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THE DAY THE SHAMAN CAME TO TOWN

by Manuel F. Medrano

“There are people who are prepared beyond our comprehension...very intelligent, capable people, more than we know...There’s a world behind us that we don’t know. Years later, I wish I would have valued him (don Jacinto) more.”¹

The Classic Maya flourished in southern Mexico and central America between 300 and 900 A.D. Their architectural, mathematical and astronomical achievements are legendary and continue to be the subject of numerous investigations. A central element in the Mayan way of life was its society, and within that hierarchy was the shaman, a healer and intermediary between the natural and supernatural world with the ability to transport power from one world to another. This ahmen or “the one who knows” prayed to the rain god, Chaac, to end droughts and facilitate bountiful harvests.²

At the dawn of the new millennium in January 2000, Don Jacinto Tzab Chac, a traditional Mayan shaman, visited a professor in the lower Rio Grande Valley because he wanted more people to know that Mayan shamans still existed. During his stay he shared his life story and a tradition over 2000 years old, the bringing of the rain. Those who met him and witnessed his ceremony cannot explain what happened but will never forget it.

Tzab Chac was born in 1930 in Canicab, a small farming municipality about one hundred miles from Merida, Yucatan. At fourteen, his life changed dramatically when he accompanied his father, Ramiro Tzab Cel, to the nearby community of Uman. There, lived a well-respected shaman named Feliciano Caamal Yerbes, who, people believed, had the ability protect the farmers’ fields. Tzab Chac was so profoundly impressed with Yerbes’ ceremony that he, almost jokingly, asked the shaman to teach him. Yerbes took his request seriously and agreed to teach him “el don,” the gift. During the next three months, Tzab Chac visited and learned from him in Uman. To receive immunity from the sicknesses of those he attempted to heal, he was symbolically given to the guardians, “donado a los guardianes” in the jungle. For the ceremony, Don Feliciano wrapped his young student in a coarse

cotton cloth blanket (manta), giving him a mummy-like appearance, and placed him on a wooden table. Caamal Yerbes then sacrificed several birds and recited prayers to guardians in the four corners of the earth. Tzab Chac, only fourteen, was the youngest of only four students who learned enough from Don Feliciano to become traditional spiritual shamans.³

Over the years, his reputation as a shaman grew. Don Jacinto tended to clients not only from Cozumel and Cancun in southern Mexico, but others from Europe and the United States. His work as a spiritualist, herbalist and healer combined the Mayan and Catholic faiths, and his ceremonies were in Mayan and Spanish. Many of his cures included water that he believed had been blessed by God. ⁴

By the end of the twentieth century, don Jacinto enjoyed a global following. Nowhere was this more evident than at the Chichen Itza ceremonies during the annual Spring Equinox. Attended by Individuals from all over the world, these events celebrated Mayan traditions of astronomy and spirituality. In 1998 a delegation from Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico attended. Included were Profesora Sam Y. D'Juarez, Juani Garcia, and Bertha Turribiates, who vividly remembers the experience and seeing don Jacinto for the first time,

All the attendees, including the group from Matamoros walked early in the morning into a stadium in Merida and were informed about proper etiquette and mindset and what to expect when we saw don Jacinto. Later, we travelled to Chichen Itza and congregated at the base of el Castillo, the temple of Kukulcan, (the wind and knowledge deity). Holding hands, we walked up the narrow steps of the temple, moving in a serpent-like motion. As we climbed, my friend Sam Y., pointed to four iguanas that were ascending with us. She called them guardians (guardians) and said that they were protecting the temple. We then descended the temple using chains because the steps were very narrow. Next, we were told to climb a tall hill close to el Castillo. When we arrived at the top, there were people dancing and performing Mayan music. Some were spreading incense among the many who were sitting. It was extremely cloudy. Soon, a man (don Jacinto) stands, and in a ritual, says that the sun will emerge through the clouds at twelve noon. I doubted it because what I saw was imminent rain. Suddenly, the sun emerged in all its splendor. I would not lie to you. It happened, and I cannot explain it. ⁵

After the ceremony, the three women mentioned to the shaman that I was interested in Mayan culture and included units about it in my college courses. Profesora D'Juarez then informed me that don Jacinto would like to meet me in Yucatan. I expressed my interest; however, because of my academic schedule, I would be unable to until the Summer.

