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The role of the ancestors in the daily life of the Aguacatec (Maya)

Harry S. McArthur

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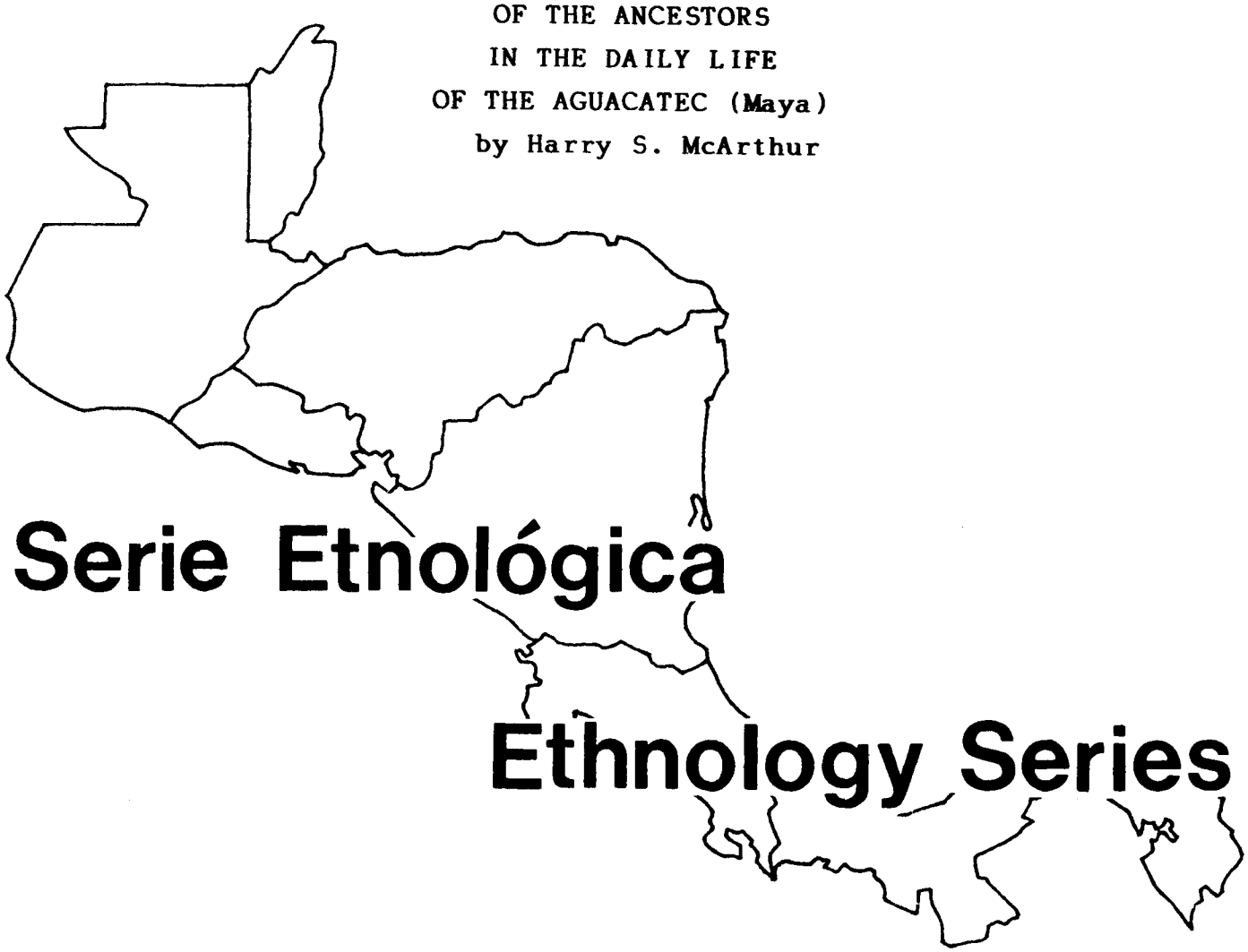

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THE ROLE OF THE ANCESTORS IN THE DAILY LIFE OF THE AGUACATEC (Maya)

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The purpose of this paper is to describe the essential aspects of the ancestor cult in the *municipio* of Aguacatan, in the *departamento* of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, and to underscore the importance of the cult throughout the western highlands of Mesoamerica. Bunzel (1952), Holland (1961) and Vogt (1964, 1969) have all commented on the crucial role of ancestral deities in the religious systems of Chichicastenango (Quiche), Larrainzar (Tzotzil), and Zinacantan (Zinacanteco), respectively. The present study of the ancestors, based in Aguacatan, adds information to previous studies (McArthur 1961, 1966, 1977; Brintnall 1974), thus demonstrating the internal variation and distribution of the cult. This study treats the specifics of the state of the dead, their present location, their socio-political organization, their deification, rituals designed to worship them and communicate with them and implication for understanding some of the pre-Columbian practices relating to the use of the pyramids and stelae.

