

# El *Pa'apu'ul* (Breaking Pots)

## Saint John the Baptist

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translated from Spanish by Pam Bridgehouse



There is a tradition we Mayans have in some regions of Yucatan. Not all of Yucatan has it; it is disappearing. But in my hometown of Tipikal it is so deeply ingrained in the heart of the Mayans that it seems impossible to forget.

This tradition is called *Pa'apu'ul*, literally “breaking pots.” It is celebrated every year on June 24. June is the season when the sun reaches its highest point above the Yucatan peninsula. For this reason, the droughts begin in these regions. *Pa'apu'ul* begins in the morning when 75% of the population gets up very early and goes into the country and the oldest houses to capture animals like reptiles, snakes, vipers, and all kinds of animals related to water. With time this tradition has changed. Now any small animal is captured - even chickens, cats, rats - any animal that can fit into the pot, and in the end, someone donates a piñata and candy for the celebration. The celebration begins with a mass in honor of John the Baptist offered by the town priest.

My ancestors taught me that we Mayans have many gods, basically gods for every natural phenomenon. But only one of those gods sends the rain for the crops so the crops will grow and produce much fruit, especially in this season of drought. This god is known as *Cha'ak*, god of thunder and rain. He is evil and selfish, so evil that he doesn't want to give water unless his day is celebrated. He likes to be begged for the water.

## MAYAN GODS



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• His name means Only one God</li> <li>• He was the principal God</li> <li>• Creator of the world and mankind was born of corn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lord of the heavens, of the night and the day</li> <li>• Son of the god Hunab Kú</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God of the wind</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sun god</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rain god</li> </ul>
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The townspeople have old pots in their houses and when they return from hunting for the animals, they put them inside the pots. The ceremony starts at 5:00 in the evening with the ceremony in honor of John the Baptist.

It is interesting to know that this tradition comes from many years in the past. It was only known by the Mayans. In the time of the conquest, the Spanish arrived in Yucatan and began to conquer the Mayan peoples. Many years later, a bishop and inquisitor arrived at Maní, Yucatan, a town that lies about five minutes by car from Tipikal. On July 12, 1561, this man named Diego de Landa ordered an enormous bonfire to be made outside the Franciscan church where thousands of objects venerated by the Mayans were burned.



Diego de Landa thought and believed that those objects were the works of the devil. Among these objects collected by him and other friars from the nearby towns were several codices, beautiful books where the Mayans had recorded their history, beliefs, and astronomy, including the tradition of *Pa'apu'ul*. Although the people wept and begged Diego de Landa not to burn them, but he had no compassion. According to him he was trying to do something good for the Mayan ancestors. This scene was never forgotten by my ancestors. In my town the oldest people can be heard talking about this scene. It is a story embedded in the mind and heart of my ancestors. Now, if someone wants to know more you can go to the internet and search for Diego de Landa.



Among all these objects and books that were in danger of disappearing there is a codice that was rescued. The Codice of Dresde is one of the few Mayan books that survived the epoch of the conquest. At the end of the book there is an image of a lizard in the sky that lets a waterfall come from its mouth and a female deity holding a clay pot that is filled with water. It fills and she pours it out onto the earth. I don't know how the lizard relates to the god *Cha'ac*, the rain god.

The Mayans were divided into those of the north, *Xaman*, and those of the south, *Nojol*. Then each side had its own story of how *Pa'apu'ul* began. We cannot

know because all the ancient writings in the Mayan language disappeared because the inquisition wiped out all types of Mayan writings. What I write here is based on what my grandparents and my parents have told me.



*Pa'apu'ul* is a syncretism where the priests tried to change the meaning of this tradition and I can say that these priests intended to change the Mayan culture from its roots. These priests saw the faithfulness that the Maya had for their gods. The priests wanted to evangelize the Mayans to be like them and to make them more Christian. One way they could do this is connect them to St. John the Baptist as a person who comes with water to baptize them.

The priests began by focusing on John the Baptist and left *Cha'ak* to one side. Not only *Cha'ak*, but they wanted to completely erase all the gods. The priests wanted to erase the minds of the Mayans, leaving them as a blank slate where they could inculcate them with all the good “according to them”, that they knew.

I can say that for the Mayans there was a very good connection with John the Baptist because he was someone who had no power or ambition to rule over others. The Mayans saw in John the Baptist someone who understood them. They saw John the Baptist as someone who was very simple; John the Baptist was just like the Mayans; he was a person who lived in poverty, and thanks to that, the veneration of John the Baptist began.



Little boys and girls are the main participants in the *Pa'apu'ul* celebration when the child runs to break the pot. The noise the blow makes is like a crack of thunder. The Maya believe that the god *Cha'ack* heard the noise of thunder and it would confuse him and he would let the rains come. But also, it was a moment where the people were getting more and more frightened because when the jar breaks the animal falls to the ground and runs in whatever direction. Then the mothers and fathers shout because the animal might come after them, or if the vipers could come out and many people could go home with bites.



On the other hand, in the ceremony performed by the priest before the *Pa'apu'ul* begins the celebration. I remember that he told us to remember that we are noble people like John the Baptist and when the animals come out of the pots we

had to remember that John lived in the desert, suffered poverty, and knows the need in times of drought. So, John the Baptist knows the people in the town need water. The people of the town, remembering or venerating John the Baptist basically ask him to remind God that we need water and the rain for the people to stay alive.

Here it can be seen that the people are not centered on Christ but on the priests who center them on the saints. They also focus on the works the Maya could do to win God's favor. I remember the people would carry the image of John the Baptist and the catechists took advantage of the opportunity of the people being gathered together around the image to pass the collection plate, first during the mass and later after the event. You may ask yourself if I did it. I admit I was the first to carry the image. I didn't know what I was doing!



In my seminary classes about the book of John I learned something new. John refers to John the Baptist, but not the way the Catholic priest did. *There was a man sent from God whose name was John.*<sup>7</sup> *He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.*<sup>8</sup> *He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

<sup>9</sup> *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.*<sup>10</sup> *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.*<sup>11</sup> *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*<sup>12</sup> *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—<sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (NIV)*

St. John writing his gospel referred to John the Baptist because it seemed that the people of his time also thought that he was the promised Messiah, which was an error. John wanted to demonstrate that John the Baptist was the voice of one crying in the desert, preparing the way for someone much greater than himself as prophesied in the book of Isaiah 40:3. And this person is Jesus Christ.

The apostle John emphasized in his writing that John the Baptist was not the light, but he came to bear witness to the Light. Jesus Christ is the light that lights the way to God. Christ is the one who shows us our errors or the false teachings that we have in our cultures. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Christ is the true light.

The world has fallen into sin. It is in complete darkness since Adam and Eve fell into sin. But God has given His promise that he would send a Savior into the world. During the whole time of the Old Testament God sent people to communicate His message before Christ would come. John the Baptist is one of those messengers. John the Baptist is the one who came to give testimony to the Light.

As a Mayan person, as I was reading the words of the gospel of John, God showed me the light and the terrible wrong that the ancient priests were doing to my ancestors. They wanted to teach that we, as human beings, cannot have a connection with God because God is very distant. They taught me that God doesn't care about us, but that we need the help of people who are closer to Him, like John the Baptist.

But this Light, who is Jesus Christ, told me "no one comes to the Father except through me." With these words I understand that all that the priests were teaching the people of my village was a vile lie because absolutely no one can make God do the will of man. Rather it was God who came to the world as the Light, the True Light that enlightens all mankind, including Mayas like me because the world, people and I myself are God's creation through Christ. All of us who exist were created by Him. Sadly, the world and the Maya did not receive Christ. Or I dare to say that we were not taught or shown the correct way. The Maya know that there is a Christ but for them, Christ cannot help them. The Maya do not recognize the Light because they were shown a wrong way.

It is my longing that someday the Lord will send people to my town to preach the truth of Christ, that the Lord would send missionaries that will show them the Light of Christ so that instead of focusing on other people who cannot help them, that they would focus on Christ, or at least realize that John the Baptist was a simple person like us and a servant of the Lord, being the testimony that Christ is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

Christ Jesus is the Messiah God promised. Christ is the Way. Christ is the Light. Christ is the Truth. Christ is the Life. Christ is the Door. Christ is the Good Shepherd. Christ is the Lamb of God. Christ in His passion carried His heavy cross and also all of our sins and put them there, paying an enormous price for our freedom from sin, death, and the devil.

It is my prayer that the Lord would give the Maya His Holy Spirit so they might be able to see, believe, and receive Jesus Christ, and believing in His name, that God would give them the right to be children of God; and not only for the Maya but also to all the many cultures scattered throughout the whole world.

Our Triune God is not a god who is far away, but is our Triune God. He is the only true God and He is very near to us. God revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ. God Himself lived what we live. God Himself understands all the needs of our life.

Dear reader, if you want to see the one true God, you can do it by knowing Jesus. Perhaps you ask yourself, “How do we know Jesus?” The Gospel of John was written so that we might believe in Him. It was written so that we might see that God in His Son. Knowing Him we can recognize Him as Thomas did saying, “My Lord, and my God.” God gives us His Holy Spirit so that we might go to all nations making disciples for the Lord.

If there are no missionaries who can go to my people to preach to them, may God use me as His instrument, guide me, and give me the courage to be able to share His forgiveness and His love with them.

Here are some fotos of how *Pa'apu'ul* is celebrated in Tipikal, Yucatán.







