

By John Major Jenkins. **The Mission Izapa Tour, June 19 – 26, 2010**, was an extraordinary experience. It took the efforts of many people, and I am grateful to everyone who helped make this happen. The seed for this tour came two years ago, when Mary Lou Ridinger and I were in Tapachula, doing a radio interview about the importance of the nearby site of Izapa, in southern Chiapas, Mexico. In Guatemala, the Maya guides are allowed into the archaeological sites to do ceremony. But in Mexico, religious ceremonies in the archaeological sites run by INAH are prohibited. This has been a sore point for traditional Maya aj' q'ij (spiritual guides). The border between Guatemala and Mexico creates a cultural gulf. Whereas there are many Maya groups in Guatemala, in the area of Izapa in southern Chiapas, there didn't appear to any traditional Maya people. We wondered about this, and were told that there were a few traditional Mam Maya living high on the slopes of Tacana volcano. One of the older guides had wanted to get into Izapa and do ceremony, but did not know how to go about doing it. Mary Lou and I talked about how amazing it would be to facilitate, somehow, traditional Maya guides coming to do ceremony at Izapa. On a recent tour to Maya sites in Guatemala led by Jim Reed and myself, we brought our group into Tak'alik Ab'aj at a time, coincidentally, when a ceremony was taking place on the altar in front Stela 5.



Tat Rigoberto at Tak'alik Ab'aj, 2007

Afterward, we met the aj' q'ij who led the ceremony, Tat Rigoberto Itzep Chanchabac. He was cordial, energetic, focused, and knowledgeable. Jim made a mental note to be in further contact with Tat Rigoberto. In time, Jim gave the seed idea a huge push and got the ball rolling, working with Georgeann Johnson, the president of the new Maya Conservancy. By late 2009 plans were congealing. Working also with Mary Lou and the Jade Museum in Antigua, Jim brought a small group to Momostenango, Tat Rigoberto's town, to experience the famous 8 Batz initiation ceremony on February 6, 2010. The fire ceremonies occurred throughout the night and culminated at dawn on 8 Batz, when new daykeepers were initiated into the ancient tradition. I have written about the complicated and profound calendar rites of the 260-day calendar in my various books, including *7 Wind* (1993). This opened the door to working with Tat Rigoberto, his wife Maria, and their associates. At this time, I was still doing conference events in the wake of the release of my book *The 2012 Story* in October 2009. In the first three months of 2010 I did

events in Yucatan (Mexico), Dubai (UAE), and Cairo, Egypt. I was extremely busy. Jim and Georgeann worked hard to organize an event that was shaping up to focus on “the return of the Maya” to “the dawn of time.” This was a fun way accentuate something quite historic that we were trying to pull off. Izapa, irregardless of my own galactic alignment theory and my archaeoastronomical work at Izapa, is indeed an origin place for the Maya calendars and the Maya Creation Mythology. On the morning of June 24, 2010, the ceremony on the east mound of the ballcourt group at Izapa occurred. It was the perfect location. You can even see the throne on the west end of the ballcourt in this picture of the beginning of the ceremony:



Ceremony at Izapa, June 24, 2010

Izapa is identified as a calendrical origin place in, for example, the recent book by Prudence Rice called *Maya Calendar Origins*. We asked the Maya guides for good dates according to the 260-day tzolkin, and the tour was set for late June. This would also incorporate the solstice on June 21. Although no one was fully aware of another celestial event at the time — except maybe Georgeann! — our group would end up at the final and fifth ceremonial location, Momostenango, on the lunar eclipse of June 25. It turned out that this eclipse had great symbolic meaning, as it would be occurring in the position of the dark rift in the Milky Way — just like a lunar eclipse record on Tortuguero Monument 6, the infamous 2012 monument.

We put the word out and soon the 14 spots for participants were filled. Proceeds would go to the Maya spiritual guides and their families. This was an experiential tour with thirteen Maya aj' q'ij, or Spiritual Guides, the first event sponsored by The Maya Conservancy. We began the tour with a grand meeting in Antigua, Guatemala. Then we struck into the highlands, doing ceremony at Iximché, Atitlan, Tak'alik Ab'aj, Izapa, and Momostenango. It was revealing, transformative, and challenging. Since the 1980s I've met with different Maya groups and have worked on projects with Tzutujil and Quiché people on different occasions in various settings. But time has a way of cycling you in and out of contact with people and places you love and that were so meaningful. For me, this was the perfect setting and opportunity to make new friends, learn

more about Maya traditions, and have a shared experience that brought hearts closer together. There were language differences, of course, but ultimately communion is what we were shooting for, and communion can happen without words and language. The fire itself is that great transformative unifier; the offerings and sacrifice rites, humbling ourselves together before the Great Mystery — these are experiences that all human beings long to have and share. The ability of the Maya to facilitate the creation of these sacred spaces should not be taken for granted. The challenges of getting visas for the Maya people, crossing the border twice, and pulling off the semi-miracle of doing ceremony at Izapa were not inconsiderable. We all felt blessed to have had such great and exciting weather. On the morning of June 24, 2010, the ceremony on the east mound of the ballcourt group at Izapa occurred. It was the perfect location. You can even see the throne on the west end of the ballcourt in this picture of the beginning of the ceremony



Ceremony near Momostenango

It was particularly meaningful to me that V. Garth Norman was along with the group. He is the pioneer archaeologist who did work at the site in the 1960s and 70s, doing detailed drawings of the monuments and decoding measurements and orientations. The final ceremony at an ancient shrine just outside of Momostenango was a magical afternoon, when hearts commingled and as we finally ended with hugs and laughter, a little rash of rain fell while the sun broke through. Rain and sun, the symbols of growing and future sowing. Four days later, when I was trapped overnight in Houston due to a flight cancellation, I reflected on the amazing quality of recent events, and it struck me — we did it!

We were all deeply moved by the words of Tat Rigoberto, delivered right after the fire ceremony at Izapa, on June 24, 2010. A partial transcript and translation of his words is here:

“Let’s remember the wisdom that comes from our ancestors — their wisdom was so profound. We cannot project ourselves into the future if we do not look back, into the root... the future is our past. We cannot deny any of the three phases of Past, Present, and Future. We have the privilege of having this time, now, *to revive and adapt the ancient and ongoing Sacred Ceremony.*”