

Foreword:
Complex Performance
in Santiago Atitlán

BY DAVID CARRASCO



I FIRST HEARD OF ROBERT S. CARLSEN after giving a lecture on shamanism in Mesoamerican religions at the University of Colorado in Boulder. A colleague came up to me and said, "You need to meet Robert Carlsen. The guy knows a lot about shamanism. He's been working and living in Guatemala with Maya peoples." When I met the soft-spoken Carlsen, I was immediately impressed with how carefully he seemed to listen and his easy way of getting to the point. He had been living and working in Santiago Atitlán, becoming familiar with the *cofradia* community, and he felt that he was discovering how the Atiteco Mayas survived the shower of changes, pressures, and violations to their cultural practices and beliefs. He wanted to deepen his understanding of social change, religious resistance, and creative adaptation. He had seen that the Atiteco Mayas had "successfully resisted their spiritual conquest" by Europeans. Carlsen had learned this, in part, from Luch Chavajay, a former *alcalde* of the *Cofradia Santiago*. He taught Carlsen the truth: "The Old Ways of Santiago Atitlán are so vital that if they are not performed, the town itself must literally die." Performance, it seemed was the key. It was Carlsen who introduced me to the opaque genius of Martin Prechtel (whose contribution to the present book is found in Chapter 3) and to Dennis Tedlock's remarkable translation of the *Popol Vuh*, the ancient K'iche' Mayan "Book of Council." Through him I met the "Sovereign Plumed Serpent," the "sowing and dawning," "Hunahpu Coyote," and the "overjoyed... True Jaguar" who animated the religious imagination of the Maya. Carlsen pointed out a passage in the *Popol Vuh* which could serve as a key theme to *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*, which is a wonderful, complex, and challenging book. In the *Popol Vuh* we learn that the world was created and continues to be created through ritual actions. In the words of the text, "It takes a long performance and account to complete the emergence of all the sky-

earth." Carlsen's account of the struggles and complex creativity of the Atitecos contributes to those vital performances which help to repair the world.

There are at least three things to keep in mind as you work your way through this innovative study. First, Robert Carlsen is uniquely situated to write about the ongoing evolutionary process of Atiteco existence. In other words, he is an anthropologist *on the edge and in the edge*. Like many anthropologists who have been in the field working with the local community that is the object of their study, he established the crucial rapport with the Atitecos. But Carlsen was not just in the field. As anyone who spends time with him learns, and as you will see in reading this book, the Atiteco "fields" of history, maize, pain, imagination, religious commitments, and symbols are *in* him and do not get dissolved under the work of his pen. The point is that Carlsen employs his *on/in the edge* perspective—an understanding that overlaps the Maya world view and anthropological theory—as a place to write *from* and not just a place to write *about*. It enables him to see both Maya and anthropological theory from new angles and to tell us about processes of creation and interpretation (by Mayas and anthropologists) previously unseen.

Second, Carlsen is not claiming that he has achieved a kind of "deep play" analysis of the Atiteco, though he is doing a historically layered interpretation of the social archaeology of the culture. Rather, he is consistent in showing a *complex* web of dualities, contradictions, juxtapositions, foot-dragging evasions, and subverting syncretisms, which give as much weight to the view that "some things remain the same" as to the view that "everything has changed." A number of anthropologists have been slinging ideas, theories, and even mud at each other trying to give one of these approaches the status of truth. Others, such as Marshall Sahlins and Gananth Obeyesekere, have jumped beyond the fail-safe zone by launching culture wars about what one can actually know about the "native point of view." Carlsen listens and learns (some things) from these wars, but he is of the opinion that while much has changed in the world views, ritual practices, and daily lives of the Mayas, a great deal of what is crucial to their lives has remained constant. As he writes, "I am prepared to argue that perspectives which stress similarity within a society, like those which stress difference, are useful, just as they both have their limitations. Accordingly, the present study pays considerable attention to difference in contemporary Santiago Atitlan, particularly as it concerns religious factionalism. At the same time, however, it makes use of the valuable information available in similarity."

Third, Carlsen believes that with the help of the Atiteco Mayas and his work in libraries, in particular through an exposure to the history of religions, he has been introduced to one of the central conceptions in Maya religiosity which has enabled the Mayas to adapt while celebrating continuity. But this "central conception" called "Jalok-K'exoj" by the Atitecos, is also complex, made up of "Flowering Mountain Earth" and Maximón (The Lord of Looking Good), the umbilicus of the world, "faces coming out" and faces going away (certainly including the thousands of Mayas murdered in contemporary political violence), cofradia love, Mayan saints and Catholic idols, and much more! Carlsen says it best:

Moreover, the entire Jalok-K'exoj-centered nexus has in turn provided a mechanism to integrate intrusive elements into Atiteco culture, converting them to a form acceptable to the local Mayan population. We submit that when revealed in their obvious contrast to highland Mayan culture, Hispanic cultural intrusions have triggered indigenous responses which have ultimately resulted in the modification and normalization of the original practices and beliefs.

Robert Carlsen's labor of understanding about the creative survival of the Atiteco Maya is done with profound concern for the future performances of the community. Their world (and ours which is becoming linked with theirs!) is changing as *never* before, and the crisis of the immediate future is grave. This alters the question of Carlsen's first chapter from "What in the world is going on in Santiago Atitlán?" to "What in the world will happen to this community at the end of the millennium?" Carlsen has written an outstanding and complex book that helps prepare us for that performance.

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