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## **Power in Places: Investigating the Sacred Landscape of Iximche', Guatemala**

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**Research Year:** 2007

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Postclassic

**Location:** Sacatepéquez, Escuintla, Chimaltenango, and Sololá, Guatemala

**Site:** Iximche'

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## **Abstract**

Following leads from colonial documents, community spiritual leaders (*ajq'ija'* "daykeepers"), municipal officials and town residents, over fifty sacred sites spread across the four principal Kaqchikel departments were visited, ritually acknowledged, and surveyed. Oral social histories of the sites were collected. Town spiritual guardians were identified. Calendrical associations with the altars were noted. Though some site names and even altar locations have changed over time, day associations appear to be more stable. Many sites were found to be recently abandoned, some actively destroyed or barricaded, others in open contestation between religious factions; nevertheless, major pilgrimage sites are heavily frequented.

## **Resumen**

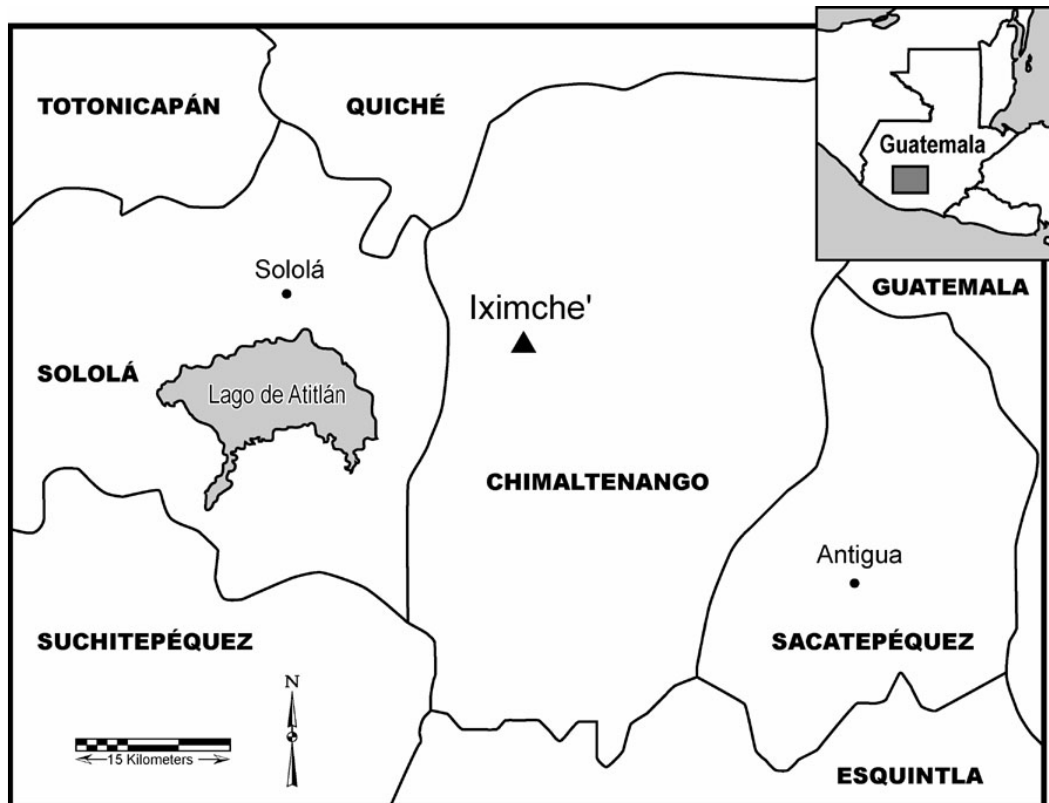
Basándose en las indicaciones de documentos coloniales, las de los guías espirituales (los *ajq'ija'* "contadores de los días), las de los autoridades municipales y las de los pobladores, se reconocieron (con los ritos y mapeos debidos) más que cincuenta lugares sagrados en los cuatro principales departamentos Kaqchikeles. Se identificaron los guardianes espirituales de los pueblos visitados. Las asociaciones caléndricas de los altares fueron anotados. Aunque se han cambiado algunos nombres de los altares, y a veces hasta los mismos altares se han mudado, las asociaciones caléndricas parecen ser bastante estables. Se vió que muchos sitios se han caído en desuso recientemente; algunos han sido destruídos o vedados; otros se encuentran en pleitos abiertos entre facciones religiosas; sin embargo, los sitios mayores, centros de peregrinaje, presentan altares muy activos, altamente utilizados.

## **Introduction, Field Methods, Colonial Documents and Historic Sites**

### ***Introduction***

This report presents the results of the sacred landscape field investigations conducted in 2007 in the south central highlands of Guatemala covering the area from Antigua region west to the Lake Atitlán region. Research focused in the departments of Sacatepéquez, Escuintla, Chimaltenango, and Sololá, with emphasis on the sacred geography of the Kaqchikel capital of Iximche' (near

modern-day Tecpán) and surrounding regions ([Figure 1](#)). Fifty sacred sites were recorded during summer investigation. Site types included caves, rockshelters, large boulders, piles of rocks, archaeological site mounds, stelae, modern cemeteries, springs or seeps, rivers, trees, animal burrows, and mountaintops.



**Figure 1. Project area in Guatemala.**

### ***Field Methods***

Various methods were employed during the course of this project. These included reviewing ethnohistorical documents and archaeological site reports; interviewing community members about sacred site locations; interviewing ritual specialists on site locations, corresponding day names, and site utilization trends; reconnaissance survey to locate sites; and the recording of sites through descriptions, photo documentation and GPS coordinate collection. Because of the sensitive nature of these sites we opted to not become obtrusive in conducting detailed mapping of the sites, out of respect for those community members who were visiting the sites and performing their own ceremonies. As part of our work, a ceremony or lighting of candles was offered at each site that was visited. Only after receiving a positive response from our ceremonial fire or candles were we then able to photograph and document the site. Finally, because team members had visited some sacred sites in recent years with the

same understanding of knowing about “power in places”, we decided to include those data in this report because of their relevance to the project. This report, therefore, provides a synthesis of study spanning many field seasons of investigation of sacred landscape in the southern highlands of Guatemala.

### ***Colonial Documents and Historic Sites***

The colonial documents known variously as the Kaqchikel Chronicles (Maxwell and Hill 2006), *Anales de los Cakchiqueles* (Recinos 1950) (Brinton 1885), and *Título de Xpantzay* in the *Crónicas Indígenas de Guatemala* (Recinos 1957), cf. Carmack (colonial documents 1973) list many place names. Some of these place names refer to towns, both pre- and post-contact. The principal document written by the Xajil lineage scribe, herein the Xajil Chronicle (Maxwell and Hill 2006), sometimes makes explicit the relationship between pre-contact and post-contact town names. For example, Xiwanul became San Gregorio, Chaq'ij Ya' became Santo Tomás. These name changes are then documented. In these cases, there is no relationship between the original town name and the saint assigned to that town. *Xiwanul* is derived from *xiwan* “wildcat” and an abstract stem formative //VI//<sup>1</sup>; San Gregorio is not associated in any special way with wildcats. *Chaq'ij Ya'* means “dry or dried up water”. Again Santo Tomás has no symbolic link to water or to drought. The saints were assigned according to the Roman Catholic calendar and the date of the *entradas* rather than taking into account prior indigenous names. Most towns in Guatemala do retain an indigenous epithet, as a specifying tag following the name of the saint, designated as the patron for that town, and whose saint day became the titular festival of the community. Most of such indigenous tags are in Nahuatl, however, rather than in the indigenous languages. These Nahuatl tags are largely missing from the Kaqchikel colonial documents cited above, though the Kaqchikel did have active trade and political relations with the Nahuatl prior to the arrival of the Spanish. Nahuatl loans in the sixteenth century Kaqchikel documents are largely in terms for military equipment and defenses. Two month names are also borrowed into colonial Kaqchikel and K'iche' calendars from Nahuatl. However, the names of towns in Guatemala are given in Kaqchikel with or, more often, without a Spanish sobriquet. Towns in non-Maya areas of México are given with Nahuatl names.

In this project, we have concentrated on those areas named in the colonial documents which are currently inhabited by the Kaqchikel and their Tz'utujil

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<sup>1</sup> Modern Tecpanecos folk etymologize this name as Siwan+ ul > Siwan “ravine” and ul “landslide”. They note that the neighborhood/canton of Totonicapán that still bears the name Chaq'ij Ya' is bordered by a deep ravine, which has frequent landslides.

cousins. We did not undertake retracing the migration path outlined from México. We began the reconnaissance in the area of Tecpán Guatemala/Iximche'. The pre-contact Kaqchikel capital was at Iximche'. There they received *Tonatiw*<sup>2</sup> Pedro de Alvarado. In recording the founding of Iximche', the Xajil scribe lays out the routes of entry, the border-defining landmarks, and those salient features of the landscape whose *rajawala*' "spirit owners" define the social space of the town and protect it. Each Maya town in our survey is served by at least four guardians, roughly aligned with cardinal points. Within the town proper, a fifth site typically centered the community. The Spanish priests were assiduous in siting their first churches over these central altars. In the case of Iximche', local oral histories record that the first Catholic priests brought the carved stone from the altar at the pre-contact Iximche' tribunal site, K'otb'al K'wal, into the town center and installed it beneath the principal altar of the Spanish church. Recinos (1950) records going to view the stone, but found that the jewel had been replaced with a plain construction block.

In beginning the modern documentation of these sites, we begin with those places named in the Chronicles and in the Xpantzay document. An initial hypothesis of the research was that each named site where there are archaeological remains exposed would be currently be treated as sacred, its historicity providing a concrete connection with the past, hence, the ancestors, who are invoked in modern Maya ceremonies. This hypothesis was disproved. While accorded respect due to age and this connection, not all such sites are now treated as sacred spaces in which rituals are performed. Remains of pre-contact buildings are routinely recycled, sometimes into new altar spaces, sometimes into secular structures. Some carved stones have been systematically destroyed, others looted and sold. Smaller artifacts regularly plowed up in fields have been sold off, sometimes by municipal authorities, sometimes by the field owner. Others place such relics on household altars; still others report being instructed in dreams as to proper care of such objects. Many sites with extant building forms, stelae, or carved inscriptions are current ritual sites. In section 5 ([Site Descriptions](#)), we outline which sites identified show no sign of ritual activity, which are known to have recently been abandoned, which are active, and which are pilgrimage sites.

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<sup>2</sup> *Tonatiw* is a Nahuatl epithet. The term is derived from the verb //tona// "heat" and the versive //tiw//. This is spelled *Tonatiuh* in colonial Nahuatl orthography. It means "heated"; as a nominal it would mean "heated one"; colonial documents often translate it as "Son of the Sun" *hijo del sol*.

### **Sites associated with Iximche'**

Recording the founding of Iximche', the Xajil Chronicle mentions Ratz'amüt, "the doves' salt". This site is a neighborhood/cantón of the modern town of Tecpán, the area in which the Spanish resettled the Iximche' populace. It is still known by that name. The Chronicle records that the settlement at Iximche' extended to Pa K'elaj. Pa K'elaj is an active altar site. We did not visit this site to take GPS readings, but two ajq'ijab' report knowing and using this altar, which is several hours walk from Iximche's center.

The Xajil Chronicle records the migration of people from both the Lake Atitlán area and that stretching from Mixco to Palín. The scribe records a battle at Tukuru' Kaqixala'. This area is now an *aldea* of Sololá, though the name has been shortened to Kaqixa'. There are archaeological remains of the town and at least two ajq'ijab' from nearby *aldeas* maintain altars there. However, we found no residents of the *aldea* who themselves know or use the altars. We did not survey these altars.

The Xajil Chronicle goes on to detail the defeat of various polities occupying the lands to be incorporated into Iximche'. Once the area was amalgamated, the ceremony of taking the staff of office was performed atop a hill west of Tecpán, Kaqjay. *Kaqjay*, literally "red house", refers now to museums or public exposition halls. Fray Thomas de Coto (1983) in his dictionary compiled between 1650 and 1656 defines *kaqjay* as a watchtower or guardpost. There are several hills and caves in the central highlands known by this name. The Kaqjay mentioned in the Chronicle has been variously identified. Brasseur de Bourbourg and Recinos following him (Recinos 1950) places this site one league west of Rabinal, far removed from the lands just subjugated and from the town whose founding is being enacted. It seems more likely that the Kaqjay in question is one in the immediate vicinity of Tecpán. Swezey (1998) locates Kaqjay south of Iximche' between Patzún and Patzicía. Fuentes y Guzman (1969-1972) records Kaqjay as a small hill to the west overlooking the city. Aparicio and Morgan (1999) suggest that the correct Kaqjay is the watchtower located in the Tecpán *aldea* of the same name. Modern daykeepers in Tecpán, Waykan Carlos Tz'i'an and Cristóbal Cojti', have shown Maxwell the hill now bearing this name. It lies to the west of Tecpán, but is not visible from the town center. This hill, however, is recognized as one of the town guardians and is an active ritual site.

Jolom B'alam is another hill site near Iximche' mentioned in the Chronicles as an outlying stronghold, which resisted the Spanish after the Iximche' revolt. It too is an active ritual site, but not a guardian point. We did not survey this site.

Next the Chronicle mentions struggles to control access to the site of Iximche'. The hill K'atb'e Yaki', (lit. burned-road Mexican) lies to the north of town and, presumably, overlooked the main route traveled by Kaqchikel and Nahuatl couriers and merchants, linking these polities. This name is not active today.

Caliaj < *Q'ali'aj* (lit. crown-non-possessed) is tentatively identified by daykeeper Cristobal Cojti' as this site. Carved tenon heads were found here. Maxwell visited the site with Ma<sup>3</sup> Cojti' in 2003. One tenon head, in the form of a carved puma head, was found. It had been moved from the field where discovered to a spot between two house lots, where it served as a boundary marker. There was no evidence of ritual use: no offerings, no burn circles. The homeowners willingly allowed us to take pictures of the tenon. They offered the observation that this is one of several that had been found in the town. A late night interview with a daykeeper living in the village center revealed that most of the other tenon heads, perhaps 10, carved in various animal forms (deer, jaguar, and bird) had been broken and flung down a ravine by an Evangelical church group. An older daykeeper living near the town accessway described the selling of one tenon head to the municipality of Totonicapán. No one in the town had active knowledge of the hillside above the town serving as a waystation or a port of entry into Kaqchikel territory. There was consciousness of being surrounded by K'iche'-speaking villages.

Many wars later in the relation, a battle was fought at Q'osib'äl Koqolajay, (lit. flail lightning). No place with this name is currently known in the environs of Iximche', but the daykeepers do recognize a spot between Tecpán and Patzún where there are two small mounds as *Q'osib'äl Q'opoj*. Ma Cojti' reports that daykeepers from Tecpán, Patzún and Patzicía perform ceremonies at this site. Maxwell visited this site with Ma Cojti' and Kawoq Baldomero Cuma Chávez, a daykeeper from Sta. María de Jesús. The mound is a wooded hillock rising from broccoli and bean fields. The supervisor of the fieldworkers gave us permission to cross the fields and perform a ceremony at the site. He observed that the altar is popular. Nonetheless, the flat surface of the platform top was littered with leaves. Brush encroached on all sides, leaving only four square meters open. There were no charred remains or soot on the top, though there was litter on the sides from incense wrappings.

Iximche' itself is a sacred site. Daykeepers regard the entire archaeological complex as hallowed, imbued with the spirits of their ancestors. Particularly strong spiritual connections can be made at altars in the front plazas, those cleared for tourist access. The Xajil Chronicle relates the fear and anger engendered in *Tonatiw* by a night spent in the palace structure behind the *tzompantli* altar. However, rituals are not routinely held in the front, open plazas, rather the smaller fourth plaza, furthest removed from the site entrance, is reserved for ceremonies. The local association of *ajq'ijab'* has managed to get the government to declare this back plaza a sacred precinct. Signage informs

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<sup>3</sup> *Ma* is the honorific title for adult males.

any tourists who make it that far that the area is consecrated and that they should treat the altars and any celebrants present with respect. The back plaza is a very active site. Altars are in use on both the east and west sides of the central mound. The plaza on the eastern side of the mound is dotted with burn circles. For important ritual dates, such as Waqxaqi' B'atz', "Eight Howler/Monkey", hundreds of people may attend and the central offering fire may be meters across. Occasionally, permission has been granted for ceremonies in the front plaza. In 2007, Ma Cojti' performed a purification ritual in the front plaza, following President George W. Bush's visit to the site. But most ritual activity is performed at the back plaza.

There is a subsidiary sacred site on the east side of the ravine behind the back plaza. A small chambered cave stretches back from the escarpment and has a tunnel in the upper part of the room. The entrance to this tunnel is barely wide enough for a small adult's head and shoulders. Scott and Maxwell tried to enter this aperture but could not. Tecpán residents affirm, however, that they have entered this tunnel. This is sacred space and spiritual permission is needed to gain access. Those who enter without proper authorization may be "won" by the *rajawal*. They may simply not come out, or be transported to Totonicapán or to Saqulew. This site has no formal name beyond Iximche' Jul, "Iximche' Cave".

The Xpantzay Chronicle lists other places around Tecpán as it sets out the boundaries of the Xpantzay lands. Some boundary lines are simply given as abutting lands of other families or townships, but some landmarks are named. K'otb'a(l) K'wal, lit. carved jewel, is named here. This hilltop site lies beyond the landspur on which Iximche' proper rests. It consists of one large mound and two small plazas with low bounding platforms. Fuentes y Guzmán identifies this site as the pre-conquest seat for administration of justice, with condemned felons being executed by the expedient of throwing them into the ravine. He records the taking of the carved jewel, central to the altar of this court of justice, by the first priests and its placement in the main church in Tecpán. Hill and Maxwell visited this site in 2005 with Pakal B'alam Rodríguez Guaján. Looters' trenches on the east side of the main mound attested to the recognition of this site as a trove of pre-contact Maya material culture, but there was no evidence of ritual activity on the main mound, or on the eastern plaza floor. In the smaller western plaza, completely shaded by brush, there were three burn circles indicating current ritual activity. The hillside and the surrounding fields are known by the *cacerío* name Xe' Atz'am, lit. below salt. There are alkali salt seeps on nearby hills. Modern daykeepers folk etymologized the name K'otb'äl K'wal to K'otb'äl K'uwal, "carved/excavated well", and suggested that there might very well be dug wells in the area, as a perennial stream runs just to the north. This stream is mentioned immediately after K'otb'äl K'wal in the Xpantzay Chronicle.

In the Xpantzay account of the founding of Iximche' and the original boundaries of the lineage holdings, they follow the Xajil Chronicle in first mentioning Ratz'amüt. They then refer to Saqtz'ikinél Juyu'. This hill is one of the four



guardian mountains of Tecpán. Its name has been simplified to Tz'ikin Juyu', though a few older daykeepers recognize the full appellation. There are two active altars on this hill. Maxwell visited one altar with Ma Cojti' and another local daykeeper, Marina. The altar lay at the foot of a tall rockface. The ledge on which the altar rested and upon which the celebrants knelt, prayed, sat and communed was narrow, less than a meter wide. (See discussion below, of the association of altars and calendrical days and their characteristics.)

The Xpantzay Chronicle mentions Pulch'ich' as another boundary landmark. Pulch'ich', lit. rust-metal, is a pilgrimage site today, lying far north of Tecpán and overlooking Lake Atitlán. Its name unchanged since first recorded in the colonial documents, Pulch'ich' is a huge escarpment. A small niche above the cliff-face allows daykeepers to communicate with the *rajawal juyu'*, the spirit-owner of the hill, to ask permission to proceed to the altars in order to perform ceremonies, make petitions and offer thanks. If permission is granted, a downward-sloping crack in the rockface allows access to 21 altars. There is an altar for each day in the *cholq'ij*, 260-day ritual calendar, and an altar for Ma Ximon<sup>4</sup>. Many altars at this site are heavily used, despite the difficulty of access. Some daykeepers bring ropes to secure their clients during the descent and/or to provide handholds. Three altars at this site were surveyed, as well as the overlook above the cliff-face.

Other Tecpán/Iximche' landmarks and boundaries mentioned in the Xpantzay Chronicle are streams rather than altars.

The sites named in the Xajil and Xpantzay Chronicles do not exhaust the sacred landscape of the town. The remaining cardinal guardians and subsidiary altar sites are listed below in the discussion of each *municipio's* hallowed grounds.

The Chronicles also mention the passage of the Kaqchikel through the Lake Atitlán area, the division of the lands with the Tz'utujil and the founding of towns there. One of the first prominences mentioned is Kaqb'atz'ulu'. Maxwell and García visited this site, which overlooks the Lake on the west. Here the Chronicles record that a powerful opposing champion, Tolk'om, was defeated and quartered, the pieces thrown into the water, earning the spot a second name, Tza'm Tzaqb'äl Tolk'om, "point of the falling of Tolk'om". Today this name has been shortened to B'a Tz'ulu' and then folk etymologized to Pa Tz'ulu' "at the reeds". Emigrants from this area have carried the name of this important site

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<sup>4</sup> Ma Ximon has been variously identified as San Simón, Judas Iscariot, the modern avatar of a pre-contact earth lord, and the culture hero/saint Ma Francisco Sojuel. cf. Stanzione (2000) for more interpretations of Ma Ximon, "the great tied-one", ri Rijiläj Mam, the very/old elder.

with them, renaming local prominences commemoratively. Emigrants to Santa María Visitación brought the name with them. The Kaqb'atz'ulu' in Santa María, four kilometers distant, does not give access to the lake, and can not be the site of the original sacrifice, but remains of ritual importance to the Visitecos.

The relation of the Chronicles lists Kaqb'atz'ulu' in succession with other spots around the Lake. Xe Kaqab'äj, "below the throwing stone", is only a kilometer away from the Tolk'om sacrifice site, and no doubt references this sacrifice as well. Xe Kaqab'äj is also an altar site, though most of the archaeological remains there were buried by post-earthquake debris falls.

The Xajil Chronicles relate that the Tz'utujileb' left Xe Kaqab'äj moving into occupied lands, where they confronted the Ajtz'inikajay and the aj Pa Wakal. These gentilics have now become place names in Santiago Atitlán. Pa Wakal was an active ritual site. Divers in Lake Atitlán have recovered huge incense burners from this site.

The Xajil Chronicle next recounts the clash with the Spanish at Rula' Uja(y), "the house of the visitors". Today this name has been shortened to Ula' jay "stranger/visitor house". There is an inactive altar here.

The sites next mentioned in the Chronicle are Pan Pati', an active altar site outside of Santa Cruz la Laguna, and Pa Yan<sup>5</sup> Ch'oköl<sup>6</sup>, a non-active altar of San Marcos La Laguna. Maxwell and García visited Pan Pati'<sup>7</sup>. There are a series of altars along the streambed to the west of Sta. Cruz. A set of large stones mark the entrance to the sacred precinct. Here one asks permission to enter. Beyond this point we localized two more altars. A third was high on an escarpment. There were indications of a fourth site across the stream; but a recent flood had covered the area with huge boulders and debris. Between the entrance to the consecrated area and the first altar, several new houses are under construction.

Pa Yan Ch'oköl, though known in San Marcos and San Juan, is not active. Residents of San Marcos and of Santa Cruz often cross the lake to lands near San Lucas Tolimán to celebrate rituals. San Marqueños have land and migratory

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<sup>5</sup> *Yan* is a noun classifier, a specialized pronoun form. It co-occurs with or replaces nouns that refer to adult women. This classifier is today used only in San Marcos La Laguna and Santiago Atitlán.

<sup>6</sup> *Ch'oköl* means "straddling, astride".

<sup>7</sup> *Pati'* is not an active word in current Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil or K'ichee' usage; suggestions for the meaning of *Pan Pati'* include "amid the houses, the shacks" and "amid the oaks".

ties with farms on the south side of the lake. Thus, the Chronicle next mentions Pa Chi' Tulül<sup>8</sup>, "at the mouth of the zapote". While there are many zapote trees on the south side of the lake, the altar identified as Pa Chi' Tulül is at the foot of a large, lightning-blasted silk-cotton tree, a tree which signifies life and is itself medicinal. The tree is enormous and clearly visible above the surrounding canopy. Now a grade school nestles below its branches. Nonetheless, it is an active altar site. There was evidence of burns and offerings. A cooperative promoting sustainable agriculture and traditional medicine has established its headquarters below the rise on which the tree stands. They have built a secondary altar, taking some sacred material from the original site.

Pulch'ich' appears again as Kaqchikel warriors move out from the Lake. It should be noted that Kaqb'atz'ulu', Pulch'ich', and Pa Chi' Tulül form a triangle of intercommunication. There is line of sight connection between these points, but there is also a spiritual connection that can be called upon in ceremonies at each and any of these sites. This triangle defines the area of the Lake, itself the heart of this spiritual bowl.

The Xajil Chronicle further tells of the arrival of the culture hero, Q'aq'awitz, above the Lake. He arrives at the hill Pujujil, Raxone', "lit. suppurating, green-bird". Today Pujujil names three cantons of Sololá, numbered one-three. There was a major altar at the original Pujujil site, commemorating the arrival of Q'aq'awitz. However, a lake overlook and tourist market was placed at this point beside the Panamerican Highway and the altar was moved. Daykeepers were able to rescue and re-seat the main altar stones.

In the San Pedro La Laguna area, the Xajil Chronicle mentions neighboring sites of Kaqajpek and Salik'ajol. The first is a cave site, now called Xe Kaqpek "below the red cave". Salik'ajol is known and associated with the dancers who mask for traditional festivals. García has visited Xe Kaqpek.

The area between Xe Kaqpek and San Pedro is known as Ko'on. This name appears as a gentilic and as a place name in the Xajil Chronicle. Today Pedranos subdivide the area into Chu Suj, Pa Mes, Pan Alujay, and Tza'm Kaqjay. These areas occupy the strip between the highway and the Lake. In the middle of Pan Alujay there is a mound. This archaeological site is visited by tourists. The local ajq'ijab' have won national protection for the altars there and the site has been declared part of the national patrimony. In Santa Cruz la

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<sup>8</sup> The zapote of the lake region does not grow on the slopes going down to the coast. Its bark and its leaves are medicinal.

Laguna there is also a site known as Pa Ko'on. As the Ko'on lineage spread to occupy space, so the association of their name with these places evolved.

Pa Chalik B'aq, at the mound (of) bones, is mentioned in the circuit around the lake. The name refers to the mounds of bones returned to hunting altars. There are many such sites in and around San Juan and San Pedro La Laguna. Throughout the K'iche', Tz'utujil and Kaqchikel areas there are communities known by the abbreviated form: *Pa Chali*. García, Maxwell and Scott went with Dr. Linda Brown to visit one such altar in San Pedro, Pa Saq Mam, "at the white elder".

The Xajil Chronicle next mentions arriving at the K'iche' capital, Q'umarkaaj, Santa Cruz del Quiché. There are active altars here, but we did not move this far from the Kaqchikel heartland.

### **Cultural traits and histories**

Some of the sites listed in the Chronicles are named for and commemorate historic events, such as the defeat of Tolk'om. The Xajil Chronicle describes the rites the Kaqchikel leaders prescribed to memorialize Tolk'om's capture and sacrifice: *Tik'o jujun juna' xa tib'an wa'im, uk'a'am, xa kech'ab'in ak'wala'. Xa tunay chik ruk'exewach tikik'äq b'ila k'a tüx ri Tolk'om!* "Let it come to pass each year that food and drink be prepared; that children shoot arrows. With the tunay [tree] as his substitute, let them shoot as if it were Tolk'om!" While subsequent rituals performed at these sites recall and celebrate these events, they also consecrate the space. The Xajil Chronicles gives four names associated with this original sacrifice: Kaqb'atz'ulu' (the mountain), Tza'm Tzaqb'al Tolk'om (the precipice from which his quartered and arrow riddled body was cast) and Pan Pati', Pa Yan Ch'oköl (sites next to the lake where the waters roiled stirred by the pieces of Tolk'om's body). Kaqb'atz'ulu' remains an active ritual site. The re-enactment of the arrow sacrifice is no longer performed, but shared food and drink remain necessary complements of ritual celebrations. Tza'm Tzaqb'al Tolk'om itself is not active, but a rock face below it, Xe Kaqab'äj, (below the casting stone, or as folk etymologized, below the red rock), remains in use. Both Pan Pati' and Pa Yan Ch'oköl continue to serve as spaces for spiritual contact, sacrifice and ritual.

Sites listed as settlements are also sacred sites, each with its guardians at the four<sup>9</sup> cardinal points and in the town center. (See the discussion of the guardian points for the communities surveyed, below, [section 3](#)). Just as permission of the *rajawal juyu'* must be obtained to enter sacred precincts to perform ceremonies, permission must be obtained to bring ritual objects into the spiritual sphere defined by the guardian's purview. Hinojosa (1999) details the preparations for the Cattle Dance in San Juan Comalapa, Chiq'a'l, Chi Xot. The dancers go to Momostenango, Chwa Tz'aq, to rent the dance paraphernalia: costumes, masks, scepters, and swords. They bring the materials to the edge of town, following the old road, rather than the paved entrance from the highway. Reaching the limit of the municipal sacred space, at the base of the guardian cliff, now known as Chwa Burro, they lay out the costumes. An ajq'ij welcomes the ritual paraphernalia and the spirits that give them their potency, blessing the costumes, masks and regalia. The dancers and their families join in this welcome ritual, feast and toast the costumes, making sure that the masks share in the offered liquor. They hold a vigil throughout the night. After thus having presented the dance paraphernalia to the local spiritual authorities, the dancers proceed into the town, where the costumes and equipment will be laid out on the dance leaders' altar, fed daily, and cared for while the dance troupe practices and then performs for the town.

Hinojosa (1999) also reports that the *rajawala'* extend their protection to the inhabitants. During the 35-year genocidal war, the Comalapa/Chi Xot *rajawala'* loosed jaguars in the hills surrounding the town, keeping both guerrilla and army movements contained.

In addition to current habitation areas and the sites of historic events, other names within the Chronicles refer to features of the natural landscape, hills, caves, ravines, trees, and swamps. Some of these such as B'ulb'ux Ya', the swamp near Santiago, Atitlán, and Pa Tulül, a site named for a zapote, but now represented by a silk-cotton tree, are still known and ritually active.

In undertaking the survey, the ajq'ijab' with whom we consulted were assiduous in introducing us to the ritual areas of most importance locally. They were

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<sup>9</sup> Though Western models refer to "four" cardinal points, there is good evidence that the Maya conception of space is and was three dimensional, so that the four corners are complemented by a central axis, with zenith and nadir defining fifth and sixth points. Modern altars mark all six points, each with its own associated color. Most complement these six points with cross-corners, but only the main six have directional associations; the cross-corners are instead associated with man, woman, protection, and ancestors. Pakal's tomb with the directional glyphs indexically placed on the corresponding walls, indicates the use of zenith and nadir as part of the directional complex in the Classic Period (Bricker 1983).

interested in the colonial document and its listed place names; indeed, we have provided copies of the relevant sections of the documents to many of our consultants at their request. However, they felt the reconnaissance of sacred space should be complete and up-to-date. Thus, we visited many sites not explicitly named in the Chronicles, or at least, not now known by the names given in the documents. But the communities know and live with the spirits and energies of the sites.

All the sacred sites share features which allow ajq'ijab' to recognize them, even if the site is inactive. Some features are apparent without spiritual training. Physical prominences generally have one or more associated altars. Large exposed vertical rock faces, rock overhangs, caves and tunnels are propitious spots for altars. Of course, not every rock or cliff is consecrated space. Ajq'ijab' can feel the energy of the physical environment. Once a spot has been identified as a portal for appropriate energy, then rituals may be performed there. Each rite in successfully establishing communication with the ancestors and the spiritual realm strengthens the connection provided by that portal. Each full ritual begins with a re-creation of the cosmos, establishing the four corners of terrestrial plane, erecting the sky, crafting woman, man, the human generations, and the spiritual plane. In counting the days, not in the yearly round, but in the ritual cycle (13 successive iterations of each day), time too is set in motion, yielding an Einsteinian universe, a space-time continuum.

The ritual invocation calls upon the celebrants' ancestors, both close genetic kin and legendary forebears, as well as on the spiritual agents of creation. These spirits, both human and supernatural, are guests at the banquet laid out as an offering. Part of the offering is presented through the ritual fire; part is laid or poured along the altar, proportions dictated by the knowledge granted the celebrant ajq'ij. The consumption rate of the fire indicates both the hunger of the spirits and their acceptance or rejection of the offerings and the petition. Fires at neglected ritual sites may burn very rapidly and part of the spiritual communication may include instructions for subsequent offerings to reactivate the site and supply further spiritual sustenance.

Each site has at least one day of the 260-day ritual calendar, the *cholq'ij* (cf. cognate Yucatec Maya *tzolk'in*), which is associated with that site. Each altar, then, can be named by its eponymous day(s), specified by both the day-named and its numeral coefficient, such as *Waqxaqi' I'x* "Eight Jaguar". Just as each day of the calendar round has certain virtues, making it propitious for certain undertakings and their associated petitions, so each ritual site with its associated day lends itself to these same undertakings and petitions.

Ajq'ijab' select specific days for ritual according to the needs of their clients. They likewise select the appropriate altars. If, for some reason, the ritual can not be done on the most propitious day, a series of accommodations can be made, establishing spiritual connections through the host day and invoking complexes

of associate day-bearers. Likewise, the altar chosen need not always be that associated with the day of the ritual celebration. One of the tasks of the *ajq'ij* is to negotiate the spiritual interrelations of the calendar day, the day-spirit of the altar, the day-spirit of the client, and that of the celebrant himself.

Every day in the *cholq'ij* has both positive and negative attributes. A person born on *Aq'ab'al*, for example, must be careful to avoid comfortable sloth, while opening herself to new beginnings. Likewise, energies accessed through altars can be channeled toward positive or negative ends. Moreover, negative energies may be harnessed to provide quick access to desired goals. The ritual offerings for negative energies differ from those for positive spiritual work. They include gasoline or kerosene and other agents that leave the rockfaces, altar surfaces, and environs coated in black, greasy soot. Just as positive ceremonial fires burn sugar, honey, tobacco and herbs to produce fresh-scented flames, negative fires burn acridly. Harsh materials, such as hot chilies, replace the herbs and sweet offerings. Perhaps not surprisingly, those doing negative work do not clean up their debris, but leave the area strewn with cans, paper, wrapping materials and empty liquor bottles. If much negative work has been done at an altar, the greasy coating and trash may inhibit access to the underlying positive energies; those wishing to access the positive aspects of the day-bearer(s) linked to these altars must find neighboring associated clean spaces. It is possible to clean these altars, but this requires work prior to arrival at the site with clients.

As the days are differentially susceptible to petition, so certain sites are differentially accessible. Tz'ik'in "Bird" altars are particularly sought after, as Tz'ik'in offers aid in commercial enterprises, in providing for one's family, and in new undertakings. However, Tz'ik'in altars seldom are easily approachable. They are often located on the sides of crags, accessible only in certain seasons or with ropes. Other altars protect themselves from inappropriate contact. Chwi' Kuplaj, a hillside rock prominence between Chi Xot and Sta. Apolonia, is known to hide itself from unsuitable petitioners. Some Chi Xot daykeepers who do not regularly do ritual at the site, but use it for special requests, report long hikes to reach the altar, with short returns after a successful petition. Other townsfolk who tried to find the altar reported missing it completely. We were fortunate in finding the altar within 300 meters of the roadway.

Another very delicate altar is that at Kwartel, above Sta. Cruz la Laguna. Several lower altars on the hillside were accessible, though lightly used. However, the principal altar was not visited in this survey. The proposed reconnaissance was cut short by Maxwell's fall down a precipice and subsequent trip to the hospital. Recounting this misadventure to daykeepers, including those from as far away as Tecpán and Sta. María de Jesús brought reassurances that the mountain was fractious and that our spiritual intent was not at fault. The altar in the community El Cementerio allows easy access to petitioners. The altar lies within the central patio of a resident's house. He discovered the altar when drilling for a well.

