

Converging, Divergent Spiritualities in the Highlands of Central Guatemala

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Abstract

The highlands of central Guatemala are blessed with incredible natural beauty, fertile, volcanic soil, and a climate that is ideal for agriculture and human activity. Given those factors it has a long and rich human history. If we look closely at the religious activity associated with that human history we find an ever-increasing level of what I'll call "converging, divergent spiritualities" stretching back from the Spaniards arrival in the early 16th Century and leading up to today. Historically the two divergent forms of spirituality that converged were the Mayan and the Catholic. Social scientists have described how for Spain, the imposition of Catholicism and the destruction of the Mayan Spirituality was seen as key to control. For nearly five centuries Catholicism remained as virtually the only form of spirituality practiced openly and in public in the Guatemalan highlands. Largely due to the rise of tourism as an important part of the economy in the 21st Century, other forms of divergent spirituality began to eat away at the dominance of Catholicism. Today in the highlands, there has been a virtual explosion of divergent spiritualities converging on the two areas most affected by tourism, Antigua and Lake Atitlán. My paper, based on traditional research and personal experience living in Antigua and in a small town on Lake Atitlán, will describe and analyze those converging divergent spiritualities, beginning with the rise of Evangelical Protestantism that has grown tremendously at the expense of Catholicism all over Latin America in the past two generations. The next divergent form of spirituality we'll look it is what we'll call New Age Spirituality. Spiritual practices such as yoga, Transcendental Meditation, and Reiki and have taken hold, especially in the town of San Pedro la Laguna. While mostly based on Eastern forms of spirituality, these New Age practitioners also accept certain aspects of Mayan Spirituality and all around Lake Atitlán there has been an explosion of often self-proclaimed Mayan Shamans who offer their spiritual services to both locals and tourists. Although not generally described as an organized form of spirituality another practice seen in Antigua and especially in the towns on Lake Atitlán, is "Ecstatic Dancing". This is usually done at multiple hour-long dance marathons that seem to me to be what has been described as a Rave. Finally, the last form of spirituality that

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has been rapidly growing in popularity throughout Guatemala but whose most important shrine is located in Santiago de Atitlán, is the cult of Maximón, or San Simón. This Native born form of spirituality venerates this chain-smoking, liquor-guzzling, Folk-God who has his roots in Mayan Spirituality. As such, the original, native beliefs that were suppressed shunned and persecuted for almost half a millennium are finally being openly, and enthusiastically practiced once again in the highlands of central Guatemala. How long these divergent forms of spirituality will remain, coexisting, and even thriving is unknown, but as it is today, the highlands of central Guatemala make a great place to explore divergent spiritualities that originate in both Guatemala itself and all over the world.

Keywords: Catholicism, Maximón, Mayans, Tourism, Yoga