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Mayan Worldviews Reflected in Body Modifications

*After that, they put it in words: the making, the modeling of our first mother-father, with yellow corn, white corn alone for the flesh, food, alone for the human legs and arms, for our first fathers, the four human works. It was staples alone that made up their flesh.* Popul Vuh

With over three thousand years of archaeological history, the incredible feats and traditions of the Mayan people have astonished the world since the Spaniards encountered them in the early 16th century. Unlike the nearby Aztec-Mexica people who speak Nahuatl, the Mayans do not have a single language. Instead, there are almost thirty distinct languages spread over the varied tribes that continue to occupy the Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, and Belize. The Spaniards found it difficult to conquer the Maya because there was not a single tribe to conquer, not a single mindset to rewrite. The widespread and diverse Mayans are instead bonded by a special worldview.

To understand this worldview is not easy. Our knowledge of the ancient Maya remains a puzzle with many missing pieces. The pieces we do have, codices that survived the wrath of Spanish conquistadores, a variety of glyphs that decorate urban and religious centers, and oral knowledge allow us to speculate the way the world worked according to the Maya. “Cosmological beliefs pervaded all aspects of life and integrated every individual into a unitary worldview and ethos” (Foster 129) In every aspect of their life, Mayans recognized that they were a mere coexistent of their surroundings. The spirit that drives all life exists and permeates everything. The Mayan counsel book *Popol Vuh* and the equally informative *Chilam Bilam* are filled with literature that insists that, “It is not that the stones are mute: they are only keeping silent” (Leon-Portilla & Shorris 606)

Time for the Mayans is a road in five directions. There are the four cardinal directions that dictate the four cosmological quadrants and then there is center, divided into the Upperworld, Middleworld, and Underworld. The sun rose in the east, arising from the Underworld, and returned when it set itself in the west. It is here in the Middleworld that humans coexist with the flora and fauna. Mountain terrains, rivers, caves, cenotes, jaguars, birds, possums, bougainvillea, ceiba and copal trees, and most importantly, corn, arose from the Underworld and aimed for the sun toward the Upperworld. It is here in the Middleworld, where humans find themselves. A culture of astounding intelligence, the Mayans sought to harvest their minds as they harvested the maize, both meant survival and sustenance.

The Mediator, The Thinker

Of Everything, Whatever exists:

Heaven, Earth

Lake, And Sea.

Edmunson 3-8

In the creation of the human race, it is this ability to think, ponder, and communicate that separates us from other beings. According to the creation stories found in the Popol Vuh, when the gods created animals they said: “It is impossible for them to say our names, the names of us, their Creators and Makers.” (Recinos from Leon Portilla & Shorris 405) The creators tried again and made “Manikins”, men made from wood. Yet again they failed.

But there was nothing in their hearts and nothing in their minds, no memory of their mason and builder. They just went and walked wherever they wanted. Now they did not remember the Heart of Sky.

Tedlock, from Leon Portilla & Shorris 408

When the advent of humans occurs, the gods formed the humans out of corn. Animals brought the food. Water became the blood. The Makers modeled them and when they came to, the gods were pleased.

Thoughts came into existence and they gazed; their vision came all at once. Perfectly they saw, perfectly they knew everything under the sky, whenever they looked. The moment they turned around and looked around in the sky, on the earth, everything was seen without obstruction. They didn’t have to walk around before they could see what was under the sky; they just stayed where they were. As they looked, their knowledge became intense. Their sight passed through trees, through rocks, through lakes, through seas, through mountains, through plains.

