

Dwelling in the Sacred Center: San Juan Chamula and the Festival of Games

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INTRODUCTION

To Dwell, according to Martin Heidegger, is to preserve the "primal" oneness¹ of what he calls the fourfold: the earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. Dwelling exists when man is oriented in the horizontal world of his natural and made spaces and the vertical realm; the heavens and the underworld, inhabited by the divinities. The spaces in which these orientations and connections are made are usually defined as a sacred Center. It is a place of transcendence where people commune with their deities, preserve a common identity, and confirm their place in the world. "The creation of sacred place," writes Barrie, "has principally provided the existential means for people to establish a center and thus define their place in the world."²

Sacred space, regardless of the scale, tends to reflect an attempt by the inhabitants to take possession of their surroundings, and reflect components of some pre-existing order. Christian Norberg-Schulz restates Heidegger's interpretation of what it is to Dwell in the world. He defines the act of Dwelling as a two-part relation: perception followed by interpretation through the built or natural environment:

The twofold nature of dwelling thus appears: first the faculty of understanding the given things (natural and man made), and second the making of works which keep and "explain" what has been understood.³

Dwelling within a given place requires interpretation of empirical information, and use of this information to mark a place in the world. Sacred spaces become the stages where man actively engages his

environment and deities. In doing so, he establishes identity between himself and his physical environment, and bridges the divide between the observed and unobservable.

Myth is the means by which man seeks to explain the relationships essential to Dwelling. In the context of traditional societies and in its role in the creation of identity within a landscape, myth is understood as a true account of, among other things, how the various groups came to be, and how they arrived in a location. They become an account of the primordial aspects of group identity. Harold Courlander in his study of Hopi mythology in the Southwestern United States writes, "These legends at their heart are not for entertainment, but to keep alive a sense of human continuity."⁴ The factual interpretation of myth directs the daily lives of those in this type of social structure. In many cases these stories are the basis of what a particular group sees as "sacred, exemplary [and] significant."⁵ Myth in these societies is seen as a "living" history which serves to supply models for human behavior, and by that very fact, gives meaning and value to life.⁶ Myths adapt to incorporate contemporary reality. They are fluid interpretations of a common identity, in which the primordial past and unknown future are united in the everyday lives of those within the society.

If myth is essential for understanding the abstract concepts of Dwelling, then ritual is the means by which these abstractions are made visible. Ritual is the physical expression of myth, and is the primary means by which its meaning is communicated and perpetuated. Man achieves balance and understands his place within the fourfold elements of Dwelling, and unifies them through the practice of public ritual. It is the means by which man tran-

scends the everyday world and makes living the deeds of the supernatural. It is an expression in real terms of the latent power within space that is released through the practice of ritual, and is central to forming a mythological interpretation of the surrounding environment. Ritual defines the boundary between the sacred and the profane. It imbues the environment with meaning beyond the visible, and becomes a means by which people are united in a common worldview. Through the practice of ritual, humans strive in a tangible way to achieve Heidegger's "primal" oneness: interaction with their gods in their place on earth.

San Juan Chamula, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, is a place where myth and its interpretation through ritual are used to re-create an ancient mythological structure, and define a sacred Center. The Center is essential to the establishment of Dwelling in the lives of the Chamula. Both spatially and ritually, Centrality is the foundation of their cultural identity. Gossen states:

Most basic to Chamula spatial orientation is the belief that they live at the center of the earth... They believe that their centrality on the square earth-island, combined with the high elevation of their land in the Chiapas highlands, gives them a special relationship to the sun, the principle deity...⁷

In this place, a common spatial understanding is dramatically represented during their ritual ceremonies. The most important of these ceremonies is known as the Festival of Games, wherein their creation and centering myths are acted out. Based primarily on the movement of the sun and the cardinal directions, this ritual carries many vestiges of their Mayan ancestry. As Linda Schele states, "Centering the world is thus a way of re-creating a spatial order that focuses the spiritual forces of the supernatural within the material forms of the human world, rendering these forces accessible to human need."⁸ Through the practice of ritual, the space represents the moral and physical center of the universe they inhabit.

SAN JUAN CHAMULA

One of the most unique examples of a society Dwelling within its landscape is San Juan Chamula. Despite centuries of religious, political, and social

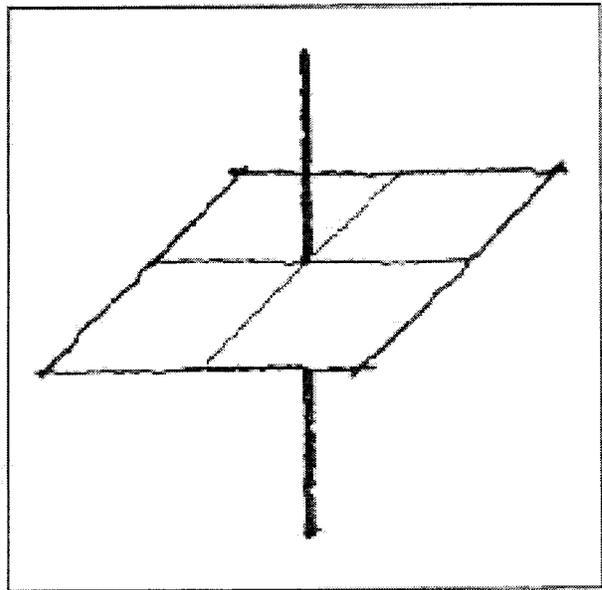


Figure 1: Conceptual diagram of universe (Author, 1998)

upheaval, this group has been able to maintain one of the purest examples of traditional Mayan myth and ritual structures in Latin America. They practice ritual to relate their creation mythology to their environment. Through the observations of rituals that perpetuate an understanding of their cultural identity and their place in the world, they provide a powerful testament to the importance of ritual and spatial identity.

Located in the highlands region of Chiapas, San Juan Chamula is the largest and most dispersed of approximately twenty *municipios*: the political division just below the state in the Mexican political system. The primary language spoken in Chamula is Tzotzil: one of a handful of Maya languages spoken in southern Mexico and Guatemala. Like most indigenous groups in the region, the Chamulas are corn farmers, artisans and traders. In recent decades, however, they have been forced, because of serious overpopulation, environmental degradation, and lack of economic development to spread throughout the state in search of other means. As such, they have come to provide a major part of the labor force Throughout the Mexican Republic.

The settlement patterns of the Chamulas retain some similarities to those of the classic Maya. Many of the important ceremonial complexes used for public ritual were sparsely inhabited for most of



Figure 2: Church of San Juan in Ceremonial Center

the year, except for priests and those belonging to the ruling class. Likewise, most of the population of San Juan Chamula lives in the surrounding countryside in three distinct settlements called *barrios*: San Juan, San Pedro and San Sebastian. Although these three outlying settlements have their own smaller shrines and ritual spaces, all perform their primary rituals both individually and collectively in the primary sacred space: the Ceremonial Center at the heart of San Juan Chamula. It exists primarily as a social and trading hub throughout the year, but becomes the stage for public ritual during religious festivities.

The Ceremonial Center is not a space in itself, but a group of ritual spaces. Much like the ritual complexes of the ancient Maya, the Chamula Ceremonial Center also contains smaller ritual spaces important during the year, including temporary housing for religious officials. The three settlements constitute the primary groups from which political and religious officials are selected. They are responsible for the organization of the ritual celebrations throughout the year leading up to Festival of Games. These men, called cargo holders⁹, serve in this capacity for two years. Following many of the formal associations of the primary ritual space, these three smaller spaces are understood to be microcosms of

the Ceremonial Center and its mythological representations. As a whole, these spaces constitute the most important built components of the Chamula ritual landscape.

CENTERING THE WORLD

According to both pre-Columbian and contemporary Mayan mythology the earth is a flat rectangular plane delineated by the four cardinal directions; the east-west direction following the sun as it traverses the heavens each day, and the north-south directions established perpendicular to this path. At the intersection of these lines is the point that defines the Cosmic Center, or "navel," of the earth. From this center rises the vertical axis known as the World Tree of the Center that serves to unite the heavens and the underworld, creating a conduit through which gods and rulers could cross between the supernatural and human worlds¹⁰ (Fig. 1). This ritually charged space is organized in accordance with what Linda Schele defines as a five-part structure of the cosmos: the cardinal directions defined by the sun's movement across a rectangular plane, and the Center defined as the intersection of both axes.

Throughout the year, ritual celebrations are used to mark important themes, including agricultural and historical events, and religious festivities. The most important of these celebrations, however, is known to anthropologists as the Festival of Games. It is timed to coincide with the Catholic Lenten celebrations, but is laden with traditional Mayan calendrical references. The Festival of Games marks the last five days of the Mayan lunar calendar of eighteen months of twenty days each. These "lost days" as they are known as a time of chaos, when enemies of the Chamula return in an attempt to destroy the cosmological order represented by the movement of the sun. It is a celebration of Chamula cultural and mythological history, combining historical elements including invasions, natural disasters, and warfare together with their creation and cosmological myths. The Festival of Games becomes a mosaic representation of Chamula identity. Through the practice of ritual, the Chamula preserve the cosmic order handed down by the gods in the primordial past.

In Chamula mythology specifically, the sun has been renamed to accommodate the introduction of Christianity. Called the Sun/Christ by the Chamula, this re-imagination of the primary deity

in the classic Maya pantheon exhibits the adaptability of myth. Of great importance in this context are the ideas associated with Centering in the universe, and ritually preserving the movement of the Sun/Christ across the heavens for another year. Through the practice of ritual, man engages himself directly with his mythology to assert his role in the universe. As Schele states, "The rising of the sun is the daily affirmation of the dynamic and participatory presence of beneficent spiritual forces in the lives of the people. This general concept is universal among the Maya."¹¹ The Festival of Games celebrates the first act of their creation myth when the sun rose out of the primordial sea to give order to the earth. This act is the basis for all human dwelling in the in ancient and contemporary Mayan mythology.

THE CHAMULA CEREMONIAL CENTER

It is essential to relate mythology to the physical characteristics of a place for Dwelling to occur. Those who seek to define themselves and their place must understand both the abstract and concrete nature of their spaces. In many cases, however, the symbolism attached to the formal aspects of the space is less important than its mythical associations. Such is the Case in Chamula, where symbols and meaning have been transformed by cultural influences.

The church of San Juan, located on the eastern side of the plaza, is the most prominent building in the Ceremonial Center (Fig. 2). The orientation of the church is essential to establishing the cosmological associations within the ritual landscape. The chancel of the church is oriented toward the east, with the nave following the east-west orientation symbolizing the rising of the Sun/Christ from the Underworld. It marks the beginning of the Sun/Christ's journey across the sky, and defines the primary axis in the Ceremonial Center. While it retains the outward symbolism of the Catholic liturgy for which it was built, its meaning in the larger context of the Ceremonial Center has been changed. During the outdoor rituals of the Festival of Games, a traditionally interior space has been turned outward and expanded to relate to its surroundings in a much different way: it has become an object in a sacred field. The church gives orientation and represents a point of origin within the ritual landscape of San Juan Chamula.

The most prominent space for outdoor ceremony is the large plaza fronting the church and its atrio, the smaller walled courtyard between the church and the plaza (Fig. 3). The ritual and physical heart of the Ceremonial Center, this plaza is a rectangular space defined at the corners by cross shrines. Decorated with pine boughs to allegorically represent the World Tree so prominent in Mayan mythology, these crosses are markers of ceremonial paths throughout San Juan Chamula. They perform the same function on the plaza.

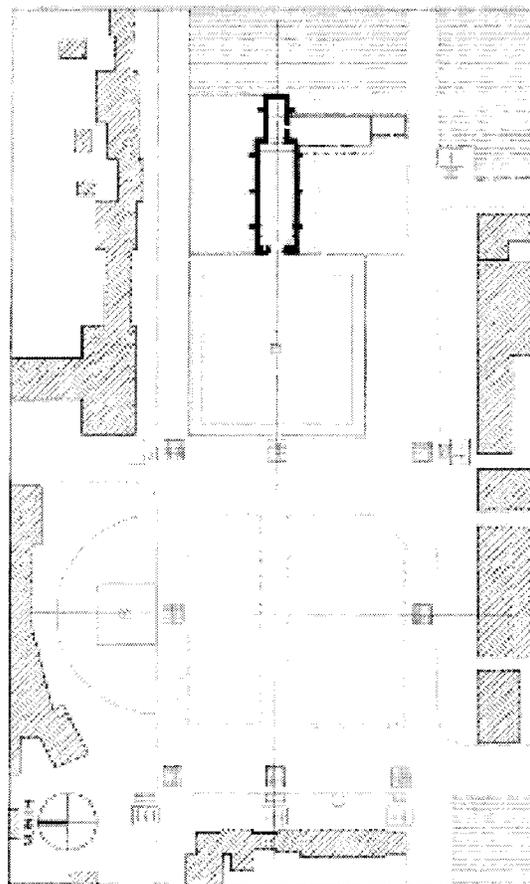


Figure 3: Ritual Circulation within Plaza, Chamula Ceremonial Center (Author, 1998)

fining ritual space by marking corners relative to a center point is a basic principle of creating sacred space in Mayan traditions. "The discerning of the four sides or the four corners and the establishing of their position relative to the center point is what we mean by 'centering.'"¹²