He moved his well-site and excavated around the altar, to expose all four engraved sides. He also carved offering niches in the excavation walls facing the altar. He charges a nominal fee for access to the altar and for maintaining the site. However, when the national Museum of Ethnography and Archaeology informed the *aldea* leaders that representatives were coming to take the altar to the capital and put it on display, the cars and truck commissioned for the job became lost in the surrounding byways and the relocation attempt was abandoned. Other sites, such as that Sta. Apolonia altar, Xe K'owil, are easily approachable, with multiple access paths. Sta. Apolonia's principal water source lies just behind the altar, so the precinct has been fenced off; community work levees keep the hilltop clear and simply ask daykeepers to dispose of their trash.

Most active sites have one or more human caretakers, often *ajq'ijab'*, but always spiritually qualified individuals. These caretakers are responsible for performing rituals at the sites on the days associated with the altars, as well as at prescribed intervals. Caretakers, due to their intimate connection with the sites, know those sacrifices which are most pleasing to the spirits who inhere in the site and to those who normally visit in answer to invocations. The caretakers are also responsible for maintaining the environs of the altar, keeping the area clear of debris. As most sacrifices include several classes of incense, which come wrapped in cornhusks; chocolate, wrapped in paper; and candles, bundled in newspaper, a ceremony will leave masses of debris, which must be disposed of.

Particular sites, especially those at tunnel/cave entrances, or those near rock faces, may be portals. Many *ajq'ijab'*, their clients and townspeople relate stories of people who either failed to ask permission to enter the sacred precinct and were won by the mountain spirit, either disappearing or being transported to other municipalities. The spirit of the hill behind Sta. Catarina Barahona conveys wanderers to San Martín Jilotepeque. The tunnel below the back plaza of Iximche' relocates those who enter inappropriately to Saqulew or to Totonicapán. Most communities also have reports of people who have gone to work for the mountain spirit in return for a boon, money, livestock, wild game, or a cure. These petitioners may disappear for days, months or even years, though the time absent is often experienced as less by the person working for the mountain. The spirit itself may manifest through these portals, often as an animal. At the *jul* site in Meq'ën Ya', the man who owned an inactive altar site saw several animals that disappeared into the hole/hillside, these included a fat hen and its chicks, a short fat dog, and a huge snake. Several other communities have hole or rock-face altars which similarly allow passage to spirit animals, usually chickens or snakes. At the Chwi' K'ajol site men working in the cornfields have seen a stranger, sometimes a man, sometimes a youth, climb up along the ravine only to disappear in the rock face. At an altar above Xe Na Koj spirit soldiers emerge at midnight, march in formation, and then re-enter solid rock faces.

There is a sense in which all terrestrial space is sacred, but some locales are imbued with greater reserves of energy or act as portals for communication with



the spiritual world. Sometimes these concentrations of energy are primed by key historic events. Sometimes the energy inheres in a physical aspect of the space, a rockwall, a cave. Each ritual celebration both calls on this energy and enhances it. Pilgrimage sites, which on any given day may have multiple simultaneous ceremonies underway and where people congregate for major ceremonies, are extremely powerful. Non-Mayan practitioners, such as *espiritistas*, herbalists, and New Agers, also come to pilgrimage sites to harness these energies. Sites such as Miralvalle or Tz'ikinala' Juyu' are known and visited and implored by Maya and non-Maya alike.

In addition to the spaces that have been marked as sacred by key happenings and those portals of energy, sacred space can be created and inaugurated. When the government widened the Panamerican highway to provide a lake overlook above Sololá, over-running the Pujujil altar site, the altar was moved by the *ajq'ijab'*. The old site was decommissioned, giving way to stalls for selling souvenirs to tourists. The altar stones were transported and set up at a sheltered rock space below and away from the roadway. Similarly, when, at Tecpán, an evangelical bought the land including a major ritual site, *Rujuyu' Xalq'at* "Hill of the Cross", and cut off access to the altar, destroying the 10' Christian cross there as well, the daykeepers sought permission from an American, holding land near the Iximche' archaeological site, to place altars on her land. Receiving permission, the daykeepers relocated limestone and tufa blocks from pre-contact structures on the land, building three separate widely spaced altars. These altars were inaugurated with offerings of food, drink, incense, candles, herbs and flowers, and now help serve the ritual needs of the community.

Sacred space is a product of ritual action as well as a stage for it. Though power exists in places, people activate this power, bringing it into the social realm.

### **Towns, their spiritual guardians, and defining physical space**

In [section 5](#), we describe the individual sites visited. Here we give a brief overview of the lay-out of the sacred spaces, focusing on their relationship to municipal centers. It is generally the case that the central altar, that in the town center, is overlain by the Catholic Church. In many cases, the symbolic and ritual associations of the patron saint overlay those of the original altar, obscuring or transmuting them. These associations will be elaborated further during the discussion ([section 4](#)) of the day-bearers linked with the altars.

In this section, towns will be discussed moving out from Tecpán, the pre-contact Kaqchikel capital; first slightly north to Sta. Apolonia, then to the South and East through to sites near Guatemala City, in San Juan Sacatepéquez, then across to the west, and back north to the Lake Atitlán area.

## ***Town by town summary***

### **Iximche', Tecpán Cua:uhte:ma:lla:n**

The modern town of Iximche' was established by the early Spanish occupation forces. With the Kaqchikel leaders and warriors in open revolt and the Iximche' capital burned by Spanish troops, Pedro de Alvarado had the populace moved to the current site. The town was laid out in a standard grid pattern, with four *cantons*. These were aligned roughly with the cardinal directions. The relocated people maintained lineage associations within their new neighbors, mirroring the quadripartite organization of Iximche'.

The central point for the pre-contact community would have been Iximche' proper. We will identify this central point then simply as Iximche'. The current active altar in the back plaza of the archaeological site is known locally by this place name. Today the central point is acknowledged to be the Catholic Church in the town square. The Church fronts a small courtyard, which leads to a larger off-set plaza with a fountain and basketball court. A bandshell with sunken stadium seating sits off to the side of the church courtyard. The market and central commercial district for the town surround the church. There is no active altar/burn site abutting the Church itself. The Church is not continually open. While there are votive candle racks within the Church, the priests here have historically discouraged other offerings within the Church proper.

Roughly aligned with the cardinal points, the town is flanked by its guardian hills, each with its altar. Oxlajuj Kej lies just to the Northeast, Tz'ikin Juyu' to the Southeast, Xib'alb'a to the Southwest, and Xe' Atz'am to the Northwest. The names of all these hills differ in modern daily usage from their Colonial names and, at times from their ritual names. Oxlajuj Kej is known by this name to older day keepers and caretaker of this sacred precinct, but the quotidian appellation is *Chwa Burro* "Before the Burro". *Tz'ikin Juyu'* "Bird Mountain" is known by this name to local residents and to the guardian and most daykeepers. Some use the variant *Tz'ikina*<sup>10</sup> *Juyu'*, attributing a lineage affiliation, cf. aj Tz'ikinajay in the

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<sup>10</sup> In Kaqchikel, only certain nouns may inflect for plural. These must be highly animate, referring to people, certain spiritually powerful animals, some celestial bodies, and supernaturals. When *tz'ikin* refers to mundane birds, it takes no plural inflection. When these nouns are taken to be proper nouns, referring to lineage names or to people from a given family, they do carry a plural marker, cf. *kej* "deer", *taq kej* "plural deer (animals)", *Keja'* "people of the family whose last name or totem association is *kej*"; *tz'ikin* "bird", *taq tz'ikin* "plural birds", *Tz'ikina'* "the Tz'ikin family". *Tz'ikin* may also refer to codical and day-sign birds; in such usages, reference is usually singular, but in usual constructions plural reference may be intended and the forms would then be inflected with the // -a// plural.

Chronicles. No one spontaneously used the Colonial name Saqtz'ikinél Juyu'; however, two middle-aged daykeepers recognized the name. The site's guardian said that the man who had been the caretaker before her might have used this name for the mountain, though not for the mountainside altar for which she was primarily responsible. There is another large active altar on the mountaintop, which has a different caretaker. The Southwestern altar, Xib'alb'a, is not known locally by this name, though daykeepers from other municipios use this name. The daykeepers and local residents of Tecpán refer to this site as *Infiernito*, perhaps as a translation of *Xib'alb'a*. When asked why this site was associated with the *infierno*, "hell" or the "underworld", daykeepers varied in their accounts. The site is a deep ravine accessed through a water-cut stone archway. Some report that in the grotto where the ravine ends one can hear the spirits of ancestors; others say only those who have died a violent death come hear to voice their complaints. One middle-aged daykeeper said that several families had been pushed over the lip of the upper cliff during the 35-year genocidal war, and their spirits were caught here. Another said it was simply the portal provided by the arch entrance, which also allows contact with deceased relatives. The Northwest altar is now known as *Xe' Atz'am* "Below (the) Salt". There are several salt seeps in the area; it lies to the west of the area of Tecpán proper known as *Ratz'amüt*, "doves' salt", cited in the Chronicles as among the first settled districts of Iximche'. The archaeological site here is identified (Maxwell and Hill 2006) as K'otb'a K'uwal "Carved Jewel", the Kaqchikel seat of justice.

Other active ritual sites in environs of Tecpán include *Iximche' Jul* "Iximche' Cave" (the cave below the back altar at Iximche'); *Rokem Iximche'* "Iximche's Entrance" (the newly activated altars just to the northeast of Iximche'); *Q'osib'al Q'opoj* "Maiden's Flail<sup>11</sup>" (a single mound site, tentatively identified with the *Q'osib'al Koqolajay* "Thunder's Flail" of the Chronicles); *Cementerio* (which is not a cemetery, but is a site identified as propitious for contacting ancestral spirits); *Cerritos Asunción* (archaeological remains known only by the Spanish name of the current settlement); *Cerro de la Cruz* (hill immediately northwest of the modern town center).

## **Santa Apolonia**

Santa Apolonia lies northwest of Tecpán, just west of the Pan-American Highway. Daykeepers from Tecpán subsume the Santa Apolonia sites within their coordinates. We did not locate daykeepers from the site proper, though we

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<sup>11</sup> In this context, the flail is identified as the sticks or deer antlers used to pound cotton to flatten fibers and facilitate spinning.

spoke with many residents in the vicinity of the most active altar, *Xe K'o'il* "Below the Divinity". These Santa Apolonians said that they performed their rituals at *Xe K'o'il* or at *Oxlajuj Kej*, across the Pan-American Highway. Others mentioned sites between Sta. Apolonia and San Juan Comalapa. However, we did not document the guardian points for the town.

### **San José Poaquil, *Pwaqil***

We did not visit all four of the guardian hills surrounding Poaquil. We did visit two of the landmark shrines and passed the third. The guardian of the fourth hill is willing to have us visit to complete this reconnaissance. We did not enter the Cemetery, which now lies in front of the southern guardian. We did visit (Ru)jolom Tz'i' and Chrij Chun, east and west guardians.

From the aerie altar at Chrij Chun, one can clearly see the outline of Campana Ab'äj. This mountain, though not a guardian, is powerful and demands respect. It is said to sound like a bell, often to announce the coming of rains. One consultant related the history of some shepherd boys who, upon hearing the bell, searched for it and found a hole near the mountaintop. One boy dropped a rock down the hole. The rock hit the lip of the bell within the mountain, cracking it. The spirit owner of the mountain was angered and appeared to the boys' parents in their dreams that night, demanding retribution. After three days, the boys became very ill. Nothing could heal them until their parents offered a large sacrifice in a ceremony for Campana Ab'äj. Gradually the boys' health was restored.

Another altar, a rocky tor surrounded by wood, further out from the town center, is known as Q'ojom Ab'äj (Music Rock). People hunting firewood on the mountain slopes there report hearing flutes and drums playing tradition tunes. They can hear the murmuring of crowds of people, as at a large party. This music can be heard at Q'ojom Ab'äj at noon on Fridays. The altar at Q'ojom Ab'äj is deemed very powerful.

### **San Juan Comalapa, *Chi Xot, Chiq'a'l***

The Catholic Church in Comalapa center has recently fissioned, with a new rival Catholic Church off-set a block from the central square. Neither of these structures is the site of traditional ritual usage, though the main church saint is miraculous and the main altar is constructed above a platform accessible by stairs on both sides. Penitents and devotees climb stairs on the left of the altar, kissing and rubbing the saint's feet and the hem of his robe, and then descending down the right-hand stairway.

The northern guardian of the town underlies the hill on which the current Church of Guadalupe rests. There is a burn altar behind the Church structure here; three along the north side of the church, and there are two burn circles on a direct line

with the central axis in front of the church. The larger circle rests within a small rimmed and raised platform. The *texela'* "members of the religious sisterhood" center their devotions at the Church door, even though the sanctuary is typically closed. They eschew the Mayan ceremonial circles. The males' fraternity, the *cofradía*, gives permission to outside daykeepers to use the burn circles, but prefers to have these ceremonies performed either behind or to the side of the structure. Daykeepers, however, prefer the energy and respect of the front central axis altars.

To the east and slightly to the north lies Kuplaj Ab'äj "Maize-grain-heart Rock", with the two altars, Xe' Kuplaj "Below Kuplaj" and Chwi' Kuplaj "Above Kuplaj". This is a guardian altar, but it makes its accessibility commensurate with the motivation of its petitioner. There is another altar above Kuplaj Ab'äj, where soldiers emerge from the rock, generally at night, to train and to guard the mountain.

Further from the town center lies the cave site of Pa Ya'. The entrance to this site is overgrown. It is not in current use and is not a guardian.

Sarima' lies north and east of town and serves as a guardian. The current caretaker is not an *ajq'ij*, but visits the site regularly, performing requisite rituals.

Chwa' Burro is the third guardian. Dedicated to Kej, someone has carved a "burro" or "horse" image in the rock face at the base of this hill. This is a vigil site (see [section 2](#), above).

The fourth guardian lies at Chwa Nimache'. We did not visit this site. Additional, sacred sites in the area, undocumented here include Pa Chi' Tur, K'ojol Juyu', and Tasb'aläj.

### **Antigua, Pan Q'än**

The Cathedral in Antigua has an active nave and main altar fronting on the central square. Behind this structure, ruins of the larger Colonial Church remain open to the public as a tourist attraction. Votive candles have been allowed in the subterranean chamber here, but full Maya rituals are not sanctioned. Owners of the large coffee plantations bordering the town have transported the stelae and carved heads that once graced the slopes of the hills cradling the town to their houses and do not grant ritual access to the erstwhile caretakers of the shrines. Though Eugenia Robinson, Marlen Garnica, Dorothy Freidel y Patrice Farrell (1999) surveyed the valleys of Antigua and its environs in the mid-90s, our requests to visit archaeological features on a farm outside Antigua were denied. Also in the '90s, two small stone carvings were recovered by an ex-patriot buying a lot near the town center. The current owner of this site has allowed a daykeeper to reconsecrate the patio area housing the carvings, creating an altar area, once again near the town center.

## **San Antonio Aguascalientes**

Rivalry between San Antonio Aguascalientes and its immediate neighbor Santa Catarina Barahona, as well as large coffee plantation holdings, may have divided the physical and spiritual spheres for the towns. The central church of San Antonio faces toward the town square. The corner houses to the east, behind the church, maintain shrines to the saints, and provide stations of the cross and religious tableaux for community holidays. No traditional altars are maintained in or around the church. Most local daykeepers report performing ritual for their clients in their homes or traveling to Tz'ikin Ala'. However, they are still aware of local sites with power. One altar, *Rumul Sanik*, overlooking the remains of the Quilisimate Lagoon, to the southwest of town, is well known, but is not an active burn site. The portal to this site is also known, but there was no evidence of active use. A site to the Northeast of town was known, but again unused. Exploration there revealed a series of portals, each with power. Another, larger site lay further uphill and to the east. This site was identified as one of the guardians, but we did not get a name for the site, nor did we visit it. Our daykeeper host has invited us to come again to document this area.

## **Santa Catarina Barahona**

Daykeepers from Santa Catarina Barahona and local residents affirm that there are sacred precincts within and around the town; however, they did not name the guardians, nor any specific peak or portal. We do have an invitation to return and visit the prominent altars. The Church in the town center is aligned along a northeast/southwest axis.

## **Santa María de Jesús, *Jun'ajpu'***

The Church in Santa María de Jesús faces up the mountain, toward the crater of the volcano, *Agua, Jun'ajpu'*. The eponymous altar atop the volcano and the lesser altar to the south of Santa María, *K'ajol Juyu'* bracket two sides of the town. The principal guardian is *Jun'ajpu'*. *Xe' Tinamit* "Below the Town" has served as a guardian. This site is highly contested, and the principal altar here has been covered over with landfill. The area below the altar is currently used for both Catholic and Protestant revival style meetings. Some of the rock outcropping marking the old altar is still visible. Offerings appear to have been left, but there is no exposed burn circle. Daykeepers in Santa María identify a further site, to the northwest, as powerful. We did not locate this site. Another strong altar lies just beyond the town as one begins to descend toward Palín. We did not visit this site either, though we have an open invitation to do so.

## **El Tejar**

We visited only one altar at El Tejar. We did not locate any daykeepers from this community to ascertain their sacred precincts. The altar we visited, at the foot of

*Chuchu' lin* “Beautiful Mother” Mountain, was a subsidiary site to the hilltop shrine. The hilltop shrine has been a pilgrimage site, accommodating large numbers of worshipers on holidays and sought out for curing ceremonies. However, armed bandits have staked out the shrine. Many people interviewed, from across the Kaqchikel departments, reported tales of robbery and threatened rape. We were advised to bypass the hilltop, despite its great power and efficacy, and to address ourselves, instead, to the hillside set of altars. These altars were very active. Three ceremonies were in progress during our visit to the site.