The ancestor beliefs that are described here are no longer held in their entirety by all Aguacatecs. However, they do continue to be vitally significant to a large segment of the community and significant to a lesser degree to the remainder of the community, despite their participation in a Christian religious system.

METHODOLOGY

The description and analysis presented here are based on many hours of tape recordings, recorded over a period of 25 years.

One shaman in particular has been especially helpful in sharing his views with me and inviting me to witness and tape record some of the ceremonies at which he has officiated. After transcribing this material, I went over it with other shamans and non-shamans, discussing the semantic implications of each phrase. All of the field work has been conducted exclusively in the Aguacatec language. I have not included here idiosyncratic accounts which were unsupported by other material.

THE STATE OF THE DEAD

When an Aguacatec dies, he becomes an *alma'* "disembodied soul" –not really dead, just transferred to another place called *chixo'l alma'* "among the dead." It is not generally considered to be a bad place in that one's parents and friends are there and, in the main section of the area, there is even sunshine and warmth. It is referred to as "the congregation of the blessed, the congregation of the gods." Only when one commits some misdemeanor in the land of the dead is he punished by being placed *xe tze'* "under the tree" (in the "jail of the underworld") where it is cold, dark, and damp. Also, those with many sins committed on earth may be temporarily confined to this cold, damp area where they receive no food or drink and suffer many indignities. At the bequest of faithful sons who are concerned about the well-being of

their deceased parents and who carry on the customs of their ancestors, release may be obtained. Christian Aguacatecs describe the place of the dead as "burning with fire," obviously a syncretic development.

The dead are buried in their own clothing, including jewelry, shoes, and items necessary for the afterlife (such as a needle and thread to repair clothing). The shoes should fit well and be made of *sk'ajse'n tz'u'm* "cured leather" ("like the old people wore"). They would reject over-elegance in dress:

> When a person is buried he is not dressed in fine clothes and we often burn the tail of their shirts or blouses because if we don't, they will be taken from them when they arrive in the place of the dead. They will be punished because they are so well dressed.

The soles of the shoes should not be of rubber but of "cooked leather" because rubber does not protect sufficiently from the briars and thorns through which one must pass on his way to the abode of the dead. Furthermore, if one wears shoes all day every day here on earth, he will be punished by the dead: "He will be forced to walk over thorns and briars because his bare feet have never touched the ground." In the place of the dead a girl's hands will be examined to see if she has the callouses that come with having ground corn; if not, she will be forced to use an immense grinding stone throughout her existence in the place of the dead.

THE LOCATION OF THE DEAD

Several *Aj Pom* "incense priests" have stated that the dead are located under the graveyard. In the very center of the graveyard, "under the big cross" *xe nim crus,* the dead congregate for their council meetings. On the western edge of the present market place in the town center is another cross similarly named, where the shamans pray to the dead "who are located beneath it," because at one time "that whole area was used as a graveyard."

When an Aguacatec dies and is buried outside of Aguacatán the family members wait until the body has decomposed and become *tx'otx' puklaj* "earth dust" before transferring it. This is accomplished by digging up several handfuls of *yi mero talma'* "his very soul" and reburying it in the Aguacatan cemetery so that this dead one can be with his fellow Aguacatecs.

SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE DEAD

The socio-political organization of the dead parallels that of the living (McArthur 1961). Wa'n Si'l, an ex-shaman, describes the hierarchical structure of the underworld government as being made up, on the top level, of four mayors: the first, second, third, and fourth *alcal.* Subordinate to these are the first, second, third, and fourth *axtol* "aldermen," followed in turn by various ranks of lesser officials, the same ranks as those of the hierarchy of the living. When addressing the dead who are in the highest positions of authority, the term *alcal* "mayor" is used by shamans (e.g., *swutz kataj Juk Ik' Ca'b Alcal* "before (his face) our-father Seven Ik', Second Mayor").

One significant difference in the nomenclature between the hierarchy of the living and the dead is apparent in the foregoing example, in that the *alcal* of the dead carries a day name, in this case "Seven *Ik'*." In Figure 2, line one, notice that there are four *alcal* "mayors" listed: 13 *Ik'* (first mayor), 7 *Ik'* (second mayor), 1 *Ik'* (third mayor), and 8 *Ik'* (fourth mayor). These corresponded to the day names and numbers which occurred in the Aguacatec calendar on the first day of each of the first four twenty-day months (*wink* "month") of the year, which began in early March in 1973. Each group of mayors (first, second, third and fourth) serve 365 days, then another group of four mayors takes over. For the year 1974, the four mayors were 1 *Chej,* 8 *Chej,* 2 *Chej,* and 9 *Chej.* Figure 1 lists the twenty day names and thirteen numbers of the first month plus the first day of the second month of the Aguacatec calendar for the year 1979.