In addition to the four cross shrines at the corners of the plaza, a fifth cross shrine terminates the

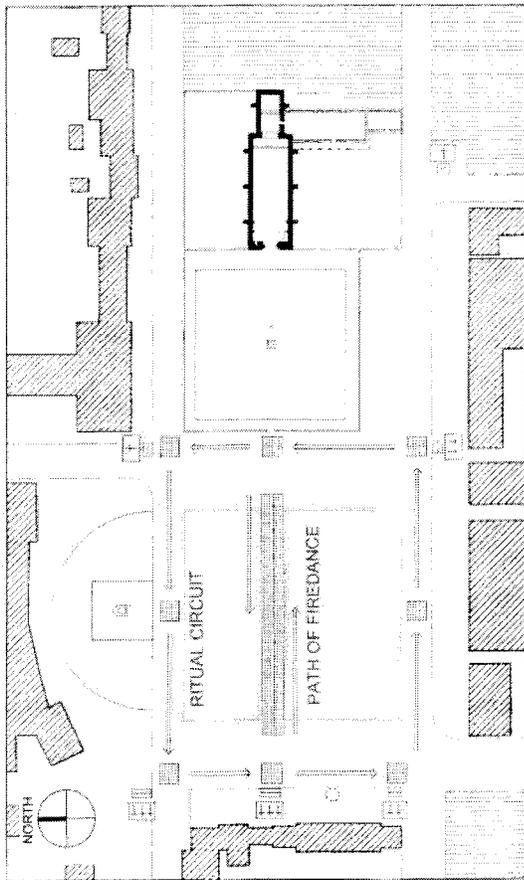


Figure 4: Axial and Geometric Organization of Chamula Ceremonial Center (Author, 1998)

east-west axis through the sacred space. Located at the west side of the plaza in alignment with the chancel of the church on the east, it includes three crosses meant to represent the crosses of Calvary, making a direct connection between Christianity and contemporary Chamula myth (Fig. 5). This shrine marks the western horizon, which symbolizes the death of the Sun/Christ and the beginning of the journey into the Underworld. By marking the corners and important axial relationships in the Ceremonial Center with these cross shrines, the Chamula have defined a sacred precinct directly associated with their mythology.

RITUAL CHOREOGRAPHY

Through their ritual, the Chamula have interpreted the trajectory of the sun across the sky in their sacred spaces to such an extent that myth and place are inextricably connected. Mythological associations, including life cycles, agricultural seasons, and male/female characteristics are derived from

solar observations and influence the ritual movements and meanings in the Chamula Ceremonial Center, particularly during the Festival of Games.

Ritual movement activates the plaza, and only then can it become the microcosm of the universe it is meant to represent. Beginning at the east side on the center axis of the plaza, the ritual participants invariably move counter-clockwise (Fig. 4). In the ritual circulation, the vertical path of the Sun/Christ has been made horizontal; the directional cues established by the rising of the sun in the east. This becomes the designated path of the cargo holders during the Festival of Games. This re-enactment of the Sun/Christ's ascension into heaven and descent into the Underworld is not only symbolically related to Christian themes, but reinforces through ritual the Chamula creation myth.



Figure 5: Church of San Juan in Ceremonial Center Arturo Artigas, *La Arquitectura de San Cristobal de las Casas* (Mexico D.F.: Universidad Autonoma de Mexico, 1991) 125.

Centering, likewise, cannot be expressed without a physical location and place. The ritual processions around the ceremonial center are highly organized and choreographed activities meant to take possession of the space, and make it sacred. They are also necessary to creating a sacred Center. "Because centering the world requires movement to, from, and around the designated center point, the processional route humans use to define the center is as important as the center itself."¹³ During the Festival of Games these processional routes are the most visible activities used to define a Center. Ritual movements during the Festival of Games assign spatial meaning, and render observable a common mythology. They define the concept of Centering relative to Chamula myth.

