

LEONARDI

Update Nicaragua
A Monthly Newsletter

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A Marriage of the Gods

The tiny patio in front of the church was rocking. Three drummers were banging out a driving rhythm and the patio was full of bouncing bodies, all jamming with leafy branches held above their heads. The vibrating mass of humanity resembled a tropical forest in rebellion or an agitated army of Leaf Cutter Ants up against a road block. The dancers were pressed up against the façade of the old adobe church of Altagracia, blocking the temple's front door was 400 year-old wooden icon of San Diego de Alcalá, the patron saint of the ancient village. The icon represents a 15th century Spanish Franciscan friar, a Catholic Saint, who annually receives this tribute once reserved for an Indigenous God.

It was a highly moving scene. The passion of the dancers and the driving soundtrack of drums subtly kidnapped my pulse, taking it for a thumping ride. For six years I had promised myself not to miss this obscure yet original dance that rocks the eastern slopes of the active Concepción Volcano, a towering cone that rises out of the steamy waters of Lake Nicaragua. Year after year the song of distant drums called me, and year after year some fact or another of daily life in Managua kept me on the mainland that November.

After six years of photographing Nicaragua's religious festivals I have decided to finally finish the documentary series, with an exhibit of the work planned for July of 2005. What better way to conclude my black and white journey through the Nicaraguan labyrinth of semi-pagan and antiquated Catholic rituals, than with the exclamation point of Ometepe Island's *Baile Del Zompopo* or Leaf Cutter Ant Dance. This rhythmic tribute to the tropics' most industrious ant is performed in the name of the patron saint of Altagracia, San Diego de Alcalá. The celebration for San Diego runs from the 11th to the 18th of November every year. It is a tradition that has been slowly eroding over the centuries, but one that likely pre-dates the year 1400 birth of the humble friar San Diego in the Spanish countryside near Seville.

Although the precise date of its origin is unknown, the Baile Del Zompopo dance comes from a pre-conquest Nicaraguan tradition. The indigenous population of Altagracia celebrated annually their harvest God, *Xolotl*, every November, marking the final harvest of Nicaragua's annual rainy season. One year the corn harvest was being annihilated by Leaf Cutter Ants and the tribe's priests prescribed a unique cure. Instead of trying to kill the ants, they decided to pay tribute to them, in the name of the harvest God Xolotl, who in turn would see to it that the ants returned to cutting leafs from forest trees, not corn stalks. The tribal priests ordained a dancing tribute, the Baile Del Zompopo, where dancers emulate the leaf cutter lines of moving vegetation, each dancer's holding a tree branch above his head. The ceremonial dance was a success, the Zompopos (Nicaraguan for Leaf Cutter Ant) stopped their crop destruction. Starvation was averted. The Leaf Cutter Dance has been danced a millennium since.

The Leaf Cutter Ant holds a special place in Mesoamerican myth, and for good reason. The Leaf Cutter (*Atta cephalotes*) has been practicing agriculture for more than 10 million years, while mankind managed to master cultivation just 10 thousand years ago. The Leaf Cutter, or Zompopo, is nature's original farmer and one of the most socially advanced insects on the planet. The sophisticated Zompopo nest can house 7 million ants, broken into 5 distinct social classes, reaching up to 6 meters in depth and 30 meters in width. A colony of Leaf Cutters can consume an equal amount of leaf matter in a 24 hour period as an adult cow.

Above surface, the amusing site of industrious worker-class Zompopos carrying relatively huge pieces of leaf matter in their jaws, traveling home to their nest on their Leaf Cutter super-highway, is reason

enough for any visitor to Central American to fall in love with them. Yet it is what happens beneath the surface that is truly amazing and the subject of admiration for indigenous Mesoamerican cultures as well as visiting European scientists.

An ancient Maya legend relates how the Leaf Cutter Ant helped the Maya civilization discover corn. It is a mythical variation of the Leaf Cutter miracle Mayans and other Mesoamerican cultures observed daily in the forest. The legend tells of how the Maya observed the Zompopo using his razor jaws to extract corn kernels from a secret subterranean chamber. The woodpecker and quetzal were instigated to help open the underground hold of Zompopo corn for the Maya. Literally taken the story signifies that thanks to the Leaf Cutter Ant, with help from the woodpecker and quetzal, the Maya discovered corn. Though the underlying moral could be that the Zompopo introduced organized farming to the Maya and the subsequent cultivation of corn made their great civilization possible.

The Maya tale is an interesting twist on the Leaf Cutter's highly organized subterranean cultivation of fungus, where underground fields are prepared for fungus to be planted, grown and fertilized using digested cut leaf matter, creating a reliable food source for the colony and planet earth's oldest example of agriculture.

Though indigenous groups gave special status to the Zompopo, it was not until the 19th century, in Nicaragua, that cold-climate outsiders finally took a closer look at this unique animal. British naturalist Thomas Belt in his landmark 1874 book "A Naturalist in Nicaragua" observed Zompopos in his garden in Chontales, Nicaragua. Belt dug up the Leaf Cutter nests in his yard to study the ants' sophisticated management of fungus cultivation used to feed their colonies. He not only noted that the fungus fields were tended to by smaller farmer-class ants, which remained almost full-time in the chambers, but also how the farmer ants carefully spaced the rotting leafs and cleaned the fungus regularly. The naturalist described social caste relationships between worker ants which brought home the leaf matter and farmer ants that tended the fungus fields. Belt also wrote of the ferocity of the soldier-class ants protecting the nest, citing how the occasional soldier that snuck into his clothing would be discovered while it was "burying his jaws into my neck, from which he would not fail to draw blood."

Thomas Belt's "A Naturalist in Nicaragua", won lofty praise from Charles Darwin, who called it "the best of all natural history journals which have ever been published". Belt's observations on the Nicaraguan Leaf Cutter Ants were precise. He observed the Zompopos' uncanny control over climatic variables, enabling them to guarantee that fungus crops would receive perfectly controlled levels of humidity. Belt noted that they, "are particular about the ventilation of the underground chambers, and have numerous holes leading up to the surface from them. These they open out or close, apparently to keep up a regular degree of temperature below. The great care they take that the pieces of leafs they carry into the nest should be neither too dry nor too damp. If a sudden shower should come on, the ants do not carry wet pieces into the burrows, but throw them down near the entrances. Should the weather clear up again, these pieces are picked up and when nearly dried taken inside... in dry and hot weather the ants do not go out at all, but bring in their leafy burdens in the cool of the night."

The Dance of the Leaf Cutter Ant is also best viewed in the cool of the night, specifically in the late afternoon of the 16th of November, when just after sunset the primal beat of drums call people from around Altagracia to the front patio of the old town church. A new temple was built behind the old structure a couple of years ago, but the crumbling walls and bat filled rafters of the old adobe church of Altagracia remain and its doors are opened just once a year for use as a staging area during the celebration of San Diego and the Zompopo Dance. It was here that I felt the true force of the Leaf Cutter Dance which reaches a paradoxical trance-like hysteria during an hour of non-stop dancing to drums on the old temple's patio.

The most famous day of the celebration, however, is November 17th. This day begins with a Mass in the late morning, served up in suffocating heat inside the new church whose tin roof justifies nostalgia for the old parish's cool ceramic tile roof. This year the priest spoke of San Diego's relevance to the island's humble farming population that crowded into the standing room only church. San Diego was born into poor family and he supported himself by weaving mats. The natives of Ometepe are not afforded the best educational opportunities and many of the older islanders are illiterate. The priest drew parallels, between the illiterate Saint from rural southern Spain and the largely indigenous Ometepinos who sat in the church pews and lined the church walls on foot, fanning themselves in vain. The Franciscan friar San Diego is believed to have miraculously healed many people during his 63 years, proof that God was on his side, regardless of his social standing or level of education.

Outside the church the crowd was growing. Young men with long cane sugar stalks flirted with girls on bicycles holding little green branches. Families, each member with a leafy branch in hand, waited outside the overflowing church for the main event. Some sat in the sculpture garden, located next to Altagracia's old and new parishes and home to a group of ancient Chorotega Indian ceremonial statues. The 1,000 year old religious symbols sit facing the Catholic churches that eventually rendered them irrelevant to the islanders. Yet when the Christian Mass finishes and the timeless Leaf Cutter Dance begins in front of the sculpture garden, one can almost sense an ironic smile forming on the heavy basalt lips of the indigenous statues. The Zompopo dance is the final thread to their lost word, and thin as it may be, it rocks the sculpture garden to a millennium-old drum rhythm, while the dance's new idol San Diego is lifted out of the church. The venerated saint's image is marched across the church patio, under the watchful gaze of the proud indigenous statues, and out onto the streets of Altagracia, surrounded by islanders in full dance, a single leafy branch held high above each head.

The procession of San Diego continues around the town, engulfing one street after another in leafy matter and lines of bobbing vegetation, imitative praise to the industrious Zompopo, punctuated by the Spanish icon floating triumphantly amongst the moving forest. Once every three blocks the statue, brought by Franciscans from Spain to Altagracia in 1613, is lowered to the ground and believers wipe sweat from their brow with a small towel and rub the old wooden statue in the same fashion that pre-conquest indigenous dancers once rubbed their blood on basalt statues. The ancient God of harvest has been pushed aside, but the ceremony performed in his honor dances on. The humble friar San Diego, who devoted his life to an eastern Mediterranean God, receives Ometepe's blessing for Xolotl with holy grace.

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