March 1979	Day Name
2nd	*6 E'
3rd	7 Aj
4th	8 I'x
5th	9 Tz'ichin
6th	10 Aj Mak
7th	11 No'j
8th	12 Chi'j
9th	13 Cyok
10th	1 Aj pu'
11th	2 Imx
12th	3 Ik'
13th	4 Ak'bal
14th	5 C'ach
15th	6 Can
16th	7 Camey
17th	8 Chej
18th	9 K'anil
19th	10 Choj
20th	11 Tx'i'
21st	12 Batz'
22nd	**13 E'

Figure 1: The twenty Aguacatec day names (one *wink)* which are repeated 18 times in each solar year. The numbers 1 to 13 accompany them in constantly rotating succession. See also McArthur, 1965.

* First Alcal for 1979 took office on this day. ** Second Alcal for 1979.

This fusion of the roles of ancestors and year-bearers (called *alcal* in Aguacatan rather than the expected *ek'um yob* "carrier of the year") is shared by the K'anjobal of San Miguel Acatan.[2] The K'anjobal believe that all the day gods are the original ancestors and address them in petitions concerning matters for which particular day gods are considered responsible. In Aguacatan also, the ancestors are thought to fulfill the responsibilities generally associated with different day gods.

Whatever rank or office that one held in life he can also hold in death. If one was an *alcal* "mayor," he will take his turn among the mayors in the afterlife.

The Aguacatec asks justice of the underworld rulers by approaching, in proper order, each of the four mayors of a given year. For instance, in 1973 a shaman went to the cemetery four different times to address in order the first, second, third and fourth mayors who were 13 *Ik'*, 7 *Ik'*, 1 *Ik'*, and 8 *Ik'*. The following excerpt from a prayer giving information to his dead father and mother was recorded on the 14th of April of that year:

> This is why we've come before you. This is the word, our word, which we left said before our father *Juk Ik' ("7 Ik' ")*. We have now come again, Father, before our father the third mayor, seer of us, hearer of us. Be patient with us, Father, First *Alcal*, who entered over us on 13 *Ik'*. We arrived last time, Father, before our father Seven *Ik'*, the second *alcal*. We have come again now, Father, before the third *alcal*, 1 *Ik'*. We will come again, Father, before our father, 8 *Ik'*. Oh, God, if it is possible, do this favor for us."

These *alcal* are also referred to as *alcal justis* "those who dispense justice." The Ixil of Chajul use a very similar term, *alcalte justis* in reference to the day gods: *E', Noh, Ik'* and *Chej*.[3]

Figure 2 shows us that the four rulers of the Aguacatec underworld are known by the day names *E', No'j, Ik'*, and *Chej*. Most of the shamans are able to call the name and number

of the four *alcal* for any given year, even though the same set of name-number combination recurs only every 52 years.

Gregorian Date	Bajx Alcal 1st Mayor	Ca'p Alcal 2nd Mayor	Toxe'n Alcal 3rd Mayor	Cyaje'n Alcal 4th Mayor
3 Mar 1973	13 Ik'	7 Ik'	1 Ik'	8 Ik'
1974	1 Chej	8 Chej	2 Chej	9 Chej
1 Mar 1975	2 E'	9 E'	3 E'	10 E'
2 Mar 1976	3 No'j	10 No'j	4 No'j	11 No'j
1977	4 Ik'	11 Ik'	5 Ik'	12 Ik'
1978	5 Chej	12 Chej	6 Chej	13 Chej
2 Mar 1979	6 E'	13 E'	7 E'	1 E'
1980	7 No'j	1 No'j	8 No'j	2 No'j

Figure 2. The day names and numbers which represent the first, second, third and fourth Alcal Alma' "Mayors of the Dead" for the years 1973 through 1980.

THE DEIFICATION OF THE DEAD

After an Aguacatec dies, his children continue to consult him, even as they did in life, except that the dead are addressed as deities. In the following prayer by Mam Leẍ Lucx to his dead father, he addressed his father as a deity:

> Oh God, be merciful to me Father; our Father who is over us,
> Watcher over us, hearer of our words,
> What shall we do about one of our children?
> What shall we do about one of your grandchildren?
> What shall we do about one of your offspring?
> He has sinned before God, before the face of light,
> And before me, and my holy sacrament (wife),
> Your daughter-in-law, bought before by yourself . . .

Later in the same prayer, the shaman addressed both his dead father and mother as deities, using the terms "God," "Father who is over us," "Saints," and "Virgins," as follows:

> You have gone to your place;
> You have become Saints, you have become Virgins,
> In the place where you are kneeling. . . .
> Are you in jail? . . .
> Or are you amongst our Fathers, our Mothers?
> Congregation of earth, congregation of dust,
> Congregation of gods, congregation of the blessed,
> Standing in mass before the First Alcal, the Second Alcal,
> The Third Alcal, the Fourth Alcal,
> The watchers over you, the hearers of your words.
> The untanglers (of your problems) . . .

