

An Interview with Moises Morales Marquez



Pilot, farmer, naturalist, explorer, Moises Morales Marquez has led many unorthodox lives. His passion for the Maya led him into the jungle, and to lifetime friendships with the Chol and Lacandon. He cleverly sidestepped positions at universities, the pressures of publishing, and the world of college degrees. Yet few scholars have made so great an impact on our understanding of Palenque. As Palenque's first guide, he played an enormous role in

increasing awareness of the ruins. Host of the first three Palenque Round Tables, patient archaeoastronomer long before that field of study was born, Don Moises has been at the forefront of new ideas for 50 years. His intellect, philosophy, and willingness to share have affected people on a global level. Moises' wisdom and advice inspired the conception of MEC's mission, and we are proud to present some of his stories and thoughts here. Carol Karasik's interview with the 80-year-old raconteur was conducted on his forested land, El Panchan.

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MM: I was born in Mexico City in 1925, but after World War II, I moved to Sonora. I was an aviator and went to Sonora to start a farm in the desert. I lived in the desert for eleven years. We had success, but thanks to the change in prices for cotton, we lost everything. And so we had to search for another place to farm. That is how I came to Palenque. When I was in the Air Force, I flew over Palenque and saw a white spot on the mountain. "What is that?" I asked my commander. He told me to look at the map. "It's the archaeological zone of Palenque, idiot!" I never thought that I would live near that white spot on the mountain. My coming to Palenque was totally fortuitous.

We were from the north and not at all like the people of Chiapas. There was always animosity between us. There were no professionals living in Palenque, only cattle ranchers from Emiliano Zapata. The place was full of ignoramuses.

Despite the unfriendly people, I decided it was a good place to stay. The village was beautiful, the nature was exceptional. And there was a possibility that with my little English I could be a guide. There were no guides, just one boy called El Tigre, who played the role of guide. He knew how to walk quickly across the grass from one temple to the other. At the time there were no trees in the ceremonial center. There was a little orange tree on the southwest corner of the Palace where the tourists could sit in the shade. But there were no ceibas or big trees by the North Group. There was nothing but

limestone, with no vegetation, except in the mountains surrounding the archaeological site. That was Palenque.

Alberto Ruz, the archaeologist who discovered the tomb in the Temple of the Inscriptions, was already feeling the glory of the discovery, and he was still working on the minor details. I met him, but he was more difficult than the archaeologists of today. He was always closed. He was not interested in providing any information, except in his speeches. And that was the beginning of the epoch we live in now. Archaeological investigation has always been the private property of the archaeologists.

Of course, who else was going to come to Palenque at that time? There were no beaches, no restaurants, and only ten hotel rooms, very cheap rooms, for tourists. The railroad came five years before I arrived, but it was far from town and not very practical. There were no highways. There were only twelve cars in the village that would take people to the archaeological site. The road was a gravel road, and very bad. There was the little airstrip, and every morning, Tabasquena Airlines, route 27, landed very, very punctually. That was our great hope. So who was coming to Palenque? Not the kind of tourists who come to count the steps. No, the ones who were coming to Palenque were strange people who were interested in the culture. That is the only thing we had to offer. We had only seven visitors per day, so it was simple to make a natural selection of the visitors. Of the seven visitors per day, two or three were really exceptional people: millionaires, politicians, presidents, prime ministers, industrialists like the Mellons, the Rockefellers. We were very proud that we were attracting the most important people of the world, because they were the ones most interested in culture. That lasted until five years ago when massive tourism began. Now we have 1500 visitors a day. Now we have everything. Now we have people who feel proud for not even going to the ruins, because they are having so much fun in town. But in the old days, the picture was different. Exceptional people came to Palenque, and I had a chance to meet them because I was the only guide and the only one able to speak English.

Fortune smiled on me when I had the opportunity to meet J. Eric Thompson, the man who wrote more about the Maya than anybody in the history of Maya studies. He came to Palenque several times, and I became a good friend of his. It was a great privilege to know people like him, to see that old capricious man dressed in old-fashioned clothes, a short fellow with fine manners, and very human. He had no limits. He was a perennial teacher, always sharing everything he found, always teaching the most humble people. That is really the most beautiful memory that I have of Eric Thompson.

