, on top of that, wire crowns decorated with paper roses.

The *alguaciles* (ceremonial stewards), dressed in a *capixay*⁷ with an apron, begin to serve them seven different dishes in the following order: cooked rice, fish wrapped in egg and herbs, hen, crabs in broth, white beans, sweet chickpeas, and finally, slices of bread with honey. Four tortillas are served with each dish.

Before each dish is served, the chief catechist sings a portion of religious music in Latin. Then, the *chirimillero* (a traditional wind instrument player) plays his instrument four times, followed by the *tamborero* (drummer), who strikes his drum eight times. As soon as the apostles are seated, they cross themselves and take a piece of tortilla to eat with the first dish. The rest of the tortillas and subsequent dishes are passed to their respective mothers, who wait behind them.

After the supper, the apostles' procession is reorganized for the next ceremony: the *lavatorio* (the foot-washing). The procession exits through the convent door, enters the church atrium, and enters through the main door, this is the only circuit they complete. Inside the temple, the apostles sit on two benches arranged for the occasion. Then the following ceremony occurs: The *Cabecera del pueblo* (community leader) acts in the role of priest, assisted by two Church Stewards. They place a basin under the right foot of each apostle, pours a little water, and washes it; one of the Church Stewards dries it with a clean towel. Then, all three kiss the washed foot. A designated man delivers a sermon explaining the meaning of the meal and the *lavatorio*, stating that they symbolize Christ's Last Supper and the moment when He washed the feet of His apostles. Then, each apostle kneels and, remaining in that position, walks to where a cushion has been placed. He leans over a plate resting on the cushion and deposits two cents, which he carries in his mouth. He kisses the cushion and, with his palms pressed together over his chest, returns to his seat on his knees, never turning his back on the cushion. With this, the Maundy Thursday ceremonies conclude.

On *Viernes Santo* (Good Friday), At half past midnight, the ceremonies for this day begin. At the indicated hour, a procession sets out, carrying the images of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Apostles Saint John and Saint James (San Juan and Santiago), among others. The procession follows a square route of twelve city blocks. At each corner, there is a chapel with the image of a saint. As the procession passes in front of the Municipality building, in that four-block stretch, the image of the Virgin Mary and other saints are placed at one end, and the images of Jesus and Saint James at the other. The image of Saint John is tightly tied to the *anda* (processional platform), dressed in a blue tunic and a cap made from *pacaya* palm leaves. Four *alguaciles* carry him on their shoulders, accompanied by a crowd of men and boys who rattle *matracas* (wooden noisemakers) and *matracones* (larger versions). The carriers begin to run with Saint John from one end of the stretch to the other. Upon reaching a corner, the *matracas* fall silent, and the bearers lift Saint John's image three times above their heads at full arm's length. Those holding the stationary saints do the same. These motions are repeated over and over until five in the morning, amounting to approximately 250 runs.

7 The *capixay* is a thick, black wool jacket.

Also at five in the morning, the first *alumbradores* (devotional candle bearers) and prayer leaders arrive at the Church, which has remained open throughout the night. They carry thick candles weighing two to three pounds. All morning long, the church remains packed with worshippers. In the streets, religious events, and inside the church, men are never seen accompanied by their wives. Both men and women remain in separate groups.

Around eleven o'clock, preparations begin for the Crucifixion, which takes place fifteen minutes after noon. The Deposition (Descent from the Cross) is performed at three in the afternoon. This is followed by the *Santo Entierro* (Holy Burial) procession, accompanied by the *Virgen Dolorosa* (Our Lady of Sorrows). This procession follows the same route described earlier and is marked by great solemnity as all participants pray and sing hymns of praise throughout the entire journey. It returns to the church at seven-thirty in the evening, where the image of the Holy Burial is left. The *Virgen Dolorosa* is taken to the *Cofradía* (religious brotherhood house) of Saint James the Apostle, because, according to the belief of the people of Santiago Atitlán, she is sorrowful and goes to “*zarabandear*”⁸ (revel or dance) with the Apostle Saint James to relieve her sadness.

On *Sábado de Gloria* (Holy Saturday). At eight in the morning, prayer leaders and catechists gather at the parish church to witness the rituals of the rosary. Due to the absence of a parish priest, a local indigenous person carries out all the religious rites and delivers the sermon. This is followed by the singing of several religious hymns.

When the rosary concludes and all those present have exited the temple, the doors are shut, for the time of the *sacrificio* (ritual punishment) has arrived. Three men step forward from the crowd: the Community leader and two Church Stewards. After crossing themselves before the fruit monument inside the church, they proceed to a room in the convent. The First Church Steward stands at the doorway with a whip in hand. First, the elders and *cofrades* (members of the religious brotherhood) pass before him to receive lashes on the back. Before and after the lashes, they kiss his hand. Then, all other volunteers line up to be whipped, including men and women of various ages.

Meanwhile, the dancers who are to perform during the *fiesta titular* (patron saint's feast), and who have been organized in advance, head to the *Cofradía* of Saint James to escort the Virgin and the town's Patron Saint to the church, where they remain overnight. According to local belief, they spent the previous night celebrating.

On *Domingo de Resurrección* (Eastern Sunday), At seven-thirty in the morning, people of all ages and both sexes begin arriving at the church from every direction. Within thirty minutes, the church is filled. At the main entrance and near the baptistery, a group of around forty young women stands, each carrying a water jug. They are in charge of cleaning the entire church, and for this task, they bring water from the lake. They volunteer this labor out of devotion.

8 In Guatemala, *zarabandear* refers to taking part in a festivity where people dance and drink *aguardiente* (a traditional sugarcane liquor).

At eight o'clock, the rosary begins, sung and led by a local indigenous person selected for the occasion. It ends an hour and a half later. Once the service is over, two groups of dancers appear: one performs a dance called "*Mexicanos*", and the other, the "*Conquista*" (the Conquest). They dance throughout the morning in the church atrium. These are the same performers who will appear in the upcoming patronal feast. Afterward, the procession begins to return the images of the Patron Saint and the *Virgen Dolorosa*, which had spent the night in the church, back to the *Cofradía* of Saint James. The dancers accompany them, performing energetically throughout the procession route.

After the Holy Week celebrations, some of whose events are also dedicated to Maximón, he is undressed and disassembled at the *cofradía* to which he belongs. His parts and garments are wrapped in a new *petate* (woven mat) and placed inside a sack or net. The bundle is stored in the *tapanco* (attic) of the best room in the *cofradía*, and from that moment on, he is no longer visible to the public. Those who honor him during ordinary days can no longer visit him.

As this narrative shows, Maximón, Don Pedro de Alvarado, Mam, or Quimón, continues to hold a prominent place in the minds of the indigenous people of the region. Nevertheless, opinions and faith regarding this figure have been increasingly divided as a result of exposure to modern civilization. Two main groups have emerged: one composed of elders and young illiterates who advocate for the continuation of rituals in his honor; and the other, composed of young people, both men and women, who are catechists and mostly literate, and who oppose these practices. They argue that the veneration of this figure discredits the Catholic faith and makes visitors believe the people of Santiago Atitlán are still backward.

In the year this information was recorded, 1954, there was no resident priest in Santiago Atitlán. However, the priests who had served in previous years had exerted some influence over the catechists, who closely followed their instructions. This led to concern among Maximón's followers that a public conflict might break out, provoked by catechist sympathizers who strongly opposed having the image displayed in the church atrium, especially since it led to excessive drunkenness among the indigenous people at the temple entrance. At one point, a priest who opposed the continuation of the Maximón rituals confiscated the image from the local people. Outraged, they appealed to the authorities for permission to preserve their ancestral custom. Permission was granted, and the image was returned to them.



Maximón, or Don Pedro de Alvarado (center), the Telenel in charge of dressing and carrying him (left), and the Cofrade of the Santa Cruz (right).