Mam Xep Yon described his conceptualization of the congregation of the dead and the meting out of justice in these words:

> It is just like we used to do when we would all gather in the house of our Mother during the big fiestas. All of the *Aj Tx'amij* "those of the staff" (a term which includes all the ranks of the political hierarchy including the *alcal*) would be seated with the great crowd of common people (*nim juy* "the big ones, the little ones") standing before them. . . ."

Xep added that he knew a man who had died, but when he arrived before the rulers of the underworld, they told him that there had been a mistake, and thus his sins were not great

enough to merit such an early arrival among them. He was sent back to earth to finish his life. "The congregation of the dead was just like that here on earth," he said.

The day-name deities are addressed as "Our Fathers, Our Mothers" even as are the dead. Others have referred to them as *e' yaj* "those men." Several shamans have stated clearly that when a high-ranking official of the hierarchy dies, he does not lose his place of honour but maintains it in the after life. Leẍ Tx'otx', a shaman, said of the *Aj Tx'amij* "those of the staff of office": *Cya'n nin ley cya'n yi na chiquim* "Their authority continues to be carried by them when they die."

Also among the congregation of the dead are the other day gods (e.g., *Choj, Batz'*, and *I'x*). In speaking about the healing ceremony for a sick child, one shaman commented:

> Well, the *Aj Pom* goes. He enters before *Choj* perhaps, before *Batz'* perhaps, before *I'x* perhaps, because they are all located there before the place of the dead."

In Ixil Cotzal prayers[4] there is also evidence for the deification of the dead. There are long lists of names of common people who have been deified by the shamans with the prefix *santo* "saint" and who are petitioned along with the other gods of the Ixil pantheon. In the opening and closing of these prayers there appears to be the inclusion of the Christian formula "in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit," but a slight shift in morphology plus a different basic meaning to the words results in a construction that actually means, "Oh World Spirit! Oh Saints! Oh Deceased Spirits!"[5]

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE DEAD AND LIVING

The dead may communicate with the living by sending certain animals as messengers. Owls and night hawks may perch near the house and cry as a signal to the living that the dead are displeased with them. Snakes or other wild animals may communicate danger by crossing a path in front of a person. The dead may also communicate to the living their disapproval of their way of life by causing them to dream about snakes, fierce animals, or dog fights. Human sickness or death, or the death of a horse, cow or sheep communicate immediately the displeasure of the dead parents or grandparents. Ancestors may also appear in the form of moths. If they appear to fight over the flickering candles, it is a sign to the living that trouble is coming—possibly a fight at the coming fiesta. Even when their form is invisible (*muj cyak'ek* "the shadow of the wind") the ancestors can see and "come in among us." Some attribute the omniscience and omnipresence of the dead to the possession of two souls, resulting in the capability of being simultaneously in the place of the dead and here on earth where they may constantly watch their homes and relatives.

Warnings and punishment from the dead may be precipitated by excessive quarreling in the home, a neglect in fulfilling duties to the dead, or any fracture of social mores or performance of ancient customs.

The living may ascertain the pleasure of the dead through use of the divining beans (*mich*), the small red bean-like seeds from the *pito* tree (Erythrina corallodendron). These are also referred to as *t-xi'n katamam* "his corn our Father-Shaman (Shaman's corn)." Their primary function is to answer questions asked of the dead. The number of beans that the shaman happens to pick up, along with the name of the day from which he starts to count, decides where the count will end. Laying down the beans two by two, he chants the names of the days, stopping from time to time to make comments about the significance of certain days. The last day-name repeated communicates the principal message from the dead (e.g., if *Tx'i'* "dog," someone in the family has committed a sex sin; if *Camey*[6] the dead have been neglected).

Incense (*pom*) and candles are the most universal symbols used in communicating concern for the dead. The pleasant fragrance of incense gives pleasure to the dead and candles are considered to be their food. The number of candles burned generally equals the number of the day on which the petition is made. One reported:

My grandmother, after eating, would say: 'I have filled my stomach, but my poor (dead) children are hungry.' She would then take candles and go to burn them over the graves of her children. If the candles over one grave burned down more rapidly than the others, she would say: 'That one was really hungry.'

Liquor (*xc'ala'*) is the drink of the dead (*tc'a'* "his drink") and is generally sprinkled or poured out over the ground by the one making the offering, as he says, "For you, Father; for you, Mother. Have patience with me." Eggs, chickens, and turkeys may be burned in part or in whole on top of the *copal/pom* as a *xtx'ixwatz* "sacrifice" (literally, "in place of his face"), i.e., blood offerings to prevent the dead from taking the person who is sick, and made in hope that they will accept the flesh and blood of the animal as a substitute for the sick one. Flowers are sometimes used as a love offering and as a means of showing respect for the dead and providing them with pleasure, but they are used less frequently than the aforementioned items. Squash, bread, honey and other delicacies (food for the dead) are usually left at the graves only on All Saints' Day.

