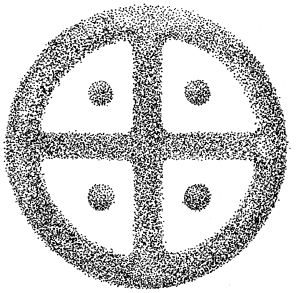

Portal

At the Dawn

At dawn on June 12, 1988, my husband, Martín, with our infant daughter on his back, and I, pregnant with our second child, pilgrimaged single-file with seventy people toward a Maya altar. Fifteen Ajq'ijab' (spiritual guides), family members, people from Zunil and from the outskirts of the village, and several friends from the United States, had joined us for the ceremony. We filed across the red-brown river, called Samala' Shikekel, which threads through Zunil in the northwestern highlands of Guatemala, and pours miles later into the Pacific. We trudged up a dirt path that wove through green cornfields, wet with morning dew. Roosters crowed, dogs barked, and children giggled, peeping over low fences as we passed their adobe homes, which dotted the hillside. Tender bean plants wound round and up the knee-high cornstalks, seeded together in groups of three, each trio planted in a little mound of earth. We threaded higher into verdant hills, the wind murmuring in the pines, until we arrived at the cave, Xe' kega ab'aj (under the red rock), near a spring of fresh water on the eastern edge of Zunil. We were presenting our child, performing a "giving thanks to the mountain" ceremony for our firstborn, Joanna, eight months old.

Several days earlier, Martín, or Atín as he was addressed in K'iche', and I had visited his ninety-four-year-old maternal grandmother in an *aldea,* a small village on the western side of the volcano, Santa María. In the dark adobe room, Doña Rosa lay in bed, her body twisted from polio, her eyes clouded from cataracts.

FIGURE 00.1. The ceremonial base is constructed with sugar, *ensarte* (pine resin discs), and other aromatic materials.

"Atín," she asked, "what took you so long to get here?"

"What do you mean, Grandma?" he asked, bending closer to her.

"I saw you walking down the road for three days."

I was stunned. No human courier, no phone message, no telegram had communicated our arrival in Guatemala to her, much less our plans to visit her. I looked at Martín. Did she have another way of seeing?

As she touched her gnarled fingers along her great granddaughter Joanna's face, we explained the upcoming ceremony. She smiled through her blindness, and said, "Oh, the 'giving thanks to the mountain' ceremony. We haven't done this for a generation. This is good. This is good. This is good for your child!"

I remembered Doña Rosa's words as we entered the cave, its walls darkened with soot. I watched Don Tino and the young Ajq'ijab' kneel before the crosses, pray in audible voices, kiss the earth, then begin to clean the large earthen hearth area. Under the direction of Don Tino, who was garbed in a self-fashioned, bright red jaguar cape, the young Ajq'ijab' prepared the ceremonial site. They poured white granules of sugar from a plastic bag in a twenty-inch diameter circle on the earth, then streamed a line of sugar from East to West, from North to South, dividing the circle in equal quarters (Figure 00.1).

"Red flowers in the East, purple flowers in the West," Don Tino directed the younger Ajq'ijab', as he pointed to the corners of the cavern, "yellow flowers in the South, white flowers in the North. Do it very well, very well."

They scattered handfuls of green pine needles around the circle of sugar, softening the ground and freshening the cave. Kneeling around the hearth, Don Tino directed the Ajq'ijab' to spiral the small *ensarte* discs (pine resin), round and round sunwise, until they filled the circle. Don Tino planted a thin green candle and then a blue one in the center of the hearth, circled the candle couplet with laurel leaves, then *ocote* (pine kindling), still glistening with sap.

Addressing the crowd of family, friends, and villagers, he directed, "It's good if you push back a little bit from the circle," indicating we were ready to begin.

Don Tino wrapped a scarf-like cloth over his head, picked up his *vara* (ritual bundle), kissed it, raised it toward the sky, then began to speak in K'iche'. I leaned closer to my husband, listening as he translated in English.

"Good morning to everyone who comes from everywhere, from far away or not too far away. And I'm going to say good morning to the people who come from the other side of the water. Some people are coming from faraway places to be with us in our tradition, which our grandparents celebrated.

"This is our religious tradition. These aliens have also come to know, to learn, to see our old customs from our grandparents. And I say, see here is Atín who comes with others from that far place to bring this little one, his little flower, and to ask to present her to the mountain, to show her to the mountain and to the face of the earth.

"That's why the parents are bringing her here to the Owner of us because we give thanks for this child. She has started crawling, walking, moving, urinating, and defecating on the face of the earth. So for all of this we have to present her to the Creator. One of the things we are going to talk to our Owner about is that the Owner pardons this child if she ever kills a bird, kills a tree, or yells at her parents. So we have to mention this lack of respect to the Creator. This child will grow up and we let her have her wisdom, her development. So we need to present her to the mountain, the Owner, the Creator. Each child is born and has a very big, wide wisdom. The child has an eye in the mind, in the heart, which we shouldn't kill."