### **Santo Domingo Xenacoj, *Xe' Na Koj, Xe' Na Kok***

The Church marking the town center of *Xe' Na Koj* has withstood many earth tremors and quakes, including the huge earthquake of 1976. The townspeople explain the resilience of the structure by reference to the children who were sacrificed and interred below the cornerstones. The *cofradía* of Santo Domingo remains strong and active. Their headquarters lies a block behind the Church. Racks and tables for votive candles face the saints' chapel here. Mayan style offerings of flower petals, colored candles, incense, liquor, and cigars are also accepted and visible. Prayer is encouraged here; traditional names for the sacred may be invoked, but the *cofradía* leaders, male and female emphasize that this is a Christian altar. The male *cofradía* leader accompanied us to three altars above the town. The rock formation for which the town is named serves as one guardian for the town. The *cofradía* leader consistently pronounced the name of the hill and of the rock form as *Xe' Na Kok* “Below Mother Turtle”, but he interpreted the meaning as “Below Mother Jaguar”, which is in keeping with standard pronunciations and the town name, *Xe Na Koj*. The two allied altars lie quite close to the “Jaguar” and a third lies slightly further up the same hillside. The *cofradía* leader was aware of another set of altars to the west of the town and offered to guide us another day. We were not able to schedule a return. He was not aware of a northern or southern guardian for the town, but mentioned potential candidates as *Chupila'* and *Tzuluj Juyu* in the north, and *Pa K'isis* and *Chi Qatop* in the south. We were unable to return and verify these proposals.

### **Santa María Cauqué, *Ka'oqe'***

We visited only one altar here, near *Kaqjuyu'*. The original sacred precinct had been fenced off and our daykeeper guide did not want to risk a confrontation with the owner so we did not attempt to approach the old altar. Rather, we visited a newly inaugurated altar within a wood. We visited *Ka'oqe'* during a festival. The *cofrades* were engaged in staging the traditional dance-dramas in the streets. We need to return here to complete the delimitation of the town's sacred spaces.

## **Santiago Sacatepéquez, Pa K'im**

The central church here is supported by an active *cofradía*. Their meeting house is near the north side of the church. They maintain the altar with flower and candle offerings, but also accept gifts of liquor, tobacco, and money. They do not encourage traditional Maya ritual before the saints. The guardian to the west of the city is *Q'uq'ulkan* “the plumed serpent”. This guardian arises not from a cliff or mountain face, but from a streambed. This stream has recently become polluted as Santa María Cauqué has begun to dump its sewage just above the original *Q'uq'ulkan* shrine. Elders report having seen the feather serpent arise amid a shower of golden light from the streambed in days when the stream ran clear. Daykeepers note that previously they were able to commune with ancestral spirits here, the communication facilitated by the feathered serpent daemon. The ancestors no longer accept this spot as a portal. Three altars further down stream, are also *Q'uq'ulkan* altars, but none has opened as an ancestral gate. The guardian to the east is *Tz'ite' Che'*. The northern town edge is guarded by *Chi Ya'*, an altar beside the *Chi Plátanos* river. The southern guardian is currently undefined.

## **Escuintla, Atakat**

The altar we visited in the Department of Escuintla is variously known as *Miralvalle* “Facing the valley”, *Miraldía* “Facing the Day”, and *Tz'ikin Ala'*. This is a pilgrimage site and serves the central highlands as well as the coastal plains. Both Maya and non-Maya ritual specialists frequent the altars at the base of the upthrust rock pinnacles. While the upper altars are less used they seem to be frequented more by Maya practitioners.

## **San Jorge La Laguna**

The strongest of San Jorge's guardians is *Nimajay*. Below this cave site, lie subsidiary altars dedicated to Ma Ximon. To the south of town *Keq Ab'äj* stands vigil. The morpheme *//-keq//* of *Keq Ab'äj* is folk etymologized as “red”, hence, “Red Rock”, but the rock is neither red nor associated with the east, itself represented by “red” in ritual offerings. Since the principal altars here lie along the narrow top of the rock pinnacle, it seems more likely that the morpheme should be identified as *//-këq ~-keq//* “to throw” and may refer to ethnohistorical accounts of sacrificing vanquished foes by throwing them from such rocky prominences into the lake below. Pujujil was the principal guardian to north of San Jorge. This site may have been shared with Sololá, or the Pujujil relevant to San Jorge may be a separate altar. There are four modern Sololá cantons of this name. We did not succeed in locating the site, though many people mentioned it and referred us to people who would know its location. Just to the northwest of San Jorge lies the last guardian, *Nim Ab'äj* “Great Rock” with its subsidiary allied altars.



### **San Andrés Semetab'aj, Semet Ab'äj**

We located one guardian site for San Andrés, Xe To'y, northeast of town. A second guardian lies just north of the city. We did not learn the name of this site, though it was referred to as *Encanto* "Enchantment" or simply as a powerful hill. We dubbed the site *Nik'aj Q'ij* as the altar here only appears at high noon. People wishing to make sacrifices must be sure to arrive precisely at mid-day. The archaeological site surrounding the town cemetery probably defined the sacred precinct to the west of town. We did not locate the western guardian, though Tokache' "Spiny Tree" is a candidate.

### **San Antonio Palopo', Antun Po'j**

We visited only one site here, Saqasiwan. This serves as the town's eastern guardian. The cave site has no active caretaker. The grandson of the last caretaker did not know of the other guardians. He had heard of other sacred precincts, but could not name them for us.

### **San Lucas Tolimán**

The guardians of San Lucas Tolimán include Pa Chi' Tulül to the northwest, Pa Xan to the immediate west, Pa Tziw'ir and Xukulb'äl to the northeast and east. An additional sacred site here is known as Vuelta Misteriosa or Kakawate (Cacahuate "Peanut"). The altar at Vuelta Misteriosa is just above a spot on the highway 11 to the coast which is noted for peculiar manifestations of physics. A stationary car on the road here, if left in neutral, will begin to roll uphill. Cylindrical bottles, balls, or other spherical objects set on the ground here will also move uphill. The Vuelta Misteriosa altar is under the auspices of Imox. The connection here may either be through Imox' link to occult energies or to its propensity to swing into madness.

### **Cerro de Oro, Ch'ajyu'**

The Church in the town center faces a courtyard and a short road that leads to a pilgrimage site well within the town limits. This currently serves as the town's central altar. The power of this altar subsumes those in the immediate vicinity. The hillside skirting the volcano Tolimán harbors the guardian, Suküt, with its principal and subsidiary altar. Pa Wakal to the east of Ch'ajyu' also stands spiritual guard over the city. The western guardian is commonly referred to as Pa Piscina. The northern guardian is undetermined, though some suggest that this warden lies across the lake, perhaps, at Kaqb'atzulu'.

### **Santiago Atitlán**

Another site known as Pa Wakal (not that warding Ch'ajyu') serves as a guardian for Santiago Atitlán. Other power sites here include Tz'ib'an Ab'aj and Chuwäch

Tinamit. We did not survey in this town, nor conduct interviews. Residents of nearby towns know that additional altars exist here.

### **San Pedro La Laguna**

The Church in the town center faces B'atz'ib'al Juyu'. No traditional rituals are held within or around the Church. The Acción Católica group within the town is currently contesting access to a sacred site southwest of the town, which abuts a chapel they maintain. They claim the smoke from the offering fires is damaging the church, which post-dates the Maya altar. Town residents have contracted lawyers to defend their right of access to the Maya altars, under the new laws protecting Maya traditional ritual practice. This pilgrimage site is *Chi Kaqjaay*, the southern ward. Q'anil, the site daybearer shares protective duties with the spirit owner of the hill. This spirit owner, himself mentioned in the Chronicles, remains active; referred to as *Kaqk'oxol* in the Chronicles, his Tz'utujil name is *Kaqak'axool*.

Pa Tawaal serves as the northern guardian. The western guard is Chwi' Tinamit. A lakeside site near the Santiago dock serves as the eastern ward. We did not document this site.

We did visit a subsidiary southern altar, Pa Sak Mam. A hunting altar described by Brown (2006). The area to the west and northwest of the city abounds with altars and portals. We have not documented them all, but we did visit *Oxlajuj* (13) *Tijax*, *B'eleje'* (9) *Kawoq*, *Kab'lajuj* (12) *Aj*, and *Waqi'* (6) *Kamey*.

### **San Juan La Laguna**

The eastern guardian of San Juan La Laguna is Chi Ruwach San Juan. K'istalin and its subsidiary altar, Xe K'istalin, ward the town on the north. Subsidiary altars on the north include the three altars of Cerro de la Cruz. Further to the north B'atz'ib'al and Kaqb'atz'ulu' lend their spiritual energies to the town as well. Pa Koral served as a ward to the west, but it is unclear if the site is still active. We did not visit this site. The southern sentinel is also unspecified, but other active sites in the environs of San Juan are Pa Tz'ulu' "Amid the Reeds", Pan Atz'am "At the Salt", Xe Q'apoj "Below (the) Maiden", Pa Ruuwach Aab'aj "At the Face of the Rock", and Pa Nuxti' "At the Cactus".

### **Santa Clara La Laguna**

Santa Clara is warded by B'atz'ib'al Juyu' to the northeast, and by a Tz'ikin altar to the east. We did not complete the survey of the sacred precinct of this town.

## **San Marcos La Laguna**

The church in San Marcos lies near the lake and was inundated with mud during the Mitch-induced landslides. It has been restored, but it was unclear if traditional ritual had been or was practiced near the church. The current sacristan is assiduous in maintaining the newly refurbished church clean, while continuing to relandscape the churchyard. The four external guardians of San Marcos are Chwäch B'atz'ib'äl, Chuxe' Mes Ab'äj, Pa K'ujil and Chwäch Ab'äj. The recent addition of the meditation center, Los Pirámides, to the community has brought spiritual seekers, Buddhists and orientalist, who add to the mystic and psychic complexity of the town. Meditators often use Pa K'ujil and Chwäch Ab'äj as sites for contemplation and spiritual communion.

## **Tz'ununa'**

The church of Tz'ununa' is again central. The four outlying guardians are Chwa Mesa, Chwa Nimajuyu', Palitz', and Pa Q'anq'öj.

## **Santa Cruz La Laguna**

The Catholic Church in the Center of Santa Cruz does not encourage traditional rites in its environs. Evangelical Protestants have made heavy inroads in this community. Their stern disapproval and mutual moral reinforcement has driven the people we interviewed to travel to other communities when they wish to perform a ceremony for their ancestors, to seek cures or make petitions. Most of those we interviewed reported traveling to shrines in the San Lucas Tolimán area, particularly Pa Chi Tulül. Some also seek out the central altar in Ch'ajyu'.

The principal guardian of the town is Kortel, north of town. This mountain housing Kortel has several subsidiary altars on its flanks. Xe Po'j wards the town on the east. Xe Juyu' Ok to the northwest and Pan Panti' to the west and southwest.

## **Sololá**

We did not determine the full complement of guardians for Sololá. The Church defines the town center. Pujujil, to the northeast, was one warden. Other sites were named for us, including Chi Kaqix, Saqsiwan and Chi Xib'alb'a, but these were not specified as guardians, and we did not locate them.

## **Xajajak**

This community north of Sololá has several renowned daykeepers, who with their families actively maintain the energy portals in their environs. We did not visit the church here. The town is centered along highway 1 leading from Sololá to the Pan American highway, rather than focused on a central square with a colonial

church. The hill Kaqb'on wards the town on the northeast. The major altar here is Wuqu' Kawoq, with the allied altars of Chwi' Xkanel and Polisyá. Wentana Ab'äj wards the town on the northwest. Subsidiary altars also lie to the north of the village center: Rosario and Chrij Eskwela. We did not learn what the southern wards were; nor whether they are shared with Sololá.

### **María Tekun, *Pixab'äj***

The village of Pixab'äj, north of the Pan American Highway, is guarded by the pilgrimage site María Tekun. The mountaintop with its rock crag crenellation also serves as the spiritual and traditional political boundary between Sololá and Chichicastenango. María Tekun, the wife of the K'iche' hero Tekun Umán, who died in battle with Pedro de Alvarado, is said to have come to this rock outpost to remain in resistance and to give advice to those who would consult her. The Kaqchikel name for the mountaintop and its altars is *Pixab'äj* "Counsel Stone". It is unclear whether it derives its name from María Tekun's stay here as counselor to her people, or if she may have chosen the spot because of the spiritual connection with the ancestors it affords, allowing her to serve as a conduit for their guidance.

### **Summary**

The ideal model for sacred space to house a social unit is the quincunx. Daykeepers construct sacred space each time they lay out their offerings on a burn altar. They typically begin with the Q'anil symbol. This glyph lays out four quadrants, each with its own circular center. The quadrants are defined by crossed lines that meet or divide in the center. The quadrants are associated with the planar cardinal points, east (marked by red candles), west (marked by black candles), north (marked by white candles) and south (marked by yellow candles). The central axis creates three dimensional space, adding "up", the sky (symbolized by blue candles) and "down", the earth (symbolized by green candles). Likewise, the sacred precinct of a town is defined by its center, generally anchored now by a Catholic Church, and by physical prominences, usually mountains, which serve as optical and spiritual boundaries. The spirit owners of these physical features and the daybearers aligned with the principal altars thereon serve as cornerposts for the town's sacrality, its spiritual identity. These guardians are roughly aligned with the planar cardinal directions. The town center/church (re)presents the central axis, uniting heaven and earth, zenith and nadir.

When we were able to interview elders, aldermen, or experienced daykeepers, they generally began their description of the sacred sites surrounding their towns by alluding to the four exterior guardians. Younger interlocutors typically name the sacred sites they knew by first indicating one mountain, and then working their way sequentially around the town edges. We have incomplete inventories of sites for some towns, and we do not have all the guardians designated for

others for which we probably have the site names. Nonetheless, it seems clear that established towns have four cardinal guardians at their corners and a central anchoring point, now dominated by a Catholic Church. In the few cases where we know the daykeeper associated with the center axis, it sometimes replicates the affiliation of the most prominent landmark serving as an exterior ward. A few towns have more than one cardinal guardian ascribed to the same daybearer protector. Most towns though have separate daemons at each corner post. In addition to creating a sacred space in which social interaction may be safely undertaken, the guardian daybearers powerfully imbue their altars with energies, which daykeepers seek to harness to accommodate the needs and petitions of their clients. The guardians are not alone on the sacred landscape. Other altars abound. The strength and efficacy of an altar may be enhanced by use. Pilgrimage sites attest to the power of popular altars. Nonetheless, some potent altar sites restrict access; they may hide access trails, close them, or appear only at certain hours, or simply select those whose petitions they will hear. Most strong altars are served by a smaller altar niche, which acts as a gatekeeper. Clients and their daykeeper advocates ask permission at these gateways in order to continue to the principal ritual site. Altars may also be polluted by the spiritual practices performed there. While all daybearers may unleash either positive or negative energy, practice may predispose an altar for access to one or the other.

While the guardian prominences, their spirit owners and daybearers, together with the central altar create the spiritual boundaries of the town; other altars also serve the residents, shaping and molding the sacred space.

## **Altars and their day sign patrons**

### ***A brief overview of the calendar-round day patrons***

Each of the twenty days of the *cholq'ij*<sup>12</sup> has a set of attributes which attune the day-bearer to specific aspects of the natural world and life therein, making it more or less propitious for classes of petitions. Studies such as Edmonson (1988) show the animal spirits linked to each day, across the complex of Mesoamerican ritual calendars. Tedlock (1982 and 1992) details interpretations for the days, noting the strengths of each day. Kaqchikel Cholchi' has published a volume summarizing the understandings of 31 daykeepers with regard to the days and their attendant ceremonies (Guarcax González, et al. 2002). Several *cholq'ij* manuals, including a children's edition (No'j 2003), are available in Guatemala. Here we will give a short discussion of the day signs and some of

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<sup>12</sup> *Cholq'ij* is the Kaqchikel word for the 260-day ritual calendar. It is cognate with Yucatec Maya *tzolk'in*.

their connotations in order to situate the discussion of their associations with particular altars. Each day in the calendar has both positive and negative proclivities.

Imox<sup>13</sup>. *Imox* is associated with lizards. Lizards represent abundance. This day may be linked with intelligence, but also with insanity and imbalance. Some daykeepers note that this day provides a portal to strong currents of energy, both positive and negative.

Iq'. *Iq'* is the wind. Contemporary everyday Kaqchikel uses the word *kaqiq'* "lit. red wind, or thrown wind" to refer to moving air; however, the root *iq'* is recognized as meaning "wind" and is so invoked in prayer. Wind, moving air, is associated with breath, with life, and with the soul that expires at death.

Aq'ab'al. *Aq'a'* is the modern as well as the Colonial period word for "night"; the //b'äl// suffix forms instrumentals or locatives; so the term *Aq'ab'al* is most directly rendered "place of night". Aq'ab'al is linked to nighttime, darkness, a time for rest, and death, itself a rest. However, Aq'ab'al is often interpreted as a potential transition period, either from night to day, "dawn", or from day to night "dusk". It is considered to be an auspicious day for appealing for aid in new undertakings.

K'at. The word *K'at* is related to the passive stem //k'at//, derived by ablaut from the transitive root //k'ät// "to burn". The glyphic representations seem to show an unlit, or burned out, wicked lamp, or candle. This day is also associated with nets, especially net bags, used to carry burdens, often of food stuffs. The interwoven patterning also suggests spiderwebs. In pre-contact and early colonial times, spiderwebs, like the ribbed pattern of turtle or tortoise shells, stood for portals offering communication with the spirit world. The preface to the 2004 Cholb'al Q'ij put out by Cholsamaj states: Kat "Es el tejer y entretejer de la vida, ya que cada uno entreteje su propia vida. Día propicio para profundizar los conocimientos y pedir por la unidad de la comunidad."(p. 6<sup>14</sup>) [*K'at*] is the weaving and interweaving of life, since each one interweaves her/his own life. A propitious day for deepening understandings and petitioning for community unity.

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<sup>13</sup> The day names here are given in their most common Kaqchikel form. They correspond in order to the following Yucatec day names, shown here with colonial spellings: Imix, Ik, Akbal, Kan, Chicchan, Kimi, Manik, Lamat, Muluc, Oc, Chuwen, Eb, Ben, Ix, Men, Cib, Caban, Edznab, Cawac, Ahau.

<sup>14</sup> No page numbers are printed in the original.