LINGUISTIC EVIDENCES OF AGUACATEC COGNITION REGARDING THE DEAD

The continued existence of the dead, their interest in the everyday life of the living, and the mutual interdependence that exists between the dead and the living is evidenced by the wealth of terms used by the Aguacatec to describe these relationships. A study of the meanings of these terms reveals the true motivations for various rites.

Jakle'n kabanl "asking-for our-good" is the expression used to indicate the primary motivation of all ceremonies. By *banl* "good, good fortune" the Aguacatec designates health, happiness, physical well-being, long life, food, clothing, and any other daily needs. Prayers for one's "good" are directed almost exclusively to one's dead parents, though the names of *Dios Padre* "God the Father," *Dios Munt* "World God," *Santa La Tierra* "The Holy Earth," *Wuskil* "Face of Light," the Day names, St. Mary, St. Peter and *Kapiador* (Spanish, "our *fiador*, go-between") may also be included. When more than one deity is addressed in a single prayer, it appears that the Aguacatec conceives of them as a single being, incorporated in essence with the ancestors. The following prayer is quite typical:

I will ask permission of the Day,
Before you, God of the Hour, before you Face of Light,
To ask, to see, to look for these poor ones
Who are kneeling before me, bending before me!
Lord Saint Peter!
It is of God, it is of the World, it is of the Face of Light,
Answer, Fathers (Ancestors)! Earth, Dust (Dead Ancestors),
The *mich* (sacred beans) are yours.

Another term which implies an exceptionally deep relationship between the living and the dead is *yi tawle'n kac'ubil* "the planting of our stone." The day on which a child is born, according to the ceremonial calendar (Figure 1) is considered to be *wutz k'ej* "face of his day (birthday)." Twenty days later, or as soon as financially possible, when his "day" comes up again, he is taken before a *muyc* "pyramid" or *wutz wutz* "face of a hill" in order to *tawle'n c'ubil* "to plant his stone." The stone is approximately eight to twelve inches in length and two inches in diameter. It is placed in an upright position in the ground before the *K'ajbil* "place of worship" or *muyc* "Pyramid." The spirit owner of the *muyc* is called *kapiador* "our protector/arbitrator," and the stone is also designated the *xoch'il* "complainer," implying a lawyer-client relationship between the stone representing the client and the pyramid or hill, representing the authority or lawyer. Pla's Cali'n, son of a shaman, said:

> If our stone is not planted, no news is given of our birth. . . . We will not grow old if we are not planted before the face of the hill. We are just here and that is all. We have no *Kaw* "our owner" before our fathers, before our mothers. We have no protector, no one to shepherd us.

The stone is a person's representative before his dead ancestors. The protective function of "being planted" is illustrated by the following quote:

> He was protected from physical harm . . . because that is why he was planted. He remembers *wutz k'ej* "the face of his day." Every nine months, when his day comes up, he remembers the face of his day so that he will not go into harm, so that nothing bad will happen to him. Even if he gets drunk, nothing will happen to him. Take me, for example, when I get drunk, I don't get put in jail. The *aj ront* "ones of the rounds, local police" may be out, but nothing happens to me, because I pray to my grandfather. I will have an eighth of liquor in my pocket and pour it out on the ground. As I pour it out, I say, 'Oh God; oh, my grandfather, Earth, Dust, Andres Ailon (grandfather), Juan Ailon (father), may I not go into the hand of the police! It is better that I go home to my own house . . . .' Everything turns out fine for me because the spirit of my father walks with me, the spirit of my grandfather is with me. Nothing happens to me. I arrive safely at home, I have a protector because I have remembered the face of my day. I remembered the face of my day, last Saturday when it went by. Eight days ago it went by. I offered two burnings of *pom*. One before my house, another for my *piador* "lawyer, protector." . . . I remembered and offered candles, *pom*, and liquor because *Juk Tz'ichin* "Seven Quail" is the face of my day. I was protected, but only by the god of the earth and my grandfather.

Sometimes more than one stone is "planted" for a child. Severe sickness may be the occasion for planting a second stone, in order to acquire the offices of an additional *piador*. A stone planted before one *piador* may be dug up and moved to another location if the first *piador* was unsatisfactory for some reason.

The Mam of Todos Santos have a stone-planting custom quite similar to that in Aguacatan. Agapito Cruz Velasquez describes the *c'ubil:* [7] "This is the stone that is one's representation before his *piador* "lawyer," the one who defends us before our dead ancestors in the graveyard."

