

Pampering A Mysterious Deity With Presents and Rum

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SANTIAGO ATITLAN, [Guatemala](#) The shaman looked annoyed.

Slivers of light cut through cracks in the thin wooden walls of the house at the end of a slippery mud street, illuminating his glare of disapproval. The kids in the back of the tiny room were giggling, but for the shaman this was a solemn moment. The look he shot them shut them up.

It was 1:15 p.m., time to worship the statue of Maximón, a squat, roughly carved wooden deity beloved here by those who believe in his power to grant favors and feared for punishing those who do not pay him proper respect. Maximón, pronounced maw-she-MAWN, occupies a space between the polar tugs of Guatemalan spiritual life, Catholicism and evangelism, neither of which approves of him. His origins are a mystery. Some say he is a modern version of a long-forgotten Mayan god. Others say he represents a martyred holy man. Still others merely shrug their shoulders.

Great gusts of smoke rose out of the metal bucket the shaman filled with burning incense. The bucket swung back and forth, and the shaman began to pray in the Mayan Tzutujil dialect. Strands of Christmas tree lights, slung over a separate, glass-encased statue, twinkled. A pinwheel of flashing lights spun round and round. Incongruously, the notes of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" slipped tinnily out of a palm-size speaker dangling from the wall.

Ten minutes into the ceremony, at 1:25 p.m., Marcelino Mura reached for the hand of his wife, Maria, and they shifted their weight on bent knees. The Muras once lived humbly but say they have prospered in the eight years since they began making an annual pilgrimage to pay tribute to Maximón in this village propped on a steep hill overlooking Lake Atitlan.

"I used to work in the fields; there was no shade. It was so hard," Marcelino Mura whispered to one of the visitors crammed into a space fast filling with cough-inducing smoke. "Now I have my own restaurant. Thanks to Maximón."

Francisco Miranda, a member of the cofradia, an informal religious group that cares for Maximón, jumped to his feet. Miranda has a place of honor in the room. Maximón has resided in this private home since the Christian Holy Week. The statue will stay there until next Holy Week, when it will move to another private home, where the owners will enjoy the offerings of rum, cigarettes, money and clothing, right along with the statue.

Miranda had spotted something amiss. The cigarette in Maximón's mouth was almost burned through and a droopy tube of ash looked as if it was at its breaking point. Miranda

tapped the ash into a tray and fished another cigarette out of his pocket. He replaced the old cigarette and lit the new one.

"I pray for this man's business," the shaman intoned.

A spigot gushed in an adjoining room at 1:40 p.m. Miranda glanced back, catching a glimpse of a man ripping off his shirt and washing his underarms beneath the stream of water. Maximón may be getting his tribute in one room, but life goes on in the rest of the house.

Three barefoot children with dirt-smudged faces and stained clothes sucked on candies outside the doorway. The street children of Santiago Atitlan have become Maximón's ushers over the years, leading Guatemalans and tourists to him. No sign announces Maximón's home, but his supposedly secret location really isn't much of a secret. Everyone here knows where he resides.

By 2 p.m., Miranda had determined that Maximón was thirsty. He dug under a table and pulled out a bottle of rum. He carefully removed the burning cigarette -- Maximón's fourth in 45 minutes -- and tipped the bottle. Rum splashed off the wooden lips, cascading over the 10 quetzal notes clipped to Maximón's scarf and into a kerchief Miranda held beneath Maximón's chin.

Miranda reached forward to take a wad of bills from Mura, scooting aside three pairs of fancy leather shoes that Mura had brought as an offering after noticing the day before that Maximón was shoeless.

Smoke thickened, blanketing the dried plants suspended from the ceiling. The shaman, barely visible in the fog of burning incense, kept up the pendulum motion of his incense bucket.

"I pray for this man's and this woman's health," he said.

Ten minutes later, at 2:15 p.m., Miranda once again sought to slake Maximón's prodigious thirst. He gestured to a boy who had just wandered into the room. The boy clenched his teeth and struggled to untwist the cap on a flask-size bottle of rum. Defeated, he handed the bottle to Miranda.

Miranda strained but couldn't get it open either, passing it off to an older man who had been watching with an air of detached amusement.

The man swiftly unloosed the cap. Miranda stepped over five empties on the floor and in seconds rum was splashing over Maximón's lips again.