Kan. This day is associated with the serpent, especially with the rattlesnake. Rattlesnake iconography abounds at lowland Maya sites (Díaz Bolio 1967), and is also found in the highlands. The day sign has several variants: some represent snake heads, with curved poison fangs and the cross-hatched supraorbital patch of a rattler; more minimalist renditions, showing two small ovals within a rounded square, are taken as simply representing a snake scale. The modern Kaqchikel word for snake is *kumätz*; rattlesnakes are *soch*. Some activists have adopted the name *Q'uq'ulkan* "Feathered Serpent" for their daily use, though the Kaqchikel equivalent is *Q'ukumätz*. *Kan* is associated with spiritual strength, with rebirth and regrowth. *Kan* is also associated justice, and can be addressed in seeking redress of wrongs, as well as insight for clear judgment and adjudication.

Kamey. Derived from the root //käm// "to die", *Kamey* is associated with death, but daykeepers stress that this does not make the day wholly negative. As Death, *Kamey* can signal a time for rest and recuperation, building energy for a rebirth.

Kej. Though the word *kej* in modern Kaqchikel has shifted its meaning to the larger quadruped, the horse, it retains some of its earlier meaning "deer" within the 260-day calendar. Most published sources identify *kej* with the deer as the animal totem; however, daykeepers actively link this day to "horse" as well. This day is considered a good day to ask for transportation: cars, trucks, buses. *Kej* is also associated with male power and vitality. It is associated with authority and leadership. *Kej* also sponsors hunters, while protecting wildlife.

Q'anil. Commonly associated with the planet Venus, the *Q'anil* glyph represents Venus above and below the horizon, in its stations as morningstar, eveningstar, and the corresponding unseen positions. The animal totem is the rabbit. The primary association with *Q'anil* is that of the seed, representing both beginnings and fertility/abundance. Some modern daykeepers associate the circles, one in each quadrant of the glyphic sign, with the four primary colors of corn: red, yellow, blue/black, and white. These colors in turn represent the four planar cardinal points. Most ceremonies invoking positive energies begin with the symbol *Q'anil* traced in sugar on the altar.

Toj. *Toj* in quotidian Kaqchikel means "payment". This day is considered to be propitious for atonement. One may redress or seek redress of wrongs on this day. Petitions for other boons may also be received on this day, with appropriate

offerings. Toj<sup>15</sup> has associations with rain and so is important for agricultural ritual as well.

Tz'i'. Tz'i' "dog" carries connotations of lasciviousness and gluttony. On the positive side, Tz'i' is associated with justice and protection. Tz'i' protects both the material and spiritual well-being of a client, household or community.

B'atz'. Throughout Mesoamerica this day is associated with the howler monkey. B'atz' is the modern Kaqchikel word for the howler monkey, *alouatta*. Howler Monkeys on classic period vases and in the Popol Wuj are depicted as scribes and artists. Some of the undertones of creativity survive in modern characterizations of B'atz', but more commonly the mischievous playfulness of the monkey is highlighted. However, b'atz' is nearly homophonous (and in some dialects homophonous) with b'ätz' "thread". Many daykeepers in their ritual speech, *choloj*, ignore the howler monkey reading in favor of the "thread" interpretation. They stress the functions of thread in interweaving the fabric of time and space, in binding women and men together, in creating and maintaining connections. Negative aspects of this day under this reading may be taken to be snarls or knots and tangles.

Ey. Ey is the root of the term for "tooth". In modern everyday Kaqchikel this root can not stand alone: it must either be possessed (*wey* "my tooth", *awey* "your tooth", *rey* "her/his/its tooth", etc.) or it must have an absolutive (non-possessioned) suffix (*eyaj* "tooth which is not possessed, tooth as a disembodied entity"). Most glyphic representations of this day show a head, with one prominent tooth in the upper jaw. In the iconography of codical texts, people represented with a prominent single tooth in this fashion were taken to be elderly, thus, wise and learned. This interpretation is weak to non-existent for most Kaqchikel daykeepers today. The preferred interpretations link ey to b'ey<sup>16</sup> "road". This day then is propitious for blessing journeys, protecting travelers and migrants, or beginning new undertakings.

Aj. Aj is cane. The remarkable generative and regenerative powers of cane make it a strong patron of renewal and abundance. Aj also has secondary associations with celebrations of identity.

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<sup>15</sup> Toj(oj)il was one of the patrons of the K'iche' polity.

<sup>16</sup> This reading may have been facilitated due to the crucial role of K'ichee' daykeepers in keeping the day-count alive during the centuries of repression of traditional religious practice and the prominence these spiritual guides have had in the revitalization. The day-count proceeds by counting each day with its thirteen numeral coefficients, 1-13. In K'iche' all the numbers between 1 and 10 (*ka'ib'* [2], *oxib'* [3], *kajib'*...*waqxaqib'*[8], *b'elejeb'* [9]) end in /b'/, facilitating "re-cutting" the morphemes to encourage interpretation of a /b'/ initial for //ey// > //b'ey//.



*I'x*. *I'x* refers to the jaguar. The common Kaqchikel word for “jaguar” is *b'alam*. Some daykeepers refer to this day as *B'alam* in their *choloj*, but most retain the older form *I'x*<sup>17</sup>. In pre-contact society the jaguar and its pelt were symbols of rulership and knowledge. Contemporary ceremonies lay more emphasis on the power of this day to facilitate spiritual connections, especially for divination. The day is also associated with women, perhaps from the near homophony with *//ix-//* “prefix for female proper names”, root of the word for “woman” *//ixöq//*.

*Tz'ikin*. *Tz'ikin* “bird” is not used in everyday Kaqchikel to refer to *aves*, birds. As this word also refers to the penis, it is seldom used in polite conversation outside of ritual contexts. Euphemisms such as *ajxik' chiköp* “lit. winged animal” replace *tz'ikin* in daily usage. However, the calendar round day still bears this name<sup>18</sup>. Just as birds are seen as good providers for their family, so *Tz'ikin* may be petitioned for aid in finding or improving job opportunities, in commercial ventures, and in obtaining financial aid, grants, subsidies, loans, etc. *Tz'ikin* also symbolizes freedom, liberty and independence, but this reading is generally backgrounded to its monetary associations. *Tz'ikin* may also be appealed to for help with fertility issues, for strength and for vitality.

*Ajmaq*. The glyphic representation of *Ajmaq* shows the candle or wicked lamp of K'at, but this time lighted. Older interpretations relate the day to *//-mäq//* “to measure, to seize or grasp (as in comprehend)”. The owl is the totem of this day. Its associations with death bleed over into the day. *Ajmaq*, then, is linked with death, with learning and comprehension and now spiritual knowledge. However, many daykeepers consistently pronounce this day *Ajmak* rather than *Ajmaq*. They link the day, not with measurement or learning, but with *//mak//* “sin, fault, error”. Even those daykeepers who retain the */q/* post-velar voiceless stop pronunciation in naming the day associate the day with *//mak//* “sin” and in their *choloj* often refer to people, themselves and/or their clients as *ajmak* “sinners”, imploring the day *tasacha'*, *takuyu' numak/qamak* “lose, forgive my/our sins”. Nonetheless, the association with the deceased, with the ancestors and with ancestral knowledge is strong. When the count reaches *Ajmaq* within the ceremonial telling of the calendar round, many *ajq'ija'* offer and have their clients

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<sup>17</sup> *I'x* is fossilized in the name *Saqjix* or *Saqjix'*. This is the Kaqchikel name for the *monja blanca*, the white orchid (*Lycaste virginalis*). Since the 1985 constitution has guaranteed the rights of Maya peoples to give their children Mayan first names and to register these legally, *Saqjix* has become a popular girls' name.

<sup>18</sup> People born on this day who use their day-name in daily interactions, in publications, etc. typically do not use the normal construction for day names (for men the numeral coefficient + the day name, for women *//ix-//*).

offer *cebo*<sup>19</sup> candles. During the *Ajmaq* invocation or the its count, clients are often invited to meditate on their beloved dead and their lineage forebears. This day is propitious for communication with the ancestors and for petitioning for forgiveness of trespasses against the ancestral spirits or traditional practice. In like vein, one may ask forgiveness for other wrong-doings on this day. *Ajmaq* is seldom addressed today to invoke learning or comprehension other than in mystical or sacred matters.

No'j. *No'j* is associated with *na'oj* "thought, knowledge, understanding, tao". This day is associated both with traditional bodies of knowledge and practice and with formal education.

Tijax. The glyph for *Tijax* probably depicts the obsidian or flint blade serving as a spear- or arrowhead. Its markings match that of spear tips shown in classic period murals and on ceramics. They also match the markings seen on some rabbit-scribe ears in codices and on pottery. The modern Kaqchikel word for "obsidian" is *chay* or *chaj ab'äj*<sup>20</sup>. Daykeepers usually do not associate *Tijax* with "warfare". They do recognize the excellent cutting properties of obsidian, linking it to surgery, and the ability to excise diseased tissue. *Tijax* is a patron for doctors, be they surgeons or not. *Tijax* also encompasses other realms of learning and intelligence. Many modern daykeepers also associate *Tijax* with rain and with lightning. Most highland peoples, Maya and non-, link lightning strikes with obsidian<sup>21</sup>.

Kawoq. Though "storm" is often listed a gloss for this day in published pocket calendars<sup>22</sup>, daykeepers seldom appeal to this representation. Rather they associate *Kawoq* with women and their life-force. *Kawoq* may be appealed to by both men and women for aid in overcoming obstacles and resolving problems.

Ajpub'. Most daykeepers link this day explicitly to the Hero Twin, of that name, in the Popol Wuj, and in generalized Maya lore. However, when they count the days, they generally render the count *Jun Ajpub', Ka'i' (chre ri) Ajpub', Oxi'*

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<sup>19</sup> These are lard candles, which are symbolically linked with ancestors, deceased kith and kin. The linkage may be metonymic since lard candles were the norm during the lives of some ancestors. Lard candles tend to be completely consumed in offering fires, leaving no telltale wax residue. The consumption of offerings is indicative of the success of the petition. Incomplete burning, a fire that is difficult to start, or which falters, is blown out or rained out, is not an effective vehicle for communication with the day spirit, with the ancestors, or with other essences invoked.

<sup>20</sup> *Ab'äj* is the generic word for "rock, stone".

<sup>21</sup> Obsidian as volcanic glass is also a well-known concept. Lightning strike "obsidian" may geologically be fused silicates, but ethnographically it is categorized as *chay*.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Cholb'al Q'ij (1992, 2002, 2004, 2006) Cholsamaj: Guatemala.

(*chre ri*) *Ajpub'*, etc., rather than *Jun Jun'ajpu'*, *Ka'i' Jun'ajpu'*... The word *ajpu'/ajpub'* means "blowgunner". The day is associated with leadership, moral and secular.

### **Sites and their day patrons**

#### **Iximche', Tecpán Cua:uhte:ma:lla:n:**

There are low constructions identified archaeologically as altars in the front two courtyards, including the circular structures that Guillemín (1965) associates with Aztec influence and dedication to "Ehecatl". Aztec maps of Cuauhtemallan show eagle heads at two sites, the only polities allowed to claim "eagle" warrior status. One of these sites was Tecpán Cuauhtemallan<sup>23</sup>, "lit. palace (of) the tied eagle place". It is likely therefore that original patrons of these altars included *Iq'* "Wind" and *Tz'ikin* "Bird". Similarly, given that there among the emblems of power given to the Kaqchikel when they left Tulan was an obsidian stone, itself a symbol of the position of the Kaqchikel as the military arm of the K'ichee', it seems likely that one or more altars were also dedicated to and sponsored by *Tijax* "Obsidian". However, these altars are no longer active.

The back plaza has been designated a sacred precinct by the Guatemalan government. Much of the plaza floor is covered with burn-altars. There are strong portals both in front of and behind the "temple" structure that closes the back of this plaza. All of these altars are strongly sponsored by the day *Kan* (Serpent, rattlesnake). The cave site below this back plaza is associated with *Kawoq* (Storm). The new triad of altars activated since the closing of the Cerro de la Cruz to traditional practitioners is dedicated to *Tijax* (Obsidian). Cerro de la Cruz was also a *Tijax* altar, but it had additional patrons of *Tz'ikin* (Bird) and *Ey* (Tooth). Chwa Burro, one of the town guardians, is ruled by *Kej* (Deer). The numerical coefficient for this day is still known. The site is *Oxlajuj* "Thirteen" *Kej*, and so is associated with the full count of *Kej* days. The second guardian, *Tz'ikin Juyu'*, reveals its day-bearer, *Tz'ikin* "Bird", in its name. *Xe' Atz'am*, (pre-contact *K'otb'a K'wal*), the third guardian, is associated with *Kej* and *Tz'i'* (Dog). Both of these days, particularly, *Tz'i'*, are associated with the administration of justice, suggesting a carry-over from the pre-contact function of the site as the seat of judgment and execution of sentences by the justices appointed for the Iximche'

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<sup>23</sup> Most post-hoc etymologies of Guatemala derive it from *cuahuatl* "tree" and *te* "rock or person": + *mal* "swell" + *(t)la:n* "locative", with glosses like "wooded place" or "place at the edge of the trees". The Nahuatl name was transliterated into Latin/Spanish script without regard to vowel length. The iconography of the Aztec maps makes clear that the association was with eagles, *cua:uhtli* rather than trees. *Cua:uh-* "eagle" + *te:* "person" + *ma:l* "tie" + *(t)la:n* "locative".

polity. *Infiernito*, or *Xib'alb'a*, the fourth guardian, is under the aegis of *Ajmaq*, (Measurer, Seizer). *Ajmaq*, because of its association with ancestors and the dead, is an apt day-bearer to watch over this site. Whether the dead in question are the recent victims of the civil war, unavenged victims of violence, or ancestral spirits, *Ajmaq* offers ready mediation and advocacy. *Q'osib'äl Q'opoj*, "Maiden's flail", is associated with *Kawoq*, the patron of women. But *I'x*, "Jaguar", also oversees this altar, suggesting continuity with the pre-contact designation of *Q'osib'äl Koqolajay*, "Thunder's Flail", since thunder and lightning are linked with the power and majesty of rulership, which in turn is often symbolized in glyphs and iconography by the jaguar. Similarly, the archaeological mound complex now known as *El Cementerio* is also associated with the two days, *Kawoq* and *I'x*. This suggests that the modern name and the association as a portal has not yet translated into assignment of a death/ancestral portal guardian, such as *Ajmaq*. *Cerritos Asunción*, another mound complex at which a pre-contact carved altar was unearthed, is allied with *Kan* (Serpent, rattlesnake) and with *K'at* (Net, Fire). The altar itself has serpent iconography. At each corner, two rattlesnakes come face to face; their rattles intertwine midway along the sides. Though there are no images of nets, spiders or their webs, nor of candles or flames, daykeepers successfully petition *K'at* at this site.

### **Santa Apolonia**

The principal altar here is *Xe K'o'il*, "Below the Sacred, the Divinity". This altar is associated with *I'x* "Jaguar" and *Kan* "serpent". The stela backing the altar depicts intertwined serpents with a face emerging from a central maw. The face may be a jaguar. In front of the stela, a jaguar tenon head is currently secured by a rebar arc embedded in a concrete base. The features of this jaguar have been effaced in the past fifteen years, but the Jaguar guardian spirit is still vividly linked to this site.

### **San José Poaquil, *Pwaqil***

We visited two sites flanking San José Poaquil. (Ru)jolom Tz'i' *"lit. Dog's Head"* lies far from the town center, but is considered a strong guardian. The patron guarding this entrance to Poaquil space is *Tz'i'* "Dog". *Iglesia ab'äj* "Church Rock" or *Ch(r)ij Chun* "Behind the Lime Rock" is a complex set of rock formations, with seven altars. Among these are a *Tz'ikin* altar, atop the rock peak; *Kawoq*, to the side of the central spire; *Ajmaq* and *Kan* amid a rock maze. Below the central rock tower, there are a series of altars which seem to be used to communicate with any of the above named patrons. A side altar by the entrance addresses *Toj*.

From the top of *Chrij Chun*, *Campana Ab'äj* may be seen. It is associated with *Tijax*, *Ajmaq*, and *Tz'i'*. This is an extremely powerful mountain and must be approached with great circumspection.

### **Comalapa, *Chi Xot, Chiq'a'l***

*Cerro de Guadalupe*. The six altars bracketing the Catholic Church here fall under the aegis of *B'atz'*.

*Chwi' Kuplaj* "Above Maize-grain-heart" and *Xe' Kuplaj* "Below Maize-grain-heart" are linked to the strong triad of *Tijax, Toj* and *Ajmaq*. The synergistic conjunction of day-bearers makes this a powerful site, one that controls access of potential petitioners.

*Pa Ya'*, "At the Water", is linked with *Imix*.

*Sarima'* has a triad of day-bearer patrons: *Tijax, Toj*, and *Ajmaq*.

*Chwa Burro*<sup>24</sup> is sponsored by *Kej*.

The fourth guardian for the town, unnamed by our consultants, has *Ix* as its spirit-owner.

### **Antigua, *Pan Q'än***

The active central altar within Antigua is dedicated to *Kawoq, I'x*, and *Ajpub'*.

### **San Antonio Aguascalientes**

*Rumul Sanik* is an *Aj* altar; the entrance permission altar for this site also offers access to *Kawoq*.

The altar below *Chwa Cruz, Rujul Kumätz*, is dedicated to *Kan*, though the spirit manifests as a dog, a chicken and chicks, as well as a snake.

### **Santa Catarina Barahona, *Kata'l***

We were unable to ascertain the day ascriptions for specific altars here, though we were told that there are at least one *Toj* and one *Tz'ikin* altar.

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<sup>24</sup> Note: this is not the same as the *Oxlajuj Kej* with this epithet guarding Tecpán.

### **Santa María de Jesús, *Jun'ajpu'***

*Pa Siwan, Rutz'ukib'al Ya'*, lit. "In (the) Ravine, Spring of Water" is associated with *Noj* and *Kawoq*. The *Xe Tinamit* "Below (the) Town" site has *Tijax* as sponsor. The major guardian, the spirit owner of the volcano on whose slopes the town rests, is *Ajpub'*. The secondary hillside, south of the main crater and the town proper, *K'ajol Juyu'*, adds *Ajmaq* and *Tijax* to *Ajpub'* as patrons.

### **El Tejar**

The one site we visited just outside of El Tejar lies on the hillside known as *Chuchu'lin*. The spirit owner of this mountain is *Tijax*. Both the canonical altar on the hilltop and the relocated ceremonial site close to the Pan American Highway are *Tijax* altars. The numerical coefficient of this day-bearer is known. The altars are dedicated to *Wuqu' Tijax*.