The fusion of the functions of the Ancestors and the Earth may be seen in the following:

> Nothing happens to me because I am taking care of the house. I don't sell any land. I don't offer any land. I am all right. And I go before him (my father) with my fine. I go before him with a candle. I give a flower, I give a candle. I give liquor, I give wine, because he is Our Father. I do with him just like you do with your (living) father.
>
> If our father has left us land then we work it. We plant garlic, tomatoes, chiles, etc. because that is how we get our money. But first we must ask it (our *banl*) from the poor one who has died, the owner of the place . . . . So we kneel and pray: Oh! God (folds hands in attitude of prayer and kisses them), Father, give me a little my food. Give me a little my money. Give me a squash, a pumpkin. Give me a sheep, a cow. Give me just a little of my *banl* "good fortune/good luck" (kisses his hands), if possible.
>
> You have disappeared (father). Did I see where you got your land from, which you left (for me) on the face of this earth? No! You bought it and left it for me. You worked and sweated to get it, but you didn't sell it. You left it for me. Thank you, father. But I don't have even a shirt or pants, but please do me a favor. Oh, God, here is a little liquor for you (cries). Oh, my father. Oh, my mother. You have disappeared, (kisses hands) but you left me my house, you left me my land.

Strict observance of all the old customs also assures one's *banl*. The religious duties received from one's parents must be performed exactly as one's father and grandfather did it. If one's father had a certain responsibility to a household or family god to perform certain rites at certain times, then the son must assume the responsibility; if he fails in the slightest way he may lose his *banl*.

The rite of the *ek'um cantel* "the candle carriers" is an example (McArthur 1969). Twice every year three ranks of the religious hierarchy would walk from Aguacatan to Quezaltenango (75-80 miles) in order to bring back candles and other necessities for the fiesta. After performing certain rites that included offerings to the dead, they would start out in single file. The *nak axtol* "ex-aldermen" group leading the way. With the highest ranking *nak axtol* going first, followed by the next in order of importance. The *Aj lawe'* "holders of the keys" group followed, also in order of their rank. Finally at the end of the line came the *Chakum tu Katxu'* "servants of our Mother." It was absolutely necessary that each man maintain his position in line. At no time during the week's march dared he move ahead of the man in front of him or slip behind the man behind. If he did it was noted and a fine was levied on him that had to be paid before their final descent into town on their return trip. This fine consisted of liquor and *pom* that the delinquent must provide for the shaman to present as a peace offering to the dead. The *pom* was burned and the liquor was poured out on the ground in an attempt to assuage the wrath of the dead who had witnessed this break in custom. If an Aguacatec would break custom completely and leave his old ways an early death was predicted for him as punishment.

Another thing that is very offensive to the dead is fighting and arguments in the family home:

> The dead are unhappy with the living if they fight with each other, if they don't give peace to the place. The dead don't like it if there is continual fighting before their old dwelling place.

Talche'n katz'iblal "telling our news," and *tak'le'n part* "giving account," are linguistic expressions which demonstrate other important reasons for communicating with the dead. The living must advise the dead father or grandfather as to what has been happening on earth, what has been going on in the home, and what their intentions are for the near future. The latter might include intentions to leave home for a period of time in order to go to work on the coast in the coffee harvest, or intentions to observe a family saint's day. If they have made any change in the time or location of a fiesta or if they wish to take the family saint to town for repairs, they must give advance notice of their intentions and give their reasons to the dead. Even though they have already proceeded with an action which appeared advisable to them, they must not forget to inform the dead of their actions.

> If I borrow money in order to be able to plant my crops I will tell my (dead) grandfather: "I have borrowed a little money, Father, because I don't have a cent to my name, because I have to buy corn now, and the times are expensive, because the weather has been bad. Where's the rain? Where? I planted my cornfield, but it is gone . . . Nothing remains. Where is my harvest? There was none."

Another example of *tak'le'n part* is found in a shaman's prayer recorded in the graveyard in Aguacatan on July 28, 1973. He had come to tell his dead father and mother about what had happened in the home two days before and what he had done about it. He told them that there had been a problem, but that everything was fine now and they were not to worry because another *aj pom* would be paying the fines. He also asked them not to listen to any false reports of supposed wrongdoing in the family, no matter what the source might be. Some excerpts from the remainder of the prayer follow:

> Your grandson has sinned before us; he hit us.
> He hit me, stole my garlic and sold it. Who knows what he had done with the money.
> That is what his sin is before the Face of Light, before God.
> That is what his sin is before us.
> But we have taken care of it, father, his sin is gone.
> He knelt before us.
> He gave us a little liquor, a little our wine, our beer, our drink.
> But here is a little for you, Sir; we have brought it to you here.
> Oh! if possible, be merciful.

Do not scold us, do not beat us,
Do not push us into sickness, into ill health . . . .
Oh! be merciful to us, Father.
That is why we have come before your mouths, your faces.
That is why we have come before you.
Thanks to you, we have risen early.
Thanks to you we have seen the light of day.
No one has gone to jail. No one has choked (on his liquor).
No one has had stomach cramps, a pain, a cramp, a vomiting spell.
Nothing has happened.
Thanks to God that in health we arose early.
Thanks to you (mother and father) that in health we arose early.