Haci pasas las cosas is a Spanish phrase that translates into “that’s the way things occur”. The new millennium began that way for me. On a Saturday morning as I sat in my office, I received a phone call from Profesora D’ Juarez. She said that the shaman still wanted to meet me. I reiterated that it would be in summer. What she said next stunned me. She, don Jacinto, and several of his followers were at the Gateway International Bridge in Brownsville. The profesora asked me to meet them there and asked if I could speak to James Steele, the customs agent who would host them. The shaman’s visit was arranged, and he stayed at Mr. Steele’s home for five days.

An informal reception for the shaman was held on Sunday and included his entourage from Merida, friends of James Steele, and other interested invitees. As people were mingling, I noticed two easy chairs facing each other in the living room. Soon, don Jacinto approached and asked to speak with me. I agreed, and we proceeded to the chairs. I knew that it would not be a chat about the weather. He then he said that he had some questions about the Mayans. It brought back flashbacks of my graduate school oral exams, but I listened and answered. From the milpas to Kukulkan, from the calendar to Xibalba, from Chac to Chac Mool, he asked questions with an urgency to test my knowledge and interest. After what seemed an eternity, but, in reality, only an hour, he asked what he could do for me. Fresh from the question and answer session, I asked him to speak at the university, and to, in brief form, conduct his rain ceremony for a larger audience. Additionally, I requested that the Media Services videotape it. With a disarming look, he agreed. On the following Tuesday, don Jacinto and D’ Juarez met with me, a few faculty and some of my students at the university. The total did not exceed twenty. The profesora introduced him. He spoke briefly about his life and a presented a small symbolic offering of bread and water to the guardians of the sacred cenote (sinkhole) in Chichen Itza. Don Jacinto also requested that I visit him in Merida and that I secure a venue for a larger audience and more extensive ceremony on Wednesday evening. I spoke to Ramon de Leon, co-founder of the Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center, in San Benito. He immediately agreed to host the shaman at the Center, which accommodated about one hundred people. I communicated with faculty, students and community members in Brownsville who might be interested in attending. Ramon did the same in San Benito and Harlingen.

On Wednesday afternoon, five of us, including the shaman, went to the HEB grocery store to purchase fruits, grains, bread and incense for the evening ceremony. Don Jacinto was dressed entirely in white. He was about five feet tall and his face resembled those on the hieroglyphs at Mayan centers. As we walked through the aisles, people looked at him curiously and seemed to melt to the sides. When we reached the checkout counter, some customers stared in uncertainty; some, in awe.

After arriving at the Center, the shaman and profesora Juarez meticulously prepared an altar, and on it, they placed balche (fermented drink from the bark of the Lonchocarpus tree with honey added), leaves, and the items purchased earlier. A

capacity audience of nearly one hundred people was seated when the program began at 6:00 p.m. The people in attendance included a diverse collection of curious, yet skeptical medical professionals, academics, musicians and various members of the community who attended the Center's programs regularly. Some just wandered in off the street.

Don Jacinto was introduced by profesora Juarez, who had been his disciple for three years and travelled with him in southern Mexico. She explained that he was an authentic Mayan shaman who served over 100 communities. He possessed the power and knowledge to call, ask, and make offerings to the guardians and mother earth. His ceremonies were traditional and profound, requesting the guardians, thanking them for their presence and asking them for protection. Flowers, cactus, incense, and fruits were included in the offering. Tzab Chac then assured us that the guardians had removed the negative energies from people and places everywhere, including the Rio Grande Valley. I was standing against a wall near the altar and saw both confusion and enthusiasm in the eyes of an audience who clearly had not expected this. 6

Don Jacinto began by saying that he was born in Yucatan and was much more fluent in Mayan than Spanish. He did not speak English. He used Spanish to explain activities in the ritual. He began, "thank you. I will present the offerings not only to your teacher and you, but to everyone, all of you, and I will offer the seeds to the mother earth... so there will be an abundance to all the children of the world. We all know that we must give thanks...to our mother earth because she gave us life...I will ask permission from my Mayan guardians...because they are owners of the cenote (sacred sinkhole), mother earth and temples. They are especially spiritual."7

The one and one-half hour ceremony was a hybrid of Mayan and Catholic rituals. He began by petitioning the twenty-four guardians to protect the Center and thanking them for the energies they provided. He prayed in Spanish, then prayed and sang in Mayan, and periodically asked us if we understood. Of course, we did not. Don Jacinto asked to be blessed, so he, in turn, could bless the community. Candles were lit and balche was brought to him with offerings of seeds, fruits and grains to be given to the mother earth. Jacinto explained that these were preparations to bring the rain. The traditional ceremony in Yucatan was three days and three nights and this was only a brief re-enactment. He also inquired if we were happy. The shaman said that his heart felt good and even the teacher (me) would be happy.