Arrival at the plaza is marked by activities that

recognize the segregation of sacred and profane space. The cargo holders and their assistants perform short ceremonies of ablution in preparation to enter the sacred space. After they have been ritually cleansed, they begin their circumambulation of the plaza in what appears to be a chaotic run to each of the points along the sacred route. Schele writes, "Maya festivals, like many such activities in the world, are characterized by long hours of negligible activity, punctuated by moments of furious action."¹⁴ This movement, however, is a highly choreographed representation of the confusion that would ensue if the rituals were not performed. Entry into the plaza is marked as the culmination of the sacred paths connecting the plaza to the three *barrios* and the landscape beyond. Although the processions may enter the space from any of the roads leading into the plaza, they are understood to begin at the eastern end of the central axis within the plaza. During their ritual procession, the representatives stop at the cross shrines at each corner of the plaza and at the four cardinal directions, offering blessings to the crosses and greetings to each other, and thus define the basic form of the universe and mark the space as sacred. This activity is repeated throughout the five-day celebration.

At the culmination of the five-day ritual celebrations, the final activity related to the act of Centering occurs. It is known as the "Fire Dance," and is representative of the Sun/Christ's journey through the cosmos. Unlike the other ritual movements, this procession is linear following central axis of the Ceremonial Center (Fig. 4). In preparation for this ceremony, straw is placed on the ground and set afire. While it burns, the cargo holders from each of the *barrios* and their entourages run from east to west along the path. This ritual recognizes one of the fundamental mythological truths of the Chamula: the birth and death of the Sun/Christ. It also has elements common to many mythologies throughout the world: the trials and transformation experienced through a mythical journey. The cargo holders, as representatives of the Divinity, and their assistants ritualize death and rebirth as a means to secure the cosmic order for another year.

The Fire Dance is the end of the cargo holders' responsibilities connected with the Festival of Games. The culmination of ceremonies marks the

beginning of a new year, both in the life of the community and in the ritual chronology. The responsibilities of cargo holder are passed on to the next group, and the agricultural cycle begins with the first plantings after the festival. With the new cargo holders in place, the preparations for the subsequent Festival of Games begin anew.

CONCLUSION

According to Joseph Campbell, "Myths, being spontaneous products of the psyche, do not lie, but simply reappear in different forms, and these forms ... are typically based on universal models."¹⁵ The rituals in the Ceremonial Center, as in many cases throughout the world, "emphasize the essential importance of symbolism, meaning and intimate human interaction in the built environment."¹⁶ The Center is essential to the establishment of Dwelling in the lives of the Chamula. Both spatially and ritually, its centrality is the foundation of their cultural identity. The establishment of Center through ritual allows a people to ground themselves in their place, to define themselves and their community, and to form a perspective on the world outside themselves. Through the ritual activities of the Festival of Games, the Chamula strive to orient themselves in their physical and mythological environment. It is here that the emotive potential of architecture and sacred space becomes critical. Security, community, continuity; all primary functions of human culture are defined through a spatial interpretation of the environment. "From birth we struggle to a fragment of order in the infinite variety of our environment," Norberg-Schulz writes, "The order we attain is...a result of collaboration and the transmission of information."¹⁷ It does not matter if the environment is natural or man-made, the social function of space as symbol of order and signifier of action are commonly understood as sacred. Joseph Campbell states, "The chosen center may be anywhere . . . It is everywhere that has ever been recognized and mythologized by any people as home."¹⁸ Ritual is the outward manifestation of these innate rules of socialization, and becomes both the ordered and giver of order. Members of a group thus gain a psychological and emotional attachment to the places of ritual: the sacred space.

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NOTES

¹ Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1972) 149.

² Thomas Barrie, Spiritual Path, Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual, and Meaning in Architecture (Boston: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1996) 53.

³ Christian Norberg-Schulz, The Concept of Dwelling: On The Way to a Figurative Architecture (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1985) 17.

⁴ Harold Courlander, The Fourth World of the Hopis (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971) 12.

⁵ Mircea Eliade, Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader ed. Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty, vol. 1 (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975) 3.

⁶ Eliade 3.

⁷ Gary Gossen, Chamulas in the World of the Sun: Time and Space in Maya Oral Tradition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974) 18.

⁸ Linda Schele, David Freidel, and Joy Parker, Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path (New York: Wm. Morrow & Company, 1993) 131.

⁹ Derived from the Spanish term, "encargados," meaning those who are responsible

¹⁰ Schele, Freidel and Parker 128.

¹¹ Schele, Freidel and Parker 128.

¹² Schele, Freidel and Parker 129.

¹³ Schele, Freidel and Parker 131.

¹⁴ Schele, Freidel and Parker 397.

¹⁵ Barrie 258.

¹⁶ Barrie 259.

¹⁷ Norberg-Schulz, Intentions In Architecture (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965) 79.

¹⁸ Joseph Campbell, The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphore as Myth and Religion (New York: Alfred van der Marck Editions, 1986) 44.