Jakle'n Permis "asking permission" is another phrase which reveals an essential element in maintaining a felicitous relationship with the dead. Permission is asked of the dead for some action that the family plans to take, such as the performing of some rite in the big fiesta; the observance of a family saint's day, before the ground is worked and the new crop planted; before a visit is made to ask for a bride for one's son; before the tools of a dead father can be used by his sons; before a well can be dug; before a family saint can be moved from one house to another; before a new house is begun; or even before a roof is changed (especially if the roof has always been of grass and the son wishes to switch to tile or corrugated iron). The dead are ashamed if the son puts up a better house than they had while on earth. The following is an excerpt from a prayer to the dead on the occasion of the dedication of a new house (The owner brought in a marimba and set off "bombs" and sky-rockets; the shaman burned *pom*, candles, and poured out liquor on the ground as he prayed.):

Father! be merciful to us, because this place was yours.
You built your little house here. Please don't scold us.
This is not the way you built your house.
It was just a little shack, and we were ashamed.
We found some money, for that reason we built our house.
But come on in! Dance with us a little, because we are going to have a little fiesta in it.
This is its Day, before 4 *Aj pu'* (owner of wood), before 5 *Imx* (face of day of houses)
we shall see the dawn. Come! and be happy with us. . . .
We were cold in the little shack of yours, just poles were the walls of your little shack.
But we, we are ashamed (now) before God because
we have put up a house of adobe, we have put tiles on the roof.
But be merciful to us, God! Be merciful to us father and mother, owner of this place.
I went before you father, I told you (advised you what I was going to do).
So please don't do anything to us.
Hurry and come! Come to us here! Come in among us!
Be seated! We have your chairs ready.
Here is a little liquor for you.
Let us be happy before you . . . .

Even before a person can bring something as seemingly inconsequential as a guitar into the house he must contact the dead father or grandfather and ask permission. He must also ask permission to learn to play it and to keep it in the house. In the village of Manzanilla two boys of the same family came back from working in the coffee harvest with money to spare and were able to buy a couple of guitars. They brought them home and began to learn to play them but without success. After some time they travelled to a nearby village to sell some onions. On the way back in the evening light they almost stepped on a big snake that was lying across the trail. It gave them a great fright. Believing that it was an ill omen, they called in the *aj pom* so that he could get the reason from the dead for the snake's appearance. In the first divination it was found that they had sinned and that it had something to do with a musical instrument. "But we don't have a marimba in the house," they said. But then it occurred to them that it might be the guitars. So the diviner asked through his *mich* if that was the case. The answer came back in the affirmative with the complaint that the dead had never had anything like that in the house before and what were they doing bringing strange instruments like

that into the family homestead. Furthermore, the dead had not been advised nor their permission asked. The *aj pom* told the family that this was going to cost a great amount of *pom* and other offerings to placate the dead on this point. As it turned out, the dead were never appeased. The boys never learned to play the guitars and finally were forced to dispose of them.

Jakle'n cuybil kapaj "asking for forgiveness' and *ẍchojle'n kamult* "paying our fines" are accomplished by the offering of candles, liquor, and *pom* to the offended party in the underworld. At times, ceremonial whippings are performed before the crosses and in the graveyards. Leather belts, nettles and thorns are used to expiate sins. Sometimes, the whole family assembles in the patio or before the crosses to receive the whipping at the hands of the shaman or from one another. This is called *joxe'n xe'* (literally, "cleaning out the unwanted undergrowth"). They must confess and atone for all the fighting and scolding that they have been doing between themselves. If the *mich* bring to light that there was unhappiness and fighting between two members of the same family, one of whom is now dead, the surviving member must go and kneel over the grave of the offended one, confess his or her sins (*jak'e' cuybil paj* "beg for forgiveness"), and receive at least *jun arroba*, "25 strokes" of the *xicy'xab* "the broad leather belt," used at these occasions. In the prayer of Leẍ Lucẍ to his father concerning the sin of his son in stealing his garlic and striking him in anger, he said:

> Now concerning the sin of our child: it is all taken care of
> He kneeled.
> He bent over.
> He bowed before us.
> He suffered one dozen,
> two dozen.
> He suffered one *arroba*,
> two *arroba*
> from the whip,
> from the leather.
> He suffered it by my hand,
> because he had done evil.

Solo'n "releasing" of the dead parents from the *xe tze'* "jail" of the underworld is one of the most important duties of surviving children. *Solo'n* usually refers to just a release from the underworld jail into the main part of the underworld and it is the never-ending responsibility of the living. The children must have money to be able to pay for the release of the dead; that is why the family lands must stay in the hands of those who are going to be faithful to the old religion and who will use the proceeds of the land *tan chicolpe'n* "to save them" (the dead) or *tan chisolche'n* "to untangle or release them" (McArthur 1977). Release for a return to earth is possible only on very special occasions to participate in a dance rite or the fiesta at the dedication of a new house, etc.