Don Jacinto explained that in Merida, petitions for rain were presented for bountiful harvests and to eliminate negativity in the indigenous communities. He then clearly said that within an hour, it would rain at the Center. He also asked the audience if they believed him. I was facing the audience and wish I could put to paper the expressions on their faces. He then recited a Mayan chant that was

probably 1,500 years old and then discreetly walked over to me and whispered, “when do you want it to rain?” I replied that a good time would be when he closed his hands in prayer at the end of the ceremony. When that occurred, I could hear the large raindrops splattering against the old windows followed by strong winds, thunder and lightning. People crowded around the windows and the front door. Some were amazed; some, euphoric; many, in disbelief as they walked to their cars in the squalls of rain.⁸

Ten years later, Ramon de Leon, dentist and co-founder of the Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center, remembered that January evening and the end of the ceremony,

I’m a skeptic to begin with... That’s just my nature... as I recall... it was a normal hot sunny day... a gentleman I don’t believe in says, ‘it’s going to rain,’ {laughs}... I was there folks... There is thunder, and then it starts to rain, I mean legitimate rain; I saw this... no reason for us to believe that it was going to rain and definitely no reason for me to believe that this man was going to be involved in making something of that nature occur... If somebody ten years later had told me that they had experienced it, I wouldn’t have believed them... but I don’t know if there was an explanation for it... It becomes part of you.⁹

Peter Gawenda, a dean at the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College, also attended and recalled,

I do remember when he promised the rain, and the rain came... there was nothing in the forecast; in fact, when we came in, there were no clouds in the sky... He somehow must have exerted powers or he had knowledge about certain conditions that we didn’t know... He didn’t come across as a powerful individual... very humble... I remember one remark that he made to me is that everyone of us has certain powers, but as we don’t know ourselves; we don’t know about our powers... we need to know ourselves before we can access our powers and our abilities.¹⁰

Don Jacinto’s sense of humor was infectious. During the ceremony, he asked if I could see the guardians, and all I could muster was a weak smile. I sat next to him as we returned to Brownsville in the rain. He nudged me and asked how I rated his rain ceremony, “de uno a diez, maestro, pegue si quiera un siete?” (On a scale of one to ten, professor, did I at least hit seven?). I replied, “pego un diez.” (You hit a ten.”).¹¹

The following day, we met at a local taqueria. After lunch, we spoke briefly in the parking lot. When I asked him about what might happen in 2012, he replied that it was only the end of a cycle on the Mayan calendar and not the end of the world. Don Jacinto was vehement, however, about taking better care of our madre tierra (mother earth). Ecological abuse was a factor in the demise of the great Mayan civilization and might well be a factor in ours.¹² He asked me to visit him in Yucatan, but I did not – a regretful mistake. I never saw him again and was told by profesora Sami that he died on Easter Saturday in 2002.

Nearly twenty years have passed since the day the shaman came to town. When my son, Estevan, and I produced a documentary about him in 2009, we needed some footage of rain. The day we began editing, it rained. Don Jacinto's presence was undeniable, his demeanor and confidence, unforgettable. When I encounter one of those in attendance that night at the Center, inevitably, don Jacinto's ceremony becomes the topic of conversation. At home, I prominently display the gourd and seeds he gave me that evening. They remind me of the importance of respecting even what I do not understand, yet vividly remember, about my own culture. And when the rain comes, it still reminds me of him.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Interview with Bertha Turribiates. August 15, 2018.
- 2 Alberto Ruz, *The Mayas* (Mexico D.F.: Salvat, 1992), 135.
- 3 Las Ensenazas del H'men don Jacinto Tzab, Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center program, 27 de enero de 2000.
- 4 Roberto Lopez Mendez y Evilacio Pereira, *Logra H'Men Maya*, 2.
- 5 Interview with Bertha Turribiates. February 26, 2010.
- 6 Shaman don Jacinto's ceremony in San Benito, Texas, January 27, 2000.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Interview with Ramon de Leon. February 26, 2010.
- 10 Interview with Peter Gawenda. February 26, 2010.
- 11 Conversation with don Jacinto Tzab Chac. January 27, 2000.
- 12 Ibid., January 28, 2000.

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