

MESOAMERICA: THE MAYAN CIVILIZATION

EMMANUEL ODOOM

The Mayans by 1500 BCE had settled in villages and had developed an agricultural activity that was mainly based on the cultivation of crops such as beans, maize (corn), and squash. Cassava cultivation was around 600 CE. A journal of archaeological science shows that maize was a complement to beans, cassava (manioc), and squash that were being used already by the Mayans. These indigenous people started to build ceremonial centres and as at 200 CE, they had developed into cities which contained several architectural monuments like temples, pyramids, palaces and ball courts. These complexities are said to have been informed or influenced by the Olmec civilization. Their buildings were made of limestones that were cut using cherts. Though they practised the normal agricultural activities like the slash and burn they still managed to adapt and use advanced systems like irrigations and terracing. They produced papers which were used for making books and these books are called the Codices. Hieroglyphic system of writing with sophisticated calendrical and astronomic systems. The Mayan culture clearly revealed the influence of the earlier Olmec civilization.

The emergence of the Mayans began around 250 CE, and that is classified by archaeologist as the Classic Period of the Mayan culture which lasted until about 900 CE. At its peak, the Mayan civilization consisted of more than 45 cities with

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population up to 50000 in each of the cities. These cities flourished throughout much of Central America. The most developed or principal cities included Tikal, Copan, Bonampak, and Palenque. The civilization “reached an intellectual and artistic height which is not comparable to present times” as according to Coe. The overall population of the Maya was about 2million.

TIKAL, COPAN, PALENQUE

Each of the numerous cities of the Mayan Civilization had unique features.

Tikal for example is known for its building of pyramids. The rulers or kings of Tikal were able to construct a twin pyramid complex after every 20-years (K’atun). Each of the pyramids had a flat top, built adjacent to each other and contained staircases on both sides. Between these pyramids was a plaza that had structures laid out to the north and south.

The city of Copan, modern-day Honduras is known for its “Temple of the Hieroglyphic Stairway”. The longest Maya inscriptions are known to have existed which tells the history of the ruler of the city.

Palenque is also known for its soft limestone sculptures and burial of “Pakal” (a ruler of Palenque). The burial was deep inside a pyramid, accompanied by six human sacrifices in a jade filled tomb. According to David Stuart, the tomb is “the American equivalent, if there is one, to King Tut’s tomb”.

THE FALL THE MAYA

It is generally believed that the Mayan civilization vanished but that is not the case

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though it is very clear that cities like Copan, Tikal and Palenque were abandoned. Other suggestions of the disappearance of Maya include drought, deforestation, wars and climate change. But it is important also to note that a city like Chichen Itza still existed and it had the largest ball courts which are even not comparable to that of present-day NBA. It also had council houses for meetings and other activities.

As espoused earlier, there was a change in the Mayan world prior to the arrival of the Spanish and the diseases they brought decimated the Maya. The Spaniards forced the Maya to convert to Christianity. Despite the destructions they faced, still Maya people live on.

MAYA MYTHOLOGY

The Creation Story.

The creation story of the Maya and the Twin Heroes (Hunaphu and Xbalanque) can be found in the Popol Vuh which preserved by the royal lineages that had ruled the highlands of Guatemala. The book was preserved during the influx of the Spaniards on the Mayan lands. The Books Popol Vuh means “Book of the Community.” In the creation story, the Creator, Hearts of the Sky and Six other deities which included the feathered serpent, wanted to create humans with hearts and brains who could be the “keepers of the days” but they failed on their first attempt. Finally, on other occasions, these deities created humans out of yellow and white corn who could talk. In other epic narrations, the Death Lord (Mayan god of the underworld) of the Underworld (Xibalba, the subterranean

world of nine levels where the Maya ancestors and the “death lord” dwell.) summoned the Hero Twins to play significant or momentous ball game where the twins defeated their opponents. The twin heroes rose into the heavens and became the Sun and the Moon. Through their actions, the heroes prepared the way for plantation of Corn, for humans to live on Earth the fourth creation of the Maya.