The parents are jailed in the underworld because of sins committed during life. But they can secure release for short periods by the good actions of their living children. If their children follow custom and live in peace with their family and honour their dead, then the *alcal* and other rulers of the underworld are placated for awhile; nevertheless, payment is always required for the release of the dead. The shaman must go before the *alcal alma'* on the days *Choj, Batz'* and *I'x* to pay the fines of the dead parents. He addresses the *alcal alma'* and begins to *cawu'n pom* "give orders to the *pom*" (to the *alcal*):

> Let the poor ones free a little from jail!
> Let them out a little in the light of the sun!
> Let them dry out a little in the light of the sun!
> Poor souls!
> They are freezing to death.
> Here is a little liquor for you,
> Here is a little beer for you, here is a little wine for you,
> Be merciful to them! . . .

C'alo'n "tying up" with its similes *biyo'n* "killing", *cuni'n* "spoiling", *xocho'n* "complaining" are all words used to describe the rite of asking for misfortune, sickness and death upon one's enemies. The *aj cun* "spoiler" or shamans who perform this kind of rite are called *biyol nak* "murderers." One can complain before his recent dead (father/grandfather) or before one of the ranks of the day gods such as *Camey*, a day for "tying up" one's enemies; before *Aj pu'* "the untangler" or "releaser," or before *Chi'j* the day for *chi'ch c'u'lal* "anger." The shamans also make complaint against enemies before *Ik'* or *Chej*.

When a shaman comes before one of the ancestors or underworld rulers to ask for "justice," he acknowledges the ancestor's authority to make a legal decision by reference to the fact that he is now seated in the place of authority, e.g.:

> Oh God! in the name of God the Father
> By the sign of the Holy Cross, if possible!
> Oh God! I ask my permission today, if possible!
> Of the Day, of the Hour.
> Of the Dawn, of the Daybreak.
> Before our Fathers, before our Mothers.
> He (the ruler/ancestor) has seated himself on the *pop* "mat."
> He has seated himself on his *chem* "chair" . . .

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY IN UNDERSTANDING PRE-COLUMBIAN PRACTICES

The present-day ancestor cult as followed in Aguacatan may offer some vital clues in understanding the ancient Mayan religious system. Mayanists have long understood the importance of using the customs followed by the present-day Maya as a help in understanding ancient practices.

Probably the most graphic example of the relationship between the Maya and his ancestral gods presented in the foregoing study is the figure of the stone planting. The function of the *c'ubil* in the Aguacatec culture of today could possibly have been the purpose of some of the stelae that are found in such great numbers before the ruins of pyramids. The stelae with elaborate carvings were certainly not erected on the birth of a child, but may have been erected later on the occasion of his taking some important office (Christopher Jones 1977) for which he felt the need of special protection and divine help. As we have seen in this study an Aguacatec would on occasion plant a second stone in a different place, or dig it up and replant it before what they considered to be a more powerful protector. This may be one of the reasons for the removal of stelae from their original positions as reported by J. Eric S. Thompson (1960).

Like the Aguacatec stone, the stelae may have been reminders to the ancestor buried under the pyramid that a contract had been made with him for the protection of the individual whose stone stood ever before him. The owner of the stone, like the present-day Aguacatec, would need to come at least every 260 days with his priestly intercessor to make sacrifice and give offerings in order to "buy" (*tan lok'che'n*) the good offices of the ancestor before the hierarchy of the underworld.

NOTES:

[1] Examples cited are written in the official practical orthography, based on the Spanish alphabet. Phonemes which do not occur in Spanish but which must be symbolized in Aguacatec are the following:

/b$^{?}$/	=	b	/q/	=	k	/ȼ$^{?}$/	=	tz'
/k$^{?}$/	=	c', q'u	/q$^{?}$/	=	k'	/s̆/	=	ẍ
/č$^{?}$/	=	ch'	/t$^{?}$/	=	t'	/ṣ̆/	=	x
/kʏ/	=	cy	/č̣/	=	tx			
/k$^{ʏ?}$/	=	cy'	/č̣$^{?}$/	=	tx'			

Although a phonemic difference exists between long and short vowels, this difference is not indicated in the practical orthography. For a complete discussion of the phonemes of Aguacatec, see McArthur, Harry and Lucille (1956). The author is grateful to Helen Neuenswander who read this paper and gave many helpful suggestions, and to Jean Bates who typed and prepared the photo-ready copy.

[2] Personal communication with Arvid Westfall, SIL.

[3] Personal communication with Dwight Jewett, SIL.

[4] Recorded by Paul Townsend, SIL.

[5] Townsend, 1979.

[6] *Camey* can be given no other gloss than *wutz chik'ej e' alma'* "face of their day, the dead," possibly from *cimi* "death" in Yucatec of which the Aguacatec *quimichil* "death" is a cognate.

[7] Personal communication.

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