The last time he was here, the BBC was making a documentary program, and they had a beautiful moment with him, because he had so much prestige then that he had no time. But he came to my house and said, "I want you to go to the ruins, because it's very important that we talk." We went to the ruins and he said, "I'm very busy, but I really have to tell you that you are very irresponsible. You keep telling the tourists horrible things, very bad information, and you disorient them because you have the capacity to convince them. So you are really irresponsible. Why do you tell them that there are more

than 1000 pyramids, 1000 structures? Why do you have to tell all these lies? When they go back home they are going to discover that you are a liar.”

I said, “Well, if you have some questions that I can answer, I will tell you something that perhaps will surprise you.” He asked me three questions. And I said, “What a pity that you have no time to listen. But I can show you some things that will answer your questions, and I promise you that I will not have to say one word and you will be completely convinced.” So he accepted the challenge, delivered some papers, organized the direction of the show, and returned. We went to the jungle. I showed him the places, showed him, without saying one word, that he was completely wrong, as many archaeologists then were wrong, and when I finished with the three subjects, we walked back to the ceremonial center. He was quiet. He checked his watch and then we went to sit under the shade of the almond tree.

“I am convinced that I have nothing to say to you about the archaeology of Palenque,” he said. “This is my last talk with you about it. What you showed me is enough, and let’s change the subject. You know my son, Donald?” I didn’t know he had a son. “Well, he’s an archaeologist, but he’s in Peruvian archaeology.” “Why not the Maya?” I asked, and he said, “I should prefer to have a mason in my house than to have an archaeologist in the Maya. I can’t tolerate the archaeologists of the Maya.”

He paused, as if he were listening to some celestial music. “Do you hear that?” he said. “It’s the *Patetique*,” and then he mentioned the “great deaf one.” If you know a little about music, you know that Beethoven was deaf when he wrote the Fifth Symphony, and if you put together these things, then of course it was the Fifth Symphony that Thompson was listening to in his mind. Then he talked about Temple IV at Tikal and compared the temple with the music, step by step, and he made me feel that the temple was a symphony or the symphony was a temple. I was in a dream.

“You admire the French,” he said. “The frogs.”

“Yes,” I said. “But they call you English the beefeaters. I don’t like beefsteaks, and I don’t eat the French, so I’m neutral.”

“Do you think the French are romantic? Well, you have to know the Russians. When you know the Russians, you discover true romanticism.” Then he asked me what I knew about Yaxchilán and the lintel that was burned. They say the lintel in Temple 39 caught fire when the ancient people were burning the limestone used in preparing maize, and that is the reason the temple fell. “But it was a cannonball,” Thompson said. “It was Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture, and the cannonball broke the lintel of Temple 39!” He was really strange.

“And when you see Palenque, when you see the Temple of the Sun from the Foliated Cross, it’s like embroidery, it’s like lace, but it’s also music. It’s Mozart,” and then he started to talk about Mozart and the Temple of the Sun converted to music. I liked Mozart, but I disagreed. I said, “I have not the same taste as you. For me it is something else.”

Sometimes I used to orchestrate a little farce, to motivate the tourists, people who knew music. One morning I was with some friends from the Smithsonian Institution at six A.M., and we were standing in the Temple of the Foliated Cross, waiting for the sun to touch the roofcomb of the Temple of the Sun. I had an assistant go inside the temple with a tape recorder, and the moment I raised my hand, he played a tape of Vivaldi’s *Concerto for Birds*. The natural birds that were singing were confused by the sounds of

those strange birds coming from the temple. They went crazy and started to sing louder, because that was their territory. You should have seen the faces of the people! They were deeply touched by the music, by the birds, by the sun rising over the mountain, and the light moving like a horizontal curtain across the swamps of Tabasco, and then, like a vertical screen dropping down, the sun touched the roofcomb and showed the beauty of the temple. That was really great.

“Perhaps if you play some other music, it would not be as good as what happened that day,” I told the gentleman. I paused, sure that I had won the round. “But when the rain starts coming from the south, as happens in Palenque, the mist will bring out the three-dimensional shape of the temple, the dead, dry stones will be shining, and by magic, the temple will come alive. At that moment you’re not going to play birds, because the birds will have their wings wet, and it will be impossible to listen because of the noise. Then you have to take from your imagination a harpsichord and play some music of Bach, and that will fit exactly.

“But in summer, the season of the long days, the rain disappears, and what we have left are incredible clouds, high cumulus at 16,000 ft., with the sun behind, and it is so spectacular that the size of the temple diminishes and the great thing is the sky, the incredible show of the clouds, and the light that strikes the dust in the atmosphere and produces the beautiful colors of the sunset. It is not for playing the *Concerto for Birds*, it is not for a harpsichord. You have to play something strong, something motivating, and what better than Telemann’s *Festival for Metals*, loud, explosive, something that will challenge the clouds.”

“All right,” he said, “That means we are not even going to talk about music.” One year later, we had the unfortunate news that he died in California.

CK: *What was your personal interest in Palenque?*

MM: Sociology. People thought I was interested in the archaeology, but I was interested in people. But why did I choose Palenque for that? Because Palenque is a magic mirror, Palenque reflects you. If you are miserable, you will see miserable Palenque. If you are a poet, you will see a poetic Palenque. Palenque is a state of mind. Palenque will always be the way that you reflect it. So you have to be proud when you see a beautiful Palenque, because that means your soul, your spirit, is really that size.

I don’t believe in archaeology. I knew the greatest archaeologists. I saw their doubts, I saw their miseries, and I didn’t like that. But I loved the people who were falling in love with Palenque, who were crying in front of the Temple of the Foliated Cross. They didn’t know why it drew their tears, but it touched them deeply. That was the Palenque that I was in love with. It was not the Palenque of the guards showing you their potency, the arrogance of the archaeologists, of the administrators. No, that was the garbage of the place. But you can always convert the garbage into beautiful things. So, Palenque is a beautiful lesson for a human being who knows how to enjoy life.

CK: *How does the new generation of scholars and archaeologists compare to the older generation?*

MM: Anthropology is a humanistic science par excellence. An archaeologist is nothing but somebody who studies a branch of anthropology. Consequently, he has to concede importance to humanity, not to business, not to collections, not to titles, not to the beautiful things that happen in the meetings he goes to in the course of the year. It's not to write an important book that produces a lot of money, it's not to have scholarships for the children; it's something else. It's a humanistic science, and it's a crime to reduce it. We have to get back on track. We have to tell the children that there are dark ages in the history of man, and we are at the end of one of them. We no longer have to suffer the archaeologists who didn't leave any poetic descriptions of such a beautiful place as Palenque. Who mentions something nice about Palenque? Che Guevara wrote a beautiful poem about the site of Palenque. A famous Mexican songwriter promised to compose a symphony for Palenque. He never did it, because he was making money selling horrible songs. No one had the quality to create a musical monument, a beautiful poem, or a beautiful book for Palenque. So Palenque is waiting. Palenque is not in a hurry. It's going to watch all those people disappear, people who were necessary to create a new class of people.

CK: *Do you think that scientists, humanistic scientists, can understand the ancient Maya?*

MM: Of course not. How can you understand Maya culture if you never lived with mosquitoes every day, if you never lived in the swamp as they did, if you never suffered the sicknesses they had, if you never saw what they saw—all the animals and birds that were so different from what writers on the subject see today. Man is a product of his context. He is conditioned by his senses, his eyes. Tropical people are the product of their exotic context, the exotic fauna, and the inconveniences of the extreme life. Here everything lives! You have to be a person who looks around. An archaeologist first has to go and live in the environment, to appreciate what is a monkey, a butterfly, a tick, a fallen tree. Then he will start to understand the Maya. If he never does that, he will never understand. He can read many books, but he will never learn through the heads of the others. He has to think about the conditions of the Maya people in the seventh century, go to a place that still has those conditions, and live with the scars and discomforts that the Maya had at that time. Once you experience that kind of life then you can try to understand the lives of the manipulators and the lives of the oppressed ones. Then you can try to understand life in the palace and life in the huts in the Tulija Valley. There was an elite and the servants who were part of the elite, like the writers, the scribes, the shamans, the thinkers, the astronomers, people whom the noble class found convenient to support, because they were tools to use to wash the brain of the profane, tools to maintain political power.

Maya culture was one of the most beautiful manipulations in history. They didn't do exceptional things. Maya architecture is not that great. Maya buildings are based on gravity, which is a primitive way to construct. They did it very well, but when I listen to people talking very highly, I know it is not like that. They were exceptional at mathematics and the calendar. But if you give me an Indian who knows nothing of nothing, in one day over four months I will make a person who will understand the year

and the seasons and the cycles of the moon across in the sky. It's a lie that all that is difficult. What you have to have is good wits in your head.

CK: And now we have thousands of people who believe the Maya possessed profound secrets about the universe.