### **Santo Domingo Xenacoj, *Xe Na Koj, Xe Na Kok***

The closely situated trio of altars above the town is dedicated to *Kan*, *I'x*, and *Ajmaq*. The *Kan* altar lies on the uphill side of the town's eponymous rock formation. The *I'x* altar lies below and is overshadowed by the Jaguar-head rock outcropping. The *Ajmaq* altar is known as *Ruchi' Xib'alb'a'* "Xib'alb'a's Mouth".

### **Santa María Cauque, *Ka'oke'***

*Kaqjuyu'* "Red Mountain" was traditionally protected by *Kej*. The nearby newly established altar remains under the auspices of *Kej*.

### **Santiago Sacatepéquez, *Pa K'im***

The eastern guardian, *Tz'ite' Che'* "Bean/legume Tree" is associated with *Noj*. The three northeastern sites lining the river, *Chi Nimaya'* "By the Big Water/River", are all *Kan* sites. The principal site utilized until Santa María Cauqué began dumping waste water in the stream, *Ojer Q'uq'ulkan* "Ancient Plumed-Serpent", is also patronized by *Kamey*. The northern site just above *Chi plátanos* "At the Plantains" is also a *Kan* altar.

## San Juan Sacatepéquez

The northern guardian, now within the town proper, *Rujolom B'ay*, is associated with *B'atz'*. An allied potent altar is *K'axnib'al* whose day-bearer is *Ajmaq*. *Keq*<sup>25</sup> *ulew* “Red Earth” is linked to *I'x*. The final two guardian hill sites are *Oxlajuj Kan* “Thirteen Serpent” and *Kab'lajuj K'at* “Twelve Burned”. Notice that these altars retain the complete day-name ascription: numeral coefficient and day bearer title.

## Escuintla, Atakat

*Tz'ikin Ala'* is dotted with altars and portals. Those high on the slope, on the rock out-croppings, on the summit, and on the first ledge below the topmost precipice are *Tz'ikin* altars, as is the principal altar at the base of the mountain near the streambed. The largest boulder shrine at the mountain base is dedicated to *Tijax*, and is a major curing center. The northern side of the rock arch is graced by an *Ajmaq* altar.

## San Jorge La Laguna

*Nimajay*, the cave pilgrimage site just east of San Jorge, is ruled by *Tijax*, *Toj*, and *Tz'ikin*. Below this cave on the same ravine face are two altars, both dedicated to Ma Ximon, *Rijiläj Mam*; the day patrons of these ritual sites are *Toj*, *Kej*, and *Tz'i'*. On the rocky prominence looming as the eastern border of San Jorge are several more sacred precincts. The two strongest are the *Keq Ab'äj* (under the auspices of *Q'anil* and *Toj*) and *Xukulb'äl Aq'omab'äl* “kneeling-place physician” (sponsored by *Tijax*). Here *Tijax* is principally invoked in the function of healer, physician.

Above San Jorge, just to the north, lie two more shrines: *Nim Ab'äj*, sacred to *Tz'ikin*, and *Rukab' Ab'äj Aq'omib'äl*, “Second Stone Healing-spot”, under the aegis of *Tijax*, *Ajpub'*, and *Kamey*.

## San Andrés Semetab'äj, Semët Ab'äj

The cave site above San Andrés known as *El Encanto* “The Enchantment” or *Xe' To'y* “Below the Tree (species?)” or “Below the Aid” is propitious for offerings to *Toj* and *Ajmaq*. The hilltop site just above the city, *Nik'aj Q'ij* is dedicated to *Kan*. The archeological site in which the municipal cemetery, *Semët Ab'äj* “Circular Stone”, is located seems not to be an active ritual site, but the association with

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<sup>25</sup> Local variant of //këq// [kyeq] “red”. Few Kaqchikel speakers make the lax /ë/ vs. tense/e/ distinction.

the graveyard and with the ancestors who built the post-classic city link the area to *Ajmaq* and *Kamey*.

### **San Antonio Palopo', *Antun Po'j***

The cliff cave site here, *Xe Säq Siwan* or *Xe Saqasiwan* "Below (the) White Ravine", though currently without a caretaker, retains strong connections with *Tijax* and *Ajpub'*.

### **San Lucas Tolimán**

The altars here include *San Martín* (patron: *Iq'*), *Pa Tziwir* (patron: *No'j*), *Pa Chi Tulül* (patron *Aj*), *Pa Xan* (patron *Iq'*), *Xukulb'äl* (*B'atz'* and *Aj*) and *Vuelta Misteriosa* or *Kakawate/Cacahuate* (*Imox*).

### **Cerro de Oro, *Ch'ajyu'***

The active altar here within the town proper, bearing the indigenous town name, *Ch'ajyu'*, is a *Tz'ikin* site. Two other subsidiary sites, *Ch'aj Siwan* and *Pa Ruwäch Siwan*, seem to be likewise dedicated to *Tz'ikin*. The cliffside altars to the south, *Nimasuküt* and *Ch'utisuküt* are patronized by *Ajmaq* and *Toj*.

### **Santiago Atitlán**

Known sites here include *Chuwäch Tinamit* (dedicated to *Kej*), *Pa Wakal* (sponsored by *Toj*) and *Tz'ib'an Ab'aj* "Painted/inscribed Stone" (patronized by *Tz'i'*).

### **San Pedro La Laguna**

A pilgrimage site here, *Chi Kaqjaay*, is dedicated to *Q'anil*. *Kawoq* attends the altar at *Pa Tawaal*. *Pa Saq Mam* offers access to *Kej*. Four further altars west of town are dedicated to *Oxlajuj* (13) *Tijax*, *B'eleje'* (9) *Kawoq*, *Kab'lajuj* (12) *Aj*, and *Waqi'* (6) *Kamey*. Notice that the actual daybearers for these altars is known, the numeral coefficient being given as well as the day-name.

### **San Juan La Laguna**

The altars and their patrons for the San Juan area are *K'istalin* and *Xe K'istalin* (patron: *B'atz'*), *B'atz'* (*B'atz'*), *Pa Koral* (*Ajmaq*), *Pa Tz'ulu'* (*Aj*), *Pan Atz'am* (*Kan*), *Xe Q'apoj* (*Kawoq*), *Pa Ruuwach Aab'aj* (*Tijax*), *Pa Nuxti'* (*Toj*), and *Chi Ruuwach San Juan* (*Kan*). The mountain looming over San Juan to the north, *B'atz'ib'äl Juyu'*, is so powerful that three of the shrines on it are presided over by *B'atz'*. However, there is a *Tz'ikin* altar, not visited in this study, nestled on a precipice face.



## **Santa Clara La Laguna**

Here only a *Tz'ikin* altar was identified.

## **San Marcos La Laguna**

The guardian prominences are *Chwäch B'atz'ib'äl* (dedicated to *B'atz'*), *Chuxe Mes Ab'äj* "Below Cat Rock" (sponsored by *Kamey*), *Chwäch Ab'äj* (patronized by *No'j*) and *Pa K'ujil* (under the auspices of *Toj*).

### ***Tz'ununa'***

Safeguarding this community are *Chwa Mesa* (dedicated to *Kej*), *Chwa Nimajuyu'* (also sponsored by *Kej*), *Palitz'* (under the influence of *B'atz'*) and *Pa Q'anq'öj* (cared for by *Q'anil*).

## **Santa Cruz La Laguna**

*Kortel* is a powerful mountain site. It extends its power and its dedication to *Ajmaq* to subsidiary altars lower on the slopes: *Chi' Kortel* and *Chu Kortel*. The remaining guardians are *Xe Po'j* (an *Aj* site), *Pan Panti'* (dedicated to *Kawoq*), and *Xe Juyu' Ok* (patronized by *Kamey*).

## **Xajaxac, Xajaxak**

East of the *aldea* center lies a mountain side with two altars dedicated to *Kawoq*. One *Wuqu' (7) Kawoq* retains the numeral coefficient in its name; the second *Kawoq* altar is known for its hillside location as *Chwi' Kaqb'on*. Nearby *Chwi' Xkanel* is an *Kan* site. Powerful *Polisia* is under the protection of *Tz'i'*. The *Rosario* altar is sponsored by *Toj* and *Aq'ab'al*. The original sponsors of the altar behind the community school are not known to us, but the site has *No'j* links, perhaps related to the proximity of the school<sup>26</sup>. North and west of *Xajaxak* lies *Wentana Ab'äj* which is under the aegis of *Aq'ab'al*. Behind and above *Wentana Ab'äj* to the north towers the complex of altars known as *María Tekun*, *Pixab'äj*. This complex is attended by an array of spiritual sponsors: *No'j*, *Tz'ikin*, *Aj*, *Ajmaq*, *Tijax*, and *Q'anil*.

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<sup>26</sup> Any causal links, irrespective of directionality of influence, were not made explicit to us.

## **Overview**

While our survey does not document all the sites associated with the communities visited, a hierarchy of daybearer patrons emerges. Those Daybearers serving the most altars are *Tz'ikin* (patron of economic success/aid), *Tijax* (physician, healer), *Ajmaq* (link to the ancestors and mediator for atonement of sin), *B'atz'* (representing unity, human relations and skill), and *Kan* (wielder of justice, strength and rejuvenation). *Kej* (male vitality, transportation, success in the hunt), *Toj* (payment, atonement, rain) and *Kamey* (death, rebirth, new beginnings) sponsor the next most frequently named altars. *Noj* (understanding, learning), *Aj* (fertility, regrowth, abundance), *Kawoq* (women's work and strength, vitality, overcoming difficulties), *Iq'* (wind, life force), and *Tz'i'* (justice, protection, loyalty, potency) comprise the third tier. The daybearers with the fewest altars primarily dedicated to them are *Ajpub'* (leadership), *Imox* (abundance, mental energy), *Q'anil* (beginnings, fertility), *Aq'ab'al* (rest, new beginnings), *I'x* (leadership, women), *K'at* (interrelatedness), and *Ey* (travel, new undertakings).

The five daybearers within the first set define an ideal balance for life. Though towns tend not to have this complete quincunx as their guardians, these rather being defined by the local geography and the power of the spirit owners of the physical prominences, every community needs the spiritual bases these daybearers provide: economic security (*Toj*); health (*Tijax*); a mechanism for maintaining communication with ancestors/one's cultural heritage and for atonement/forgiveness (*Ajmaq*); preservation of the social fabric (*B'atz'*); and justice (*Kan*). All of the days, of course, have their functions, and individuals may seek recourse to them. It may well be that even in the communities heavily surveyed other altars exist with patrons not taken into account in the above tally. However, the most consistently named and most popular altars were registered, providing an insight into the mental configuration of these sacred precincts. As altars fall into disuse, this is perhaps a function of their ritual qualities, the activities safeguarded by the spirit sponsors, though, of course, at times the abandonment of a site is due to local contestations over religious orthodoxy, both Catholic and Protestant, ranged against "traditional" Maya practice.

## **Site Descriptions**

### ***Iximche' Region, Department of Chimaltenango***

#### **Iximche', Tecpán Cua:uhte:ma:lla:n:**

Numerous sites have been visited in the area of Iximche'. The back plaza of the Iximche' archaeological site is a sacred space. The entrance to this plaza is lined by low unrestored platforms. The central plaza has a small mound closing

the square at the “rear” and two flanking larger mounds, all unrestored. The back mound serves as the center for ritual offerings ([Figure 2](#)). Fires, votive candles and flowers are placed on both the plaza facing side and that overlooking the bordering ravine.



**Figure 2. Sacred mound and altars at Iximche’  
(Photo courtesy of Don Arburn).**

Behind this plaza is a large ravine, and down the hill is a cave called Iximche’ jul ([Figure 3](#)). The mouth is about 4 meters high and 2 meters wide and the room is small. In the upper reaches is a small tunnel. The opening is less than 1 meter across, but Tecpanecos affirm that this opens up into a cave system.



**Figure 3. The cave below the archaeological site of Iximche’.**

Also known as Oxlajuj Aj, the altar of Chwa Burro is accessed through farmlands north of Tecpán. Located on a hillside below the town water supply, this is a rock-face site. The rock towers some seven meters above the narrow one meter ledge where offerings are made. Smoke from sacrificial fires has blacked the face of the rock for the first two meters. No figure is available.

Saqtz’ikinél Juyu’, now known more commonly as Tz’ikin Juyu’ lies southeast of Tecpán. There is an archaeological site atop the mountain, but the active site we visited is a rock precipice set above a narrow ledge on the western side of the mountain. The room stands about 4 meters high. The rock ledge that serves as the offering table below it is about a half meter wide and two and a half meters long. No figure is available.

This site of Xe Atz’am, K’otb’a K’wal consists of one large pyramid over looking two small plazas. It lies to the southwest of the archaeological site of Iximche’. The large pyramid has looters’ trenches in the east and southern sides. The mound and the back plaza are overgrown with trees, the eastern plaza is relatively clear. Burn circles, however, lie in cleared areas within the brushy back plaza. No figure is available.

The sacred site of Infiernito, “Little Hell” lies in a ravine south of town. A water-carved archway seven meters high and five meters wide leads into a narrow ravine. The walls of the ravine are exposed tufa, with occasional clumps of fern, moss, and lichen. The ravine dead-ends in a solid tufa wall, made green by algae and mosses, moistened in the rainy season by a thin waterfall and in the

dry season by seeps. A perennial small stream winds its bed through the ravine. The dead-end area, sacred to the spirits of the deceased, receives candle offerings in nooks and crannies sheltered from the water spray. However, altar areas are further downstream, within the ravine, but close to the stone arch doorway. Altar areas are on both sides of the stream. But periodic flooding minimizes burn build up. Gravel and flood effluvia must be re-leveled to create surfaces for the offerings.



**Figure 4. Infiernito, Tecpán.**

This site of Q'osib'äl Q'opoj "Maiden's Flail" lies about a mile from the road, between Tecpán and Patzún. It is a small platform mound, rising on a sloping hillside currently planted in broccoli, snow peas, and beans. Planting comes up to the base of the mound, but stops there. The mound itself is over-grown with

brush. Two small flat areas at the top, each about 2 meters across, have been cleared to the stuccoed surface to serve as altars. Burn circles are visible, but the brush encroaches. No figure is available.

The site called Cementerio lies near the *aldea* of Cerritos Asunción, just southwest of the main concentration of housing. It is accessed through the caretaker's house, and consists of a small altar inserted in a niche, 35 cm deep, perhaps 60 cm high, at the base of a hummock. The area around Cerritos Asunción has many archaeological structures dating to the post-Classic. This hummock would seem to be a feature of a structure, but the blocks and form of the original building are not visible. There is no active cemetery here, despite the name. No figure is available.

While the entire *aldea* of Cerritos Asunción lies within a post-classic site of the same name, with the forms of large platforms and "temple" clearly visible, we did not explore the mounds to check for signs of ritual activity. Instead, we went directly to the known and active altar in the patio area of a household, which itself is set in the ancient plaza between two of the "temple" mounds. The altar is a post-classic stone altar, roughly 2 meters x 2 meters x 1 meter. The sides are carved with rattlesnake iconography. Their bodies and rattles entwine midway along the sides, while the heads face each other at the corners, mouths open. The carving on the superior surface is indistinct, but Ma Cojti' identifies it too as snake iconography. This altar lies about 3 meters below the current ground/patio level. The caretaker has carved steps down to the level of the altar and has unearthed all four sides, leaving about 50 cm of space on three sides, but opening almost 1.5 meters to the west of the altar. Three small niches, varying in size from 50 cm x 40 cm, to 60 cm x 1 meter, have been hacked into the western pit wall to accommodate offerings. No figure is available.

The small hill site of Cerro de la Cruz lies just north of the town center. It can be accessed on foot via a short trail through oak-pine woods and a pasture, or by car from the northeast, the road winding through cornfields. The hilltop is cleared of trees and is graced by a four-meter high cement cross painted white. Though clearly a Christian cross, having the central axis longer than the arms, the cleared area in front of the cross receives offerings dedicated to the cross. The burn altar lies two meters away from the cross in line with the central axis. Before the Maya altar is laid out in sugar, herbs, flowers and incense, the cross is censured and provided with offerings as well. This site has recently been closed off to *ajq'ija'* and their clients. The owner, a devout Evangelical, has fenced off the area. There are reports that the cross has been toppled, but we did not revisit the site, known from other years, to verify this.



**Figure 5. Previous ceremony at Cerro de la Cruz, Tecpán  
(Photo courtesy of Walter Little).**

New altars are found near the entrance of Iximche'. They lie on land owned by an American just to the northeast of the entrance to the archaeological park. When Cerro de la Cruz was closed, the owner gave permission to Tecpán *ajq'ija'* to consecrate alternative sacred space here. Three altar areas have been constructed, using stone building blocks salvaged from the post-classic structures lying within the property. The altars are spread out in a lightly wooded field, slightly less than two acres. Each altar was constructed and consecrated by an *ajq'ij*. Two altars have the stones laid out in a quincunx pattern, with the burn circle in front of the stones ([Figure 6](#)). The third altar has the quincunx base, but the principal offering area is in front of a mound of loosely piled stones, about 50 cm high.



**Figure 6. New altar site near Iximche' (Photo courtesy of Walter Little).**

### **Santa Apolonia**

One site was investigated near the community of Santa Apolonia. The sacred site of Xek'owil is located southeast of Santa Apolonia on a hill top and consists of the archaeological remains of a stela and tenon head, both of which appear to be Post-Classic in style ([Figure 7](#)). In front of the stela is the tenon head. Both features are set on a stone and mortar bases. In front of the head is an approximately 2-meter diameter space on the ground for burning offerings.





**Figure 7. The stela and tenoned head at Xek'owil, Santa Apolonia.**

### **San José Poaquil, *Pwaqil***

Two sites were visited in the San José Poaquil region. Chwi Chum, also known as Iglesia Ab'äj, is situated southeast of the town and consists of very large boulders; there are eight stones of power containing various places for burning offerings. At the base of the largest boulder is an altar and burning space measuring about 3 meters long by 1.5 meters wide ([Figure 8](#)). The top of the boulder also consists of space to conduct ceremonial smoking.



**Figure 8. Main altar at Chwi' Chum, San José Poaquil.**

The other site visited in the region, known as Jolom Tz'i', is about 5 kilometers north of San José Poaquil. This site is located in an open field on a hilltop north of the community of Ojercaibal. The altar consists of a U-shaped line of small rocks and an area for burning offerings within the enclosure ([Figure 9](#)). It measures about 1.5 meters by 1.5 meters.



**Figure 9. Jolom Tz'i', San José Poaquil.**

**Comalapa, *Chi Xot, Chiq'a'l***

Four sacred sites were visited in the area around San Juan Comalapa. A very large single boulder site called Xe' Kupilaj was encountered near the top of a mountain northwest of Comalapa. At its base is an area approximately 4 meters long to conduct ceremonies ([Figure 10](#)), but extends out about 4-5 meters more to the mountain slope edge; this is the area to burn offerings. The boulder itself is about 12-14 meters high. The rock face exhibits abundant graffiti ([Figure 11](#)).



**Figure 10. Xe Kupilaj, San Juan Comalapa.**



**Figure 11. Graffiti and other markings on rock face at Xe Kupilaj, San Juan Comalapa.**

Near the community of Paya' northwest of Comalapa a large cave, also known as Pa Ya', is nestled in the upper reaches in the side of a mountain near a spring. The cave had not been visited in some time given that much cutting of vegetation was necessary in order to climb up to the cave. The cave mouth measures about 15 meters wide by about 8-10 meters high ([Figure 12](#)). The cave is roughly one large chamber measuring about 40 meters or so in passage length with some smaller alcoves near the back of the cave. There is a skylight hole in the ceiling and a cone of natural debris present on the cave floor. The cave contains bat roots of unknown species. The small alcove in the back of the cave contains signs of modern habitation/camping with a leaf/vegetation bed and evidence of a campfire.



**Figure 12. The cave site of Pa Ya', San Juan Comalapa.**

The third site documented around Comalapa is situated northeast of town near the community of Sarima'. The site, which consists of a large rock and boulder, is located in a farmer's field near the forest edge and is called Simajulew. The boulder and rock create an altar for placing a ritual meal and the sacred space found in front of the large boulder for burning offerings covers about 1.5 meters by 1.5 meters ([Figure 13](#)). We specifically went there to have a picnic and feed the mountain a meal of meats and vegetables as was deemed necessary in a dream that a local informant had some days earlier.



**Figure 13. Feeding the mountain at Simajulew, Sarima', San Juan Comalapa.**

The final site noted is located at a church called Guadalupe situated just outside the town limits. This site represents the mix between Christianity and Maya spirituality as it pertains to sacred space. A large ceremony was conducted for a group on the grounds of the church outside of the main entrance.

### ***Antigua Region, Department of Sacatepéquez***

#### ***Antigua, Pan Q'än***

One site was recorded within the town limits of Antigua. The site consists of an altar found on the private patio grounds of a business located less than a block off the central square in Antigua. The altar consists of about a 1 meter in diameter circular arrangement of rocks, modern ceramics, crystals, and artifacts, including stone figures, chert and obsidian ([Figure 14](#)).



**Figure 14. Altar located in a private household patio, Antigua (Photo courtesy of Walter Little).**

#### **San Antonio Aguascalientes**

Two sites were visited near the community of San Antonio Aguascalientes. Both were natural animal “homes” including an anthill and an animal burrow. The anthill is located south of the town in the forest on a lightly sloping hill ([Figure 15](#)). There was no evidence of previous altars or burnings at the site.



**Figure 15. Anthill site, San Antonio Aguascalientes.**

The animal burrow site was found just off a foot trail that wanders northeast of town. According to our informant the burrow had a strong connection to the natural energy of the hill and was associated with the day sign of Kan. An offering of tortillas and bread was left at the burrow entrance after the ceremony concluded ([Figure 16](#)).



**Figure 16. An offering of tortillas and bread at the animal burrow, San Antonio Aguascalientes.**

### **Santa Catarina Barahona, *Kata'***

A small stream running southeast into the town provides water for irrigation and its source provides water for the town. Several pools and rock grottos along the watercourse are considered sacred. Offerings may be placed on rocks along the banks or given directly to the water. Burn circles are not in evidence. On the western slope of the hill bordering this stream on the southwest is a rockface, at the base of which, lies a burn circle. The rockface measures perhaps 3 meters in height. The ledge below it is narrow. Access during the rainy season is difficult. No figure is available.

### **Santa María de Jesús, *Jun'ajpu'***

Three sacred sites were noted from the community of Santa Maria de Jesús. First, the summit of the local volcano, *Agua, Jun Ajpu'*, is considered sacred. A second site, called Xe' Tinamit, located north of the town was found to be abandoned and possibly disturbed by the construction of a nearby building, however, locals confirmed that ceremonies took place there some years ago. Finally, a spring site located near the summit of a hill located northeast of town was recorded. Unfortunately, construction of water tanks and a pumping station likely destroyed the altar associated with this site. As a result the spring site had been contaminated. Therefore, the team ventured deeper in the forest to find a cleaner, more spiritually pure space to conduct a ceremony. Our ritual specialist entered into a ravine where an old tree stood and new sacred space was created through the burning of our offering ([Figure 17](#)).



**Figure 17. Newly created sacred space in a ravine, Santa Maria de Jesús.**



## El Tejar

One site east of the community of El Tejar was documented as part of our study. The site known as Wuqu' Tijax is actually found up the hill but because of the high incidents of assaults and robbery of individuals visiting the site rocks from the shrine were brought down the hill and placed in a farmer's field ([Figure 18](#)). The landowner charges a fee to enter the new site, which does not discourage people from coming here. The shrine consists of a large rectangular space measuring about 15 meters by 10 meters. Rocks delineate part of the space and the ground has numerous locations for burning offerings.



**Figure 18. Tijax, El Tejar.**

## **Santo Domingo Xenacoj, *Xe Na Koj, Xe Na Kok***

One sacred site located southeast of the town of Santo Domingo Xenacoj was documented as part of our project. The shrine, known as Xe' Na' Koj, consists of a few large boulders that contained at least two altars. We conducted a ceremony at the side of one large boulder called Oxlajuj Kan ([Figure 19](#)) and later went to a site not much further down the hill near another set of boulders called Ruchi' Xib'alb'a where candles were burned on a small rock altar and cigars were smoked.



**Figure 19. The site of Xe' Na' Koj, Santo Domingo Xenacoj.**

### **Santa María Cauque, *Ka'oke'***

*Kaqjuyu'* “Red Mountain” is a principal altar here, lying north of town in a wooded hilltop area, known as *Chwi' Tinamit*, “Above the Town”. The current owner has blocked off entrance to the original altar, so daykeepers have shifted to another stand of trees slightly to the west ([Figure 20](#)). The several new burn circles indicate the consecration of this new space, but the nearby area still serves as a trash dump for three local families.



**Figure 20. The site of Kaqjuyu', Santa María Cauque.**

## **Santiago Sacatepéquez, Pa K'im**

Tz'ite' Che' is a lightning blasted tree site. The tree, denuded of low branches, still has a leafy crown and a solid base. The circumference of the tree is a little over two meters at about chest height. Tz'ite' Che' stands at the edge of a cornfield on a hill south of the town center. The lightning blast has scored the base of the tree on the town-facing side. The altar lies at the base of this scored face of the tree, nestled in the roots.



**Figure 21. Tz'ite' Che', Santiago Sacatepéquez.**

Another altar lies northeast of town near a small stream ([Figure 22](#)). On a prominence above the stream, the altar overlooks two swimming holds. The small rise on which the altar rests is perhaps 5 meters across. There is one central burn circle. This site is known as Pa Ya' "At (the) Water".



**Figure 22. Pa Ya', Santiago Sacatepéquez.**

Northwest of town, lie three more altar sites. These lie along a streambed. The first altar, known as Q'uqulkan, has two ritual sites, one at the base of a rock face, just above rainy season water levels, and a second beside the streambed, slightly further up stream, where the water rushes over a small riffle. These two sites have largely been abandoned since Santa María Cauqué has begun dumping sewage in the stream. Phosphate foam scums the top of the stream in eddies and along the edges of rock, tree and brush obstructions ([Figure 23](#)).



**Figure 23. Streambed site of Q'uqulkan, Santiago Sacatepéquez.**

Slightly downstream, a smaller rivulet comes in from the west, dropping in a series of small falls. Just before joining the main stream a rock niche just to the southeast of the stream serves as an altar ([Figure 24](#)). Nearby rock surfaces may be used as subsidiary offering sites if the main site is in use. This set of altars is known collectively as *Q'anakan* "Golden Snake".



**Figure 24. Q'anakan, Santiago Sacatepéquez.**

A half mile further down stream, a small recreational area has been built. Just below the parking area and snack shop, lies a streamside floodplain about 100 meters long and 30 meters wide. A graded ramp provides vehicular access to this plain. Four burn circles dot the floor of the plain ([Figure 25](#)). Two niches have been carved in the hillside for offerings. The larger niche is just under a meter wide at the base and 30 cm. high; the smaller niche is about one half this size. This sacred precinct is known as *Raxtew* "lit. green cold, fig. chills".



**Figure 25. Raxtew, Santiago Sacatepéquez.**

### **San Juan Sacatepéquez**

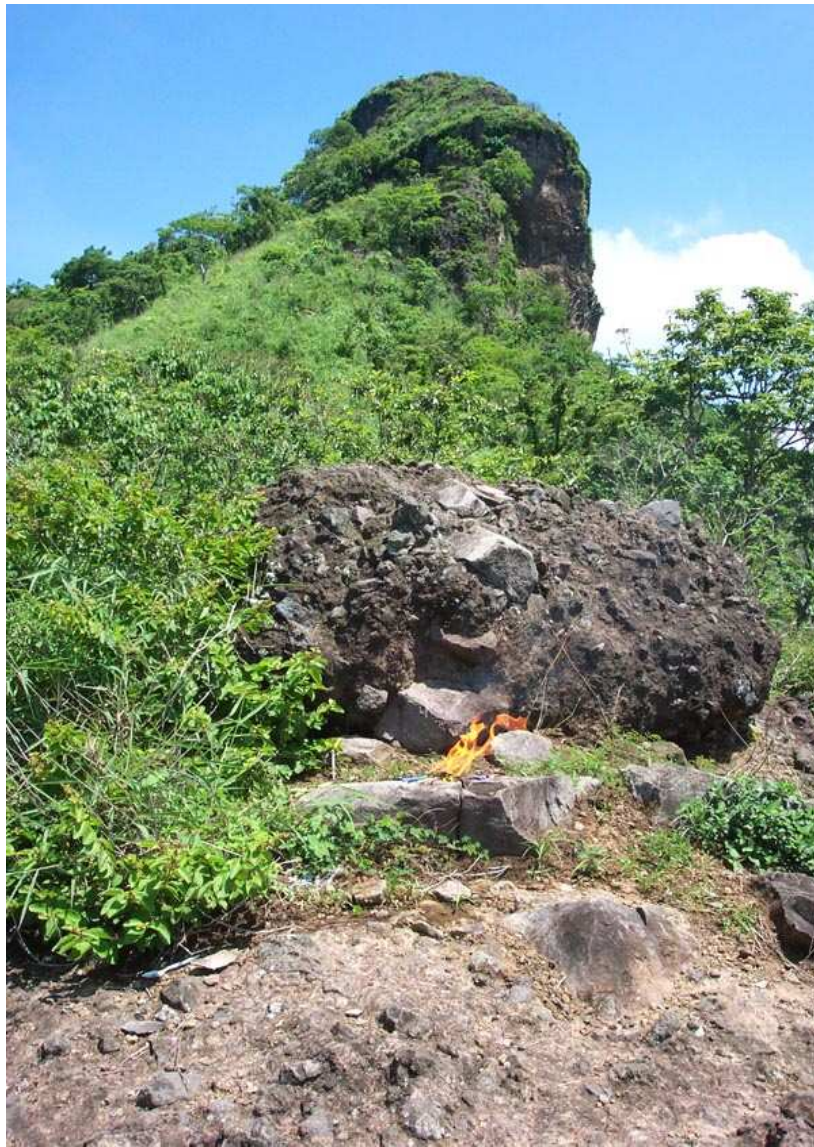
On the north end of town rises a knob, known as *(Rujolom B'ay* “Gopher Head”. This hill, wooded on the sides, has a large clear area at the top. There are several burn circles widely spread along the cleared crest. A Christian cross stands above the front circle ([Figure 26](#)).



**Figure 26. Rujolom B'ay, San Juan Sacatepéquez.**

## **Escuintla, Atakat**

A series of six sacred sites in one landform was investigated in the department of Escuintla. Called Tz'ikin Ala', the sites are located on the northeastern portion of Cerro Mirandilla, an anomalous mountain land feature found southeast of Volcan Fuego on the road from Alotenango to Escuintla. The sacred sites include two locations on the top of the mountain ([Figure 27](#)), a spring and rockshelter along a trail, a ledge/rock face, a tall, cave like passage at the base of the mountain ([Figure 28](#)), and a series of large boulders at the base near the river adjacent to the landform.



**Figure 27. One of the mountain top shrines at Tz'ikin Ala', Escuintla.**



**Figure 28. The tall passage feature at Tz'ikin Ala', Escuintla.**

The activity area of the river side site is large covering approximately 18 meters in diameter with numerous areas on the ground to burn offerings ([Figure 29](#)).





**Figure 29. The activity area near the river at Tz'ikin Ala', Escuintla.**

People from many different regions of Guatemala come to this area to conduct ceremonies, mainly at the boulders found at the base of the mountain by the river and the backside of the cave-like passage. The sites found in the upper zone of the mountain showed much less activity compared to the sites by the river. This could be a reflection of the ease in which one is able to access the lower sites instead of taking the arduous climb up the mountain or indicative of the nature of the ceremonies performed at the sites.

### ***Lake Atitlán Region, Department of Sololá***

#### **San Jorge La Laguna**

Five sites were visited in the community of San Jorge. One site, containing three sacred spaces, is located near a tourist scenic stop or *mirador* on the road down to Lake Atitlán. The site consists of a large rock outcrop that forms two small concavities measuring about 2 meters across for each area ([Figure 30](#)). The site contained much debris from numerous ceremonies and was considered rather dirty and contaminated. A more positive altar was located on the upper part of the rock outcrop on a large flat boulder measuring about 2 meters in diameter.



**Figure 30. Unnamed site located near the *mirador*, San Jorge La Laguna.**

Four sites were located on the impressive landform that is adjacent to Lake Atitlán just south of the town center. The sacred site of Nimajay, located near another scenic lookout, is a cave that consists of a single chamber approximately 15 meters wide by 10-12 meters deep ([Figure 31](#)).



**Figure 31. Entrance at Nimajay, San Jorge La Laguna.**

The cave covered in fuzzy soot all over the interior and extending to the outside over the upper lip of the mouth. This soot represents scores of ceremonies that have been celebrated there for many years. It can be considered as a pilgrimage site as many people from all over Guatemala come to the cave to conduct ceremonies; during our investigations individuals from Totonicapan and Chichicastenango were present. The cave contains numerous areas where offerings have been burned either on the ground near the front of the cave or on altars near the back of the cave or in front of the crosses. During this visit we documented vandalism of a couple of the crosses that must have taken place in the past couple years ([Figure 32](#)); all of the crosses were intact during a visit by Scott in 2005. Ceremonies also take place outside of the cave near the edge of the slope ([Figure 33](#)).



**Figure 32. Vandalized cross near the back of the cave at Nimajay, San Jorge La Laguna.**



**Figure 33. Ceremony being preformed outside the cave entrance at Nimajay, San Jorge La Laguna.**

Silla de Ma Ximon is located about 150 meters southwest of Nimajay Cave. It is a small rockshelter like feature about 2 meters wide and 1 meter deep ([Figure 34](#)). It contains two altars, one for setting candles and one for a primary offering.



**Figure 34. Silla de Ma Ximon, San Jorge La Laguna.**

Further southwest on the landform rests Kāq Ab'äj. This sacred site is located at the end of the mountain on the flat rock that appears to almost float over the lake and trees. There is one main altar on the rock, which measures about 2 meters by 1 meter ([Figure 35](#)).



**Figure 35. Kăq Ab'äj, San Jorge La Laguna.**

Approximately 30 meters away from Kăq Ab'äj is the cliff site called Chuwa Kăq Ab'äj. This site, located in the somewhat concave portion at the base of the cliff, has multiple altars for both positive and negative ceremonies. The ritual space measures about 10-12 meters long by 2-3 meters wide ([Figure 36](#)).



**Figure 36. Chuwa Kăq Ab'äj, San Jorge La Laguna.**

### **San Andrés Semetab'äj, Semët Ab'äj**

Two sites, a cave and hilltop, were visited in San Andrés Semetabaj. Xe To'oy is a cave site located northwest of the center of San Andrés Semetabaj. Situated in the bank of an intermittent streambed, the cave contains two passages about 12 to 14 meters in length that terminate with water pooled at their ends. The height of the cave ceiling varies but one cannot stand inside the passages and requires crawling to reach the ends. Xe To'oy contains an altar made of a concrete slab with a concrete cross situated at the backside ([Figure 37](#)). The altar is located near the mouth of the cave. Scott had visited the cave before and noted that new excavations in the left side of the cave have been done since her last visit. The cave may have originally been excavated for the sediments found therein, however, it has been used extensively as sacred space for a number of years. A photo of the cave appears in Warren (1989:Plate 11) where she notes that community members come to this location to celebrate rites.



**Figure 37. Cave entrance and altar of Xe To'oy, San Andrés Semetabaj.**

The second sacred site is located at the summit of a hill adjacent to a road that leads out of town towards Xe To'oy. The informant from town explained that the altar will reveal itself at midday and we should be there at that time with our offering, which included a special meal along with the normal offering. The top of the hill contained short grasses, shrubs, and various sized trees. We searched for the altar but it did not appear despite our arrival at midday. Our ajq'ij conducted a ceremony near an animal burrow. No figure is presented.

