

# Kenosis Spirit Keepers

## Working to keep ancient Lacandón beliefs alive

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Earth Odyssey Contributor

About 13 years ago, I went to the Chiapas region of Mexico for the first time. The place and the people captured my heart. I was especially taken with the Lacandón Maya who live in the rainforest between Palenque and the Usumacinta River that serves as the border with Guatemala.

They are very different from other Maya in appearance, dress and spiritual practices. This fact offers at least a couple of possibilities. They migrated to the area from some faraway land. Or, perhaps because they were sequestered deep in the rainforest for eons, their culture developed uniquely.

Such gentle people, their beliefs are based on inclusion instead of exclusion. Within their pantheon of gods, there is one named Aykantho, who is the god of the foreigners responsible for commerce.

When the Jesuits showed up centuries ago with stories of Jesus Christ, the Lacandón Maya incorporated Hesuklisto as Aykantho's son. Each is represented through a godpot and may be chosen for use during the traditional ceremonies.

I was fortunate to be introduced to elder Don Antonio Martinez through Alonso Mendez, who is now my partner in the Maya programs. We began bringing small groups for exposure to the Lacandón traditions that are nearing extinction.

Don Antonio, a sweet man displaying much humility, is the last Spirit Keeper practicing the timeless traditions of his ancestors. I could tell that initially he really didn't know what to think about us.

While he was absolutely welcoming, I could sense he was hesitant to engage fully with us at that time. And I can understand that perfectly—because his people have been told that their ancient practices are evil.

Back in the 1950s, a slow influx of missionaries began making headway in the Lacandón Rainforest. Only the hardest would venture into that then dense environment that for centuries kept outsiders at bay. Now, due to greatly increased accessibility via roads cut by loggers, the evangelistas have arrived in great numbers.

They teach a message of exclusion—only their way is true. All other ways, including the ancient traditional ways, are sinful. They offer food and medicine in return for conversion. It is an aggressive dogma.

This is a sad pattern that has occurred across the globe, a proselytizing, exclusionary religion enters an area where the religion is inclusive and sees value in all approaches, with the result that the former wins the war that the latter refuses to fight.

The peace-loving Lacandóns have simply been overwhelmed, from the outlying hamlets to the most interior jungle settlement.

Not Don Antonio though. He was the son-in-law of Chan K'in Viejo, perhaps their greatest spiritual leader of the last century.



Photos by Darlene Dunning

Above, Don Antonio Martinez lights the godpots. At right, Carla Woody, center, with Maya friends Fernando Hernandez, left, and Alonso Mendez outside the godhouse.

Now, Don Antonio alone is holding the torch to the godpots. His belief and intent must be incredibly strong.

Rather than giving up, taking his godpots to the burial cave as others have done, he continues his rituals, making the connections just as his ancestors did. I sensed a real sadness in him last year when he said he had no one to whom he could pass on teachings. His sons weren't interested. As an elder in his traditions, I can only imagine the loss he feels.

But perhaps there's hope. Aside from my original intent in sponsoring small groups to this jungle enclave to undertake a heart-opening experience, there is another purpose I hold dearly.

That is, as we continue to come showing our great respect for the teachings and practices, the younger Lacandóns would begin to note that there is great significance in the beliefs of their ancestors if visitors are so interested.

Perhaps then they wouldn't completely abandon their values based on the interconnection of all things. They could at least engage in a syncretistic approach as most other Maya have finally done.

There are small signs that my intent may be unfolding. After the first time with Don Antonio, he began to trust us, understanding our reverence. As a result, he has increasingly



offered us more in the way of his rituals, stories and perspective on the world.

We are now fortunate that we can engage in the full balché ceremony during our programs. This is indeed an honor since it's a ritual that historically has been closed to anyone outside the community, except those who are most trusted. And last time there were younger Lacandónes taking part just as I'd envisioned.

If any of you have ever experienced a crisis in your life where how you lived and everything you ever believed is somehow called into question, you know the confusion that sets up. Imagine if you were told that not only what you, but also your entire ancestry, believed is untrue and even evil—and you ingested the missal.

There is a silent war still going on as it has for centuries. This one gets little coverage, if any, except through publications like this, because much of the time it happens in remote areas to native people.

It's the struggle to claim the "soul" of a population. When the perpetrators are fully successful, the spirit of the targeted people is lost. Historically, the worst aspects of human nature take its place: despondency, forms of addiction and violence, a sense of helplessness. It can be equally as devastating as a war whose weapons kill the physical body. The body will usually follow the state of the mind and spirit anyway.

I absolutely know that the health of the world community depends on integrating

the beliefs from native spirituality that says there's a web of life that connects us all.

What you do here will have an effect there. To the mainstream population, it may seem as though the work we undertake by engaging with native traditions, supporting their preservation, learning through them, is inconsequential or even meaningless. I see otherwise.

The positive effect on all who are involved is pronounced. Ours is a way of peacemaking through honoring, a quiet antidote that contains its own powerful influence—one that carries on the wind.

Kenosis Spirit Keepers, in conjunction with Ringing Rocks Foundation in Sedona, is sponsoring a series of Saturday evening talks and Sunday afternoon circles that introduce cosmology, ceremonies and the ways of native people. Alonso Mendez will be in Prescott Sept. 5 and Sept. 6. Advance tickets for the Spirit Keepers Series may be purchased at Adventure Travel, 130 Grove St., Prescott.

Join Kenosis Spirit Keepers Jan. 5-16, 2010, for Entering the Maya Mysteries expedition and observe Lacandón Maya ceremonies first-hand.

See the calendar for details of these events.

*Carla Woody, MA, is founding president of Kenosis Spirit Keepers, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that honors and preserves the integrity of indigenous wisdom and sacred cultural practices by providing cross-cultural exchanges, education and community-building opportunities.*



Balché ceremony.

Photo by Darlene Dunning



Navigating Lake Najá.

Photo by Darlene Dunning

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