He sprinkled sugar on the kindling, then motioned to Martín and me, "Come here, mother and father of this little one. I will tell them to make it clear what I'm going to say.

"In the name of the Heart of the Creator of the Wind, in the name of the Heart of the Creator of the Fire, in the name of the Heart of the Creator of the Water, in the name of the Heart of the Creator of the Earth, we give thanks to you that you work with us. You, Creator, you planted us, raised us, and you make us, work us. So, we give thanks to you, Creator. Thank you for all of this, all you did, all you do. Thanks for all your work. You, the one who made the road, made the mountain, who created the trees. You, the one who created all the animals in the world. You made the road for the rivers, the ones who live in the house, the ones who live in the mountains. You create all the trees, all the weeds, all the animals who take care of the mountains. You create the air, the clouds, the wind. You make the farther and the closer. You worked on it; you put your seeds on it. You created it; you worked on it. And we remember those who never give thanks to what you made. For all of your children, who never remember you, we wish that you wouldn't place any sickness on them. Don't abandon them."

Then calling names of Maya heroines/heroes, he continued, "Ixmucane, Xpiyacoc, Junajpu, Xb'alanke, B'atz'. We're here. Those who call you, these really pray, really beg you in the night of the darkness, in the day, in the sun, in front of the stars, in the wind, in the drizzle, in the mists, in the thunder, in the rocks, for all those in this sacred cave. These are the words that our ancestors gave us. And that's how it started when the light hadn't yet come, when it was not clear.

"In the name of the Heart of the Creator of the Wind, in the name of the Heart of the Creator of the Fire, in the name of the Heart of the Creator of the Water, in the name of the Heart of the Creator of the Earth," he continued, as we signed ourselves again on our forehead, our stomach, our left shoulder, then right, the Catholic sign of the cross.

Don Tino knelt and kissed the earth; we followed his directions. As I kissed the earth, tenderness welled up and passed from my lips to the damp soil under the pine needles.

"Everyone, stand up and we'll begin."

He lit the blue and green candles centered in the altar. "Heart of Heaven, this is how our ancestors talked with the people. This is what the *Pop Wuj* says, "You are the Creator, Former. Don't leave us. Give us ancestors forever. Give us peace, good descendants. B'alam K'iche', they said all the prayers." The candle couplet caught fire, flames raced across the aromatic ceremonial materials, and burst into tongues of fire, sending up clouds of incense. As a young Ajq'ij stirred the fire, the flames brightened, blazed, and danced.

Don Tino picked up Joanna and cradled her close to his breast.

"We've come to the mountain. Father, Mother, talk to us. Look at us. We've come to present to you, one Ajmaq, two Ajmaq, three Ajmaq . . . thirteen Ajmaq. They that made them, worked them. Our ancestors, people who planted, cultivated corn, the house maker who worked night and day."

Don Tino held our daughter several feet above the fire and then circled her sunwise over the fire four times.

Offerings—hundreds of tossed tallow candles, chocolate, alcohol, sesame seeds, *copal* (incense) and *cuilco* (tokens/discs of pressed, dried resin)—sizzled in the fire as Don Tino called out and honored each of the 260 days of the Chol Q'ij, the sacred calendar. A rooster and hen, one after another, were presented to the fire. Each head was snapped off, each heart torn out. Don Tino rubbed the heart on the soles of our daughter's feet, then pressed the throbbing hearts into the right palm of our hands: Martín received the hen's, I the rooster's. Don Tino directed us to offer the hearts to the fire, then toss them in.

"Accept this Father, Mother. We're giving this to you in the air, in the wind, in the darkness with stars, in the day, with the moon, in the day of sun. Take it in the fire. Take it in the clouds. We're giving this to you. This is what we bring. This is our gift, our payment to you, to your face, to your lips, to your eyes, to your nose, to your hands, to your feet."

Don Tino dismembered the remainder of the fowls' flailing bodies and tossed them into the blaze.

"These are the words, Creator," continued Don Tino, "give her knowledge, goodness, favor, wisdom."

The fire leapt. "We give this as a present to you. You give us wisdom and knowledge. Thank you so much."

The fire was fed, flames leapt high. The fire would talk. Utterances, oriented toward a transcendent consciousness, undertaken in a spirit of "aesthetic love," asked forgiveness, pardon, trusting that the Owner of us all would "accept our offering, but also give back to us."

At one point, Don Tino poured a clear liquid from a dark bottle into a transparent cup, and instructed the godparents, Roberto and Lesbia, to give it to Joanna (Figure 00.2).

Don Tino explained, "The water is virgin, collected from the leaves of the trees this morning before dawn. So, it's very special water."

They gave a small sip to Joanna, but she started coughing and choking.

"Don't let her choke! Don't let her choke!" Don Tino yelled. "Help her drink it!"

FIGURE 00.2. At the "giving thanks to the mountain" ceremony for the birth of a child, the infant is given dew that has been collected at dawn.

"Pay attention to what I'm saying," he said, realizing the crowd was distracted. "These are the words of our grandparents. The day comes, and we all have to go back, they say. And they went back where the day ends. We are going back and we'll be saying bye, bye. We'll have to say good-bye to our houses, to our land. We're going back to where we came from. These are the words that our grandparents left, that we're remembering and mentioning now."

For two hours, the fire was fed, stirred, and addressed; flames leapt, twisted, spiraled within the circle, until the simmering embers gradually dimmed. Don Tino picked up the stick, stirred the coals, spread them out, studying the small traces of rising white smoke, waiting until every last ember was burnt, until the last bit of incense had been set free. The Ajq'i-jab', their faces blackened, seared from close attention to the fire, gazed intently at the smoke.

This event recalled the ritual narrated in *Popol Wuj,* when the first people, fashioned of white and yellow corn, "givers of praise, givers of respect," lifted their faces, made their fasts and prayers, just watching intently, waiting for the dawn. They saw the sun carrier, the morning star, Venus. They unwrapped their *copal,* burned their incense. When the first sun, the moon, and the stars appeared, they rejoiced.

> They were overjoyed when it dawned . . . Their dawning was there and they burned *copal* there, incensing the direction of the rising sun. They came from there; it is their own mountain, their own plain. Those named Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and Dark Jaguar came from there, and they began their increase on that mountain. (D. Tedlock 1985, 182)

That dawn the ceremony initiated not only our daughter, but also me. Little did I know what was before me.

In years of sustained work, I would travel in and out of Maya and Western storehouses, linger over and grasp to an extent the logic of Maya cosmovision and its recent public emergence, to conceive an aesthetic whole. In attending to the distinctiveness of Maya spiritual practices, I would learn to take seriously and even lovingly the particularity of this tradition. I would engage in dialogues and conversations, which would unfold in depth, in *creative activity.* I did not on that morning imagine myself seeking conversations with scientists whose job is to describe "the mysteries of physical existence as far as possible and sincerely show the edges of such knowledge," as well as with religious studies partners "who deal with our personal consciousness and . . . how we establish our stance toward the mysteries of both the physical and the personal" (E. Carlson 1995, 88). I did not know I would engage with theologians who investigate and interpret the human experience of Mystery through the field of theological anthropology, nor with cultural studies technicians who posit theories of time and space, of knowledge and power, of discursive practices, of thinking and acting in images. Nor that I would examine the genealogy of the long, tyrannical, silencing shadow, a creeping, violent hegemony of terror, which spread from Spain to reach the remote corners of the Maya highlands, driving religious practices underground. The quest would lead me to a dialogic *live entering* with contemporary Maya conversation partners about the very valid and significant Maya spiritual practices and beliefs, which provide a localized meaning and assertion of agency, nurturing strength, hope, and community identity. I now release this understanding into its own time and space, from my horizon.

That morning, pregnant with our second child, I stood in a cave, which the Maya understand as a portal between the world of humans—specifically, the invisible world of their ancestors—and the Great Mystery. Little did I know that I was about to begin going backward and forward in time, that I was entering "a world whose obligation [the Ajq'ijab'] know to be older than Christianity, obligations to the mountains and places where they continue to live and to all those who have ever lived there before

them" (D. Tedlock 1985, 62). Little did I know that morning, that the Maya, because of an entry of historical forces, were on the brink of emerging and unfolding from a cycle of darkness, into a new dawning on the face of the earth.

The ceremony was over. Joanna, enfolded in the bright woven striped cloth of Zunil, now lay asleep and tranquil in Martín's arms. Roberto turned to us and said, "This ceremony is very, very good. The child will have a good future."

Shortly after, as we walked down the mountain, I called to Martín, following behind. "Martín, there is so much I don't understand about all this."

"There's a lot I don't understand either," he called out. "But I respect Roberto and the ways of my ancestors. We will learn what we need for our journeys and for the lives of our children. My ancestors used to say 'as we do good, it will come back to us. Nothing is lost.'"

We zigzagged back down through the cornfields, and I watched the leaves of the corn plants slap and wave in the wind, their yellow tassels, the daughters of the plants, tossing their limbs in the morning air. Doña Rosa had prophesized, "This is good. This is good. This is good for your child." Perhaps as the "grandmother of day, grandmother of light" she had seen from her position of age and experience that "this is the sign" of dawn for the new generation.

This ceremony coincided with the emergence of a new spatial sphere of historical existence among the indigenous, a generative time marked in part by an overt reclamation of ancestral spiritual traditions. This book documents, contextualizes, and illuminates the distinctiveness of Maya spiritual traditions through diverse interdisciplinary lenses.