MM: People will buy anything. The problem is that because of the lack of knowledge it was easy to idealize the Maya. When archaeologists began to learn more, through better techniques, better instruments, and better ways of analyzing the findings, they realized they had to be idiots to idealize the Maya. The Maya were not the first inventors of the zero, for example. Thompson, Morley, all of them said the same thing. But all of them were wrong, and all of them were part of the same mistake. Now you have to take the hand of your child and say, "I'm sorry about what we did, we are asking you to be honest when we were dishonest. Please accept my mistakes and let me go with you and help you to discover what was. I will help you to self-educate yourself and then you will put me on the proper level." That way we will have a stronger education. Never with the pontification of the one who made a mistake, but earned a good salary and achieved prestige and now wants to have that for eternity. If it was not enough, he wants to use his children to continue his grandiosity. That is the perfidy of most of the scholars.

CK: Of all the people who came to Palenque, who was the person most interesting to you?

MM: What a difference in subjects. My favorite story is about the sister of someone who was considered a traitor to his people, King Leopold of Belgium. He was a collaborator of the Nazis. Little by little, he is recovering his prestige; now it's said he was doing it to save his people from the destruction that would be almost total for such a small country. Leopold had a sister called Maria Joseph, and Maria Joseph was married to the last king of Italy, Victor Emanuel. Mussolini was already in power and the king was just a decoration. The king came to Palenque. He was a nothing with a crown. And he was worth nothing. He was not a strong character, he was not a good artist. He was just a puppet. He was invited by some of the rich to come and invest in a big hotel in Palenque. Because he went back to Europe with a good impression of Palenque, his wife decided she would come one day. After Victor Emanuel died, she accepted the invitation of her son-in-law, an Argentinian, to visit Palenque. That's when I met Maria Joseph. She had special permission to be at the ruins after they closed, because she wanted to make a quiet, humble visit. I was with a group of French when I saw the lady walking behind the Argentinian. He was looking for me. "I'm Luis," he said. "I'm from Argentina, married to one of the daughters of that lady, who is the last queen of Italy. We would like you to help us a little, because she wants to enjoy the ruins in quiet." So I went with them.

That night I was having dinner with a group of friends at the Hotel Palenque, and we decided to go out to the ruins to watch the moment when Mars reached the closest distance to our planet in 300 years. We were very excited to go to a place where no doubt the Maya had observed the same thing. We would repeat that moment, sitting on the grass, thinking and watching, among the lonely monuments.

The lady was having dinner at the same restaurant, and I went to say hello. She asked me why my pals were getting together, and I told her we were going to the ruins.

“May I go with you?” she asked, and I said, “Oh, it will be very uncomfortable to be leaning in the grass. We’ll just see the same reddish light. That won’t change at all. But we have the chance to be in a place where perhaps somebody did the same thing a thousand years ago.”

She said, “I would appreciate very much if you can convince your friends to take me. I will not create any problem.” Then she turned to Luis and told him, “I don’t know how you are going to manage, but I’m not going to have dinner. I’m going with that group of people to lie down in the grass to view the approach of Mars.”

So we went to the ruins to watch the red star. We were checking the chronometer, sitting and watching, full of warm emotions, nothing to be published, nothing to be announcing. And the moment that Mars was the closest to this planet, our dreams were flying toward him as we sat together, quietly watching on the dark grass in front of the Palace.

The next day the queen was taking a plane from Villahermosa. I also had to go to Villahermosa, to speak to a convention of 400 dentists from all over the world, and the queen said, “We’ll be very happy to have you in our car.” I accepted her offer, but told her that I was on duty at the ruins and if I wasn’t back home by a certain time, then she must leave without me. I went to the ruins and finished one hour late. I said to myself, “Well, it would have been nice to go to Villahermosa with the queen, but no way.” I went back to the house and saw the car parked outside. It was unbelievable. “Sorry, but we had to wait for you,” they said.

We drove as fast as we could, only to see the tail of the plane leaving. There were no rooms available, because of the convention. I searched for a place and finally found one little room in a very, very cheap hotel. That was our only chance, because the manager was my friend. And the lady agreed to stay in that little piggy place. They went to have something to eat and I went to check on my group. The tourist director saw me and said, “Do you know if the queen of Italy is in Palenque? She doesn’t want any protection, but the governor here has to be checking to see if everything is going well.” I told him she was in the hotel, room 26, in Villahermosa. “Oh, but we have a space at the Olmeca,” he said. That was the very finest hotel. “And we had to put a family in the beauty parlor to make room for her.” We went to see the queen, who was eating fish in a little restaurant, and the tourist director told her about the room. She said, “I’m sorry, I cannot defraud the beautiful person who gave me a place. I’ll stay there.” Now that’s class.

CK: We ask this question of everyone. Where do you think Kan Balam is buried?

MM: I don’t think the exploration of the Temple of the Cross is finished. In the nineteenth century, Count Waldeck made a drawing that showed a waterfall coming down from the northwest corner of the Temple of the Cross. Everyone laughed at the drawing, because the vegetation looked like Martian vegetation. Of course, he was not used to painting plants like that. But the waterfall, that was too much. We said that the mosquitoes had produced his insanity. But when Christopher Powell was working with my son Alfonso Morales on the Proyecto de las Cruces, he found that there was really water in that corner at that time. For sure, that was the place. It faced the little plaza that was constructed on the south side of the Palace. The area was nothing but water, and it

had to be filled in with rocks to create the plaza. And the terraced hills had to be made level before the temples of the Cross Group could be built. If you analyze it, leveling the terraces was more work than building the temples. Kirk French, who is studying the water systems at Palenque, talks about that.

Everything in the Temple of the Cross is associated with Kan Balam. The picture of the important person is Kan Balam. Everything is Kan Balam, so there's no doubt. First I thought his tomb was on the southern façade, next to the small tombs by the staircase, but Alfonso dug a hole in the place that I suspected was the right place, and he found nothing. Then they discovered building XVI, just behind the temple. Building XVI has all the characteristics of a royal house. The Palace is the royal house of Pakal, and for sure XVI is the royal house of Kan Balam. There are some glyphs that prove that. Arnaldo González, the head archaeologist with INAH [National Institute of Art and History], excavated there, and he told me that they found some construction. But they ran out of time and money and had to cover it up. Maybe when he has money, then he'll discover it. I think it's some place there. The exploration certainly isn't finished.

CK: *Has anyone excavated under the temples of the Cross Group?*

MM: This is a funny story. Arnaldo brought some archaeologists to the site—a gang of *machos* and two young women—and he asked them which temples they wanted to explore. One fellow, fortunately I forgot his name, said he wanted the Temple of the Sun. He wanted to dig right in front of the altar. There is always something in front of the altar. So each man chose one of the good possibilities. Fanny López and the other woman were very humble, and the men made a cruel joke. “Fanny, do you want the Temple of the Skull? You can find your glory there.” And, surprise, she said yes. “Okay, there's no money to waste,” Arnaldo told her. “If you're going to dig there you have to have a strong reason.” But it was just the leftover. She started digging. For what? There were no signs on the surface. Then, on the first floor, towards the east, she said, “Here! I want to dig here.” Arnaldo said, “But what are you going to do there?” Fanny said, “Just a test pit. It will cost you nothing, so give me the authorization.” Finally they gave her the authorization. She was digging very professionally, and in the cubit she found somebody buried with a pot, which surely contained food for the trip to the other world. It was a simple burial with no jewelry, no nothing. It was an easy place to bury somebody when you are dying. The pot was translucent, because of the calcification, and it was beautiful to see, the skeleton holding his pot that looked like a crystal.

Meanwhile, the *macho* was digging, sure that he would find the crypt in the Temple of the Sun. He did discover the greatest object that was found that year—the rock that formed the base of the pyramid. It was a pointed rock. You can see it on the north side of the temple. So he found the rock, and he was convinced that there was nothing but the rock. Consequently he found the biggest object of the season. It was a *macho* rock.

Fanny, motivated by the discovery of the first burial, asked for permission to dig behind the central door of Temple XIII. Arnaldo told her, “You'll drive yourself crazy trying to find something by accident.” She started to dig and found the roof of the building underneath. Then she said, “I want to go deeper.” Arnaldo said, “Listen Fanny, that's stupid. You think that you're going to find something, but everybody's sure that

you'll find nothing." She said, "But I want to do it, and it will cost nothing, we're already halfway. I want to go to the floor of that inside temple." She found the floor and she found the tomb. There were big pieces of jade, square pieces of jade—they're in the museum —and the most beautiful piece found in Palenque, a jaguar head with an open mouth that framed the face of the ruler. It was the tomb of the Red Queen, and it was a great find.

The only thing that the men found was a big pile of rocks, the pointed rock at the base of the Temple of the Sun and the big boulder under the Temple of the Cross. There was nothing else.