### **San Antonio Palopo', *Antun Po'j***

One site, a rockshelter, was investigated from San Antonio Palopó. Xe Saqsiwan or Xe Saqasiwan is located in the lower portion of an exposed rock face of the large mountain situated southeast of the community of San Antonio Palopó. The rockshelter measures roughly 8-10 meters wide with a 6 meter tall ceiling; the floor measures about 3-4 meters from the back of the wall and abruptly ends at the cliff edge mouth. In the back of the rockshelter is a small alcove where rocks are present as bases for lighting candles. In front of the rocks is an altar for burning offerings ([Figure 38](#)).



**Figure 38. The alcove and altar in Xe Saqsiwan, San Antonio Palopó.**

The rockshelter appears to be natural, however, artificial hand holds and small steps have been cut into the soft rock pathway in order to facilitate a safe arrival at the site.



## San Lucas Tolimán

This site called Chi Tulül, named for the zapote, but currently situated at the base of a Silkcotton tree, is a small altar nestled at the base of the tree ([Figure 39](#)). Offerings are left amid the roots. The tree stands atop a small crest running east-west from the Lake to the base of Toliman Volcano. The altar lies on the north side of the tree.



**Figure 39. Chi Tulul, San Lucas Tolimán.**

## Cerro de Oro, *Ch'ajyu'*

There are several altars at *Ch'ajyu'*. Above the town rises the “sleeping elephant” hill. Below the crest a vertical rock spire rising 10 meters hosts a series of altars at its base. Non-burned offerings are stuck in the rock crevices. A secondary altar lies on the rock ledge just west of the rock spire ([Figure 40](#)).



**Figure 40. Ch'ajyu', Cerro de Oro.**

Above the rock spire on the crest of the hill, a jumble of rocks provides three more altar spaces, though these are less used. Some of the rocks appear to have had carved figures on them, but the forms are not clearly distinguishable. The most used altar lay at the base of a small tree. Other small burns were distinguishable among the rocks.

This site of Ch'ajyu' Okem is a pilgrimage site, a short block from the town center. Formerly accessible directly from the road, it must now be entered through the owner's house compound. He charges those using the site a modest fee and maintains the area free of debris. The rock overhang area is fairly large, accommodating three to four simultaneous ceremonial fires. The opening constricts to a narrow 2 meter space, where smaller offerings may be made ([Figure 41](#)).



**Figure 41. Ch'ajyu'Okem, Cerro de Oro.**

Above the town, across the highway to the west, the land slopes heading up toward the Volcano Tolimán. About two miles from the highway, on a nearly perpendicular hill face lies Nimasuküt. The site overlooks the town of Ch'ajyu'. It is a small flat hollow at the base of a concavity in the rockface. There is a single large burn circle here, with rock crannies used for votive offerings. There is no flat area away from the burn circle as the drop-off is immediate. No figure is available.

Just around a rock protrusion to the southwest from Nimsuküt is smaller altar, *Suküt Ko'öl*. This is a small flat area between standing stones ([Figure 42](#)). There is a small ledge about a meter wide and a meter and a half long just below the altar, giving petitioners a place to stand or kneel.



**Figure 42. Suküt ko'öl, Cerro de Oro.**

### **Santiago Atitlán**

One site was recorded about 5 kilometers south of San Pedro near the village of Chicajay off the road that travels to Santiago Atitlán. The site is a combination Catholic shrine along with Maya altar among what is reported to be archaeological site mounds or ruins. The site known as Chi' Kaqjay is situated just behind the Catholic shrine structure cupola. The platform altar covers about 3 meters by 2 meters with an area in the center to burn offerings ([Figure 43](#)).



**Figure 43. The Maya altar and Catholic shrine at Chi' Kaqjay, Santiago Atitlán.**

## San Pedro La Laguna

Six sacred sites were visited around the community of San Pedro La Laguna. The first four sites are located just south of town on a northeastern facing mountain slope. The four shrines, Beleje' Kawoq, Waqi' Kamey, Kablajuj Aj, and Tijax, are situated among various large boulders and rock faces found along this mountainside; they form one small rockshelter, one is a small animal burrow/cave-like passage, and two are along the base of the rock face. All of the altars are small, about 1 to 1.5 meters in size and do not exhibit extensive use ([Figure 44](#)).



**Figure 44. The altar at Beleje' Kawoq, San Pedro La Laguna.**

The fifth site recorded on our survey is called Pa Tawal, which is located on private property on the peninsula northeast of town. The site consists of a cluster of large rocks, which formed an area in front for burning offerings measuring about 1.5 meters by 1.5 meters ([Figure 45](#)). Our local informant explained that the site was popular for fishermen to ask for permission and abundance in their daily fishing excursions. The site appears to be abandoned and was previously investigated by Brown (2006) during her project on hunting shrines. No animal bones were noted during our visit in 2007.



**Figure 45. Pa Tawal, San Pedro La Laguna.**

The sixth site visited is called Pa Saq Mam and is a rockshelter hunting shrine extensively studied by Brown (2006) during her project (see her FAMS I report for a summary of findings). The rockshelter measures roughly 6 meters by 4 meters with an open area in the front about 2-3 meters in diameter. Inside the various alcoves and spaces in the rockshelter are abundant bone caches ([Figure 46](#)). A small platform altar is found just inside the rockshelter for burning offerings and numerous rocks are utilized for placing candles.



**Figure 46. Pa Saq Mam hunting shrine, San Pedro La Laguna.**

## San Juan La Laguna

Four sites were documented near the community of San Jan La Laguna. The first site called Chuwach San Juan is located east of town near the plain of the lakeshore among a large cluster of rocks in the side of a small hill. The rocks form a small alcove where candles can be placed and is large enough for a person to crouch ([Figure 47](#)). In front of the alcove is an altar where offerings are burned. The altar space measures less than a meter in diameter. There was evidence of another altar at the top of the rock to the left. The site does not receive much activity.



**Figure 47. Chuwach San Juan, San Juan La Laguna.**

The second site is called Xe' K'istilin and consists of a rockshelter found in the upper reaches of Cerro Cristalino north of San Juan La Laguna. The rockshelter opens to the south and measures about 15 meters wide, however, the location of the altar and ritual activity space is restricted to about 3 by 5 meters ([Figure 48](#)). The overhang measures about 3 meters. According to local informants the site was used in the past for celebrating dances. Currently the site contains a wooden cross against the back wall, numerous rocks for placing candles, and space in front on the ground for offerings.



**Figure 48. Xe K'istilin, San Juan La Laguna.**

The third site called Chwa Kruz is found at the summit of a mountain just north of town ([Figure 49](#)). The site has a small cement platform standing behind a cross and a papal jubilee marker. A statue of the Virgin Mary overlooks the city.





**Figure 49. The summit at Chwa Kruz, San Juan La Laguna.**

The fourth site known as Kaq B'atz'ulu' is located to the northeast. It is accessed through Sta. María Uatlán and the *aldea* of Palestina. The site is a small cave overlooking the Lake. Three crosses of pine boughs were laid just inside the cave entrance. There was evidence that water had recently flowed through the cave exiting through the mouth, cleaning a broad area of the floor and leaving a fresh layer of mud ([Figure 50](#)). The small tunnel-like opening had a small chamber on the right and a larger one, narrowing in a channel through which the water had flowed, lay to the left.



**Figure 50. Kaq B'atz'ulu', San Juan La Laguna.**

### **Santa Clara La Laguna**

Two sites were visited near the community of Santa Clara La Laguna. The mountain top shrine known as Tz'ikin is located at the top of Cerro Cristalino. The site is well known to many from the region. The area has a couple places where ceremonies can be conducted, one flat area found towards the north side of the summit covering about 2 meters in diameter and another altar, located on the western side, that consists of a cluster of rock and altar space measuring about 2 meters in diameter ([Figure 51](#)).



**Figure 51. Western side altar at Tz'ikin, Santa Clara La Laguna.**

The next lower mountaintop to the west of Tz'ikin contains the shrine known as B'atz'. This shrine currently contained some flowers in cans but did not exhibit much recent burning activity. The sacred space covered about 2 meters in diameter.

### **San Pablo La Laguna**

One site was visited in San Pablo La Laguna. There is a small chapel structure in the town cemetery. Inside this structure are areas to conduct ceremonies or simply burn candles ([Figure 52](#)). The structure was interesting in that on the exterior sides and back of the structure there were three tall openings the shape and size of telephone booths where offerings can be burned. The structure measures about 8 meters long by 6 meters wide. Both the interior of the structure and the ancillary attached structures were extensively blackened by soot from burning offerings and candles.



**Figure 52. The interior of the structure at the cemetery of San Pablo La Laguna.**

### **San Marcos La Laguna**

Pa K'ujil is a boulder overhang site, accessed by a path that runs through and alongside five private homes. The top of the boulder affords a clear view of Lake Atitlán. Areas on the south and east sides of the prominence on which the boulder sits are used as meditation areas by orientalists. Pa K'ujil appears to be lightly used. The boulder is not heavily sooted, but there were woven reed fan offerings, and a kneeling mat next to the altar ([Figure 53](#)). There is a smaller altar just below the boulder to the northwest, between three young trees. Our consultant noted that this portal could be used to ask permission of the spirit owner to approach the main altar. A similar permission portal was available downslope from the altar to the west for those who might approach from the water level.



**Figure 53. Pa K'ujil, San Marcos La Laguna.**

### ***Tz'ununa'***

In Tz'ununa' we did not visit the altars, though we interviewed town residents. The principal altars here are Chwa Mesa, Chwa' Nimajuyu', Palitz', and Pa Q'anq'öj. Only the latter two were described to use. Palitz' sits in a ravine near a stream. It is frequented by flocks of birds at dawn and dusk. Pa Q'anq'öj is a "cave" or burrow site. The hole is quite deep. The altar lies behind the rock fronting this burrow. The area directly in front and over the hole is frequented by New Agers recharging their crystals.

### **Santa Cruz La Laguna**

Kwartel is the general name of the peak overlooking Santa Cruz la Laguna. It is accessed by road from San José Chacaya' *Chaqa' Ya'*. The principal altar lies on the peak crest. The trail leads from the road across several streams and then steeply up. We were not able to reach this altar.

Two smaller altars lie below the roadway and overlook the town of Santa Cruz la Laguna. Each altar is nestled amid a stand of young trees ([Figure 54](#)). A third altar lies just below the roadway on a spur of land jutting out above the lake. Here the altar rests in the roots of a tree stump. The stump is about 16 cm in diameter. Small trees in the area appear to have been recently cut, but there are no fields here and no evidence of grazing.



**Figure 54. Kwartel, Santa Cruz La Laguna.**

### **Pan Pati'**

Pan Pati' lies along the stream bed on the northern boundary of Santa Cruz la Laguna. To access Pan Pati' one must first ask permission, at one of three large boulders framing the pathway. The altars, however, lie further upstream past new housing construction. There are two cliff-face altars on the southern side of the stream and one rock overhang altar ([Figure 55](#)). None show evidence of burn circles or caked soot. The stream has deposited large boulders over the altar site on the northern side of the streambed.



**Figure 55. Pan Pati', Santa Cruz La Laguna.**

## **Sololá**

Pixab'áj, also popularly known as María Tekun, is a pilgrimage site on the *mojón* between Sololá and Chichicastenango. It sits astride the area currently hotly contested by would-be mining companies. The site may be approached by roadway from Los Encuentros. The site consists in several rocky peaks protruding from the hillside ([Figure 56](#)). Each peak is topped by burn altars, including one area that we were unable to access without ropes. The base of the central peak has a series of altars and burn circles along its face. The name María Tecún has been spray-painted on the rock face, along with a drawing of a church front. Small flat rocks are set at intervals alongside burn circles as wind blocks.



**Figure 56. Pixab'aj, Sololá.**

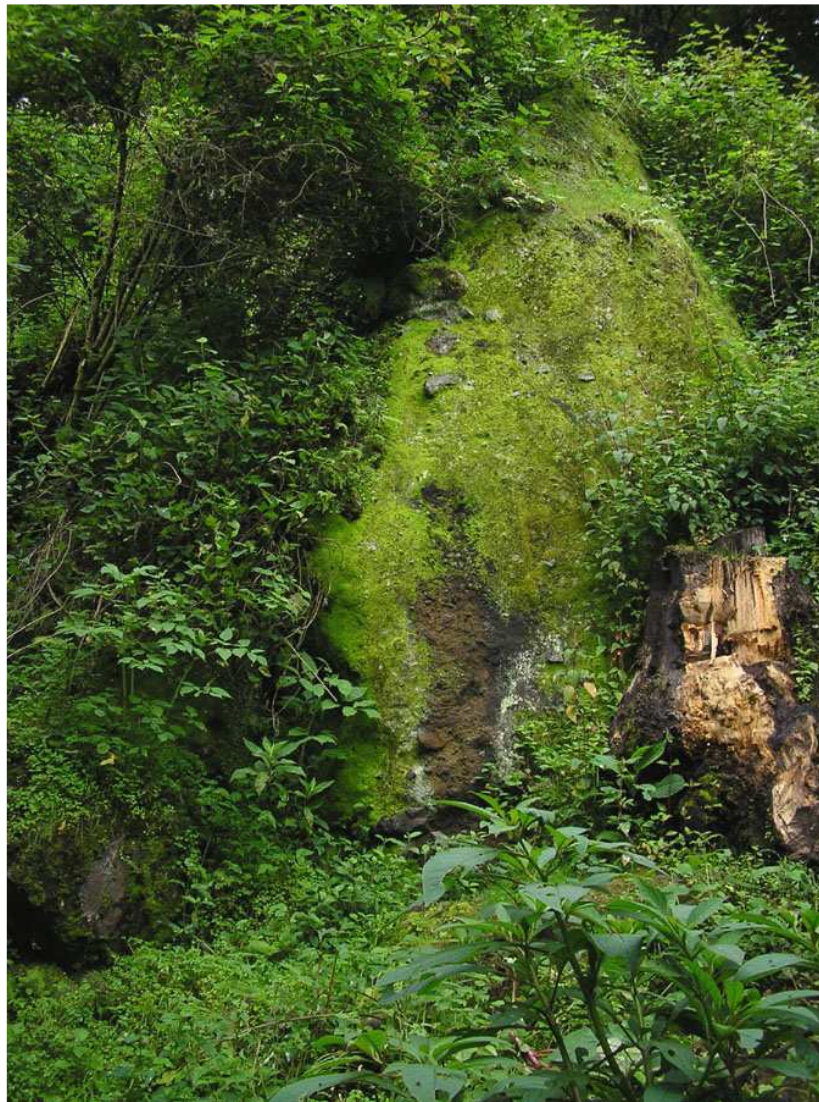
Located above the village of Xajajak, Wuqu' Kawoq overlooks the valley. There are four 50 cm. blue-green wooden Mayan crosses framing the central altar here with a fifth white cross offset at the base of the rock lip ([Figure 57](#)). There are two subsidiary burn circles in line with the central axis defined by the main altar and the white cross.



**Figure 57. Wuqu Kawoq, Sololá.**



To the northeast of Xajaxak lies the site of Policía. This altar site is nestled into the side of a steep wooded hill. Coffee plantings come to the base of the steep slope and some plants come to within 100 meters of the base of the 10 meter rock face that defines the altar area. The rock cuts out above the altar area preventing GPS readings. The rock face is blackened by the fire of many offerings. Moss surrounds the blackening, thriving in the humid air held in this hillside pocket ([Figure 58](#)).



**Figure 58. Policía, Sololá.**

To the southeast of Xajaxak along a gently rising trail sits a large boulder altar site, Xkanel. Offerings are made on the west and south sides of the altar area. Small stones are aligned to accept candle offerings ([Figure 59](#)). There was no evidence of burn circles, though there was a cleared space to the side of the western votive area, where families sat to share food after making offerings.



**Figure 59. Xkanel, Sololá.**

La Ventana is a site just to the northeast of the Pan American Highway, aligned visually with Pixab'äj, María Tekun. This is a large boulder overhang site ([Figure 60](#)). There is an offering area in front of the boulder, but one may enter an overhang space beneath the boulder by ducking in from the side. Within this space there is able space for both burns and votive offerings.



**Figure 60. Ventana, Sololá.**

### **Summary and conclusions**

This preliminary survey has documented over 75 Mayan ritual sites, 50 under the auspices of this grant from FAMSI. Most of these sites remain active, though some have fallen into disuse in recent years. Religious conversion of main elements within the communities bounded by these sites is cited as one of the chief causes of abandonment. Active contestation of access to Mayan sacred spaces is bringing communities, traditional ritual specialists, Catholic and Evangelical groups into conflict, and at times into court. Sacred sites named in the colonial Kaqchikel documents continue to be in use, though one has been moved to accommodate road expansion and the creation of a Lake Atitlán overlook and tourist market. In some cases the colonial name has been changed, folk etymologized or shortened. In other cases the sacred precincts are known popularly by Spanish or Nahuatl names. Some very powerful altars have become pilgrimage sites with supplicants coming from throughout the central highlands. One altar on the Pacific bocacosta also serves the costal lowlands. These pilgrimage sites are used by Maya and non-Mayan spiritual mediums. All natural features have spirit owners. These may manifest themselves as people, both Maya and non-Maya, and as animals, often chickens, dogs and snakes. Especially sensitive altar areas must be approached with care. These sites have subsidiary altars, which serve as gatekeepers. All

social space inhabited and defined by the Maya as communities have spiritual guardians. These reside in prominent features of the landscape, often mountains, roughly aligned with the four planar cardinal directions. The central axis, creating three dimensional physical space and defining the town center, is now typically defined by a Roman Catholic Church. In some cases, the day-bearer associated with the central altar site is still known. This day bearer is often repeated as the guardian of one of the planar directions as well. A few of the sites visited commemorate historic events, consecrate archaeological evidence of ancestral presence, or are tied to other human constructions, but the majority are natural features: prominent hilltops, escarpments, boulders, rock overhangs, and cave sites. A few streambeds, typically those noted in Colonial documents, also house altars. Altars require careful attention and ritual to maintain their potency. Most have caretakers; but some have recently seen the death of their human guardians, with no successor coming forward. Recent changes in Guatemalan law provide for the protection of Mayan sacred sites, but the process of identification, definition, and preservation of these sites is just beginning. This study represents a step in the documentation of the Mayan sacred landscape within the Kaqchikel region of Guatemala. Power sits in places; it is defined and fed by human interaction with their lived environment.

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