MAYA HUMAN SACRIFICE

Many other glyphs apart from the Popol Vuh have been found and deciphered. Yaxchilan, connect the notion of beheading to that of “awakening” or creation. Maya human sacrifices often represented or signified the starts of a new period, thus the rise of a new emperor or the beginning of a new calendar cycle. The Mayan sacrifices also are connected to the idea of rebirth and creation. They offered sacrifices as a means of proving to their deities that they are worthy of a new beginning and their mercies.

The ritual or sacrifice most often took place on top of the pyramid temple or temples. The victims were then stripped naked but a headdress and are painted blue. It is believed that the blue colour was the symbol of a sacrifice.

The methods of sacrifice rested on who was being offered to the deities and the reason for which the sacrifice was to be carried out. For instance, prisoners of wars were most often disemboweled. On other occasions, if it is connected to the ball game, the victim was either pushed down the temple’s staircases or

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decapitated. Also, near the ball court was a panel that shows persons being sacrificed. This may depict a ball-player from either the winning or the losing team was being sacrificed for the sake of the game.

The methods of sacrifice mostly depended on who was being offered to the gods and for what reason. Prisoners of war, for example, were most often disemboweled. But if the sacrifice was connected to the ball game, the victim was either pushed down the temple's steps or decapitated. Also, the killing included heart extraction which is believed to be the highest religious expression and a great offering to the gods.

MAYAN WRITING SYSTEMS AND ASTRONOMY

For every civilization, one important aspect of it is how things, events, or activities were recorded for the purpose of future reference. It is noted by some scholars like Sharer that record keeping among the Maya was very essential to the people. By taking records of the rainy and dry season, they were able to determine the best times to plant and harvest their crops. Also, by recording the movements of the sky deities like the sun, moon, planets and stars, accurate calendars were designed for the purpose of prediction.

The hieroglyphic writing system of the Maya was a sophisticated combination of pictographs that represented objects and ideograms expressing more abstracts like ideas or actions. Maya writings could be found on stone carvings, on woods, pottery and cloth artefacts and in codices. In the Mayan societies, the writing system was

believed to have been invented by the god Itzamna and in the sacred text, the Popol Vuh, the Monkey scribes – the god's Hun Batz and Hun Chuen (brothers of the Hero Twins) are the patrons of writing and the arts in general. These gods are mostly represented on Mayan pottery sat together with pen or brush in hand, writing in a codex (an ancient book made of stacked, handwritten pages). Writing in the Maya society was seen sacred because it was limited to only the royals and the priests but even for that reason, the people could recognize important symbols of the writings.

THE MAYA CALENDAR

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The Maya were great astronomers who developed several calendars based on different cycles including those of the sun, moon and the planet Venus. The most popular of the Mayan calendars are the Haab, the Tzolkin, the Calendar Round and the Long count. These calendars served several purposes both in practical and ceremonial. They recorded important events using the calendar dates written in numbers and hieroglyphs.

The Maya sacred calendar is called Tzolk'in in [Yucatec Mayan](#) and Chol Q'ij in [K'iche' Mayan](#). This calendar is not divided into months. Instead, it is made from a succession of 20-day glyphs in combination with the numbers 1 to 13 and produces 260 unique days. Multiplying 20 x 13 equals 260 days. This image illustrates how the numbers 1 to 13, cycle through the 20 glyphs to form dates in the Tzolkin calendar. Any such combination, such as 1 Imix', repeats only after 260 days have passed. The length of the

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Tzolkin matches nine cycles of the Moon and the gestational period of humans. The Tzolkin is also related to the movements of the [zenith](#) Sun and the growing cycle of corn.

The Haab cycle is 365 days and approximates the [solar year](#). The Haab is a nineteen-month calendar. The Haab is composed of 18 months made of 20 days, and one month, made of 5 days. This 5-day month is called "Wayeb." Thus, $18 \times 20 + 5 = 365$ days. This image shows the hieroglyphs corresponding to the nineteen months of the Haab calendar. The Maya represented some of these months using more than one glyph. These glyphs are referred to as "variants." Variants of the same glyph are framed in a turquoise background.

(<https://maya.nmai.si.edu/calendar>).

References

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