Tedlock, from Leon Portilla & Shorris 439

Taking on this mindset allows us to understand how the Mayans perceived their bodies and minds. Their skin and bones were not theirs but of the Earth. The same wind that ran through their jungle is the same that passed through their hearts and created the immaterial essences of speech, song, and breath. The Mayans shed ceremonial blood because the plants shed sap and the clouds shed rain, it was simply their job to give back what they were given. Just as they used the surface of stone to inscribe their ways of knowing and to construct their magnificent pyramids, they too modified the given stuff of flesh as a cultural surface that communicated their relationship with the universe. Mayan body modifications have proven to be just as awe-inspiring as their architectural feats. Their concepts of beauty are unique and though they may shock many, these modifications echo the reverence they had for the cosmic they recognized within themselves and in the stars. Ancient Mayans practiced cranial deformation, induced strabismus, pierced and tattooed themselves to correspond with their epistemology. By exploring Mayan acts of body modification we take on their worldview and furthermore, we are prompted to reflect upon the similarities and differences of our worldviews today.

Skull Deformation

In *Primeros Memoriales* of the Nahuatl who share similar worldviews as the Maya, Yohuallana or “Night Drinker” sings to Xipe Totec, a fertility god,:

This means, let me go, let me perish, I who am Yoatzin, that is, the green maize stalk, my heart is like a jade.

Sullivan, from Leon-Portilla & Shorris 210

In the *Popol Vuh,* it is the skull that is reborn as the maize god (Foster 211). The staple crop of the Mayans is and was the maize, it was vital and provided them nourishment. In efforts to emulate this sustaining crop, they took measures to deform the skull. Diego de Landa, the Spanish bishop of the Yucatan is known as the “Black Legend”. His recordings provide insight to the Pre-Colombian Mayan ways, but he also played a great role in destroying their native literature and converting them to Catholicism. Nonetheless he is credited for much of what we know about the old Maya. In his observation journals, he writes that infants were subject to skull shaping within the first four to seven days of their life while the skull was still malleable. It was seen as a ritual given to them by gods.

They bound these and left the child there suffering until after a few days the head was flattened and shaped in the way they all had them. The pain and danger was so great for the children that some almost died, and the present writer saw the head of one burst open behind the ears; the boards must do this to many. (Landa from Rush 112-113)

Approximately 90 percent of ancient Mayans artificially shaped their heads, it set them apart from other people. “This custom, given to our ancestors by the gods, gives us a noble air, and our heads are thus better adapted to carry loads.” (Torquemada from Landa 88) The result of this cranial deformation made the Mayan profile look very similar to an ear of maize, emphasizing their relationship to the crop as their coexistent in Middle Earth. Thus they were maize-human hybrids that rose from the Underworld, rose toward the Upperworld, and returned once again to the greater energy of the universe. The suffering related with cranial deformation connected infants at an early age to the sensation of feeling, suffering, and surviving.

Marcelo Tuz May is a Maya descendant now residing in Cobá. Although he admits that his theory has not been credited by any archeologist, his understanding is that cranial deformation was not solely for aesthetic purposes but also allowed the Maya to see “más allá, al tercer dimension” further, into a third dimension. Perhaps this “third dimension” that Tuz May speaks of allowed the Mayans to see there interconnectedness with the cosmos, to see the sacred as one with the science, a trait that separates us from the indigenous of the past.

Strabismus (Cross-Eyes)

Marcelo Tuz May further speculates that strabismus, the purposeful crossing of eyes, also allowed the Maya to see into this third dimension. Mayan language reflects the interrelationships between the different spheres of the Mayan universe. For example, the mayan word for “eye” is “ich”, similar to the Nahuatl word for “ich”. “Ix” and “ich” are found as prefixes to “ix machun” and “ix maxul” which both convey the meaning of “star” as without end, forever, continuously, without interruption (Nuttall 36). Diego de Landa recorded many “squinty-eyed” people in his observations. In order to achieve this effect women attached a small bead in the center of their eyes, the pupils were thus conditioned to focus inward.

They considered being cross-eyed as a mark of beauty; their mothers brought this about intentionally by hanging on their hair from their childhood a little plaster of pitch, which hung down between their eye-brows, attracting their eyes (Landa, Herrera 88).

As the skulls were formed to imitate the corn, eyes were seen as seeds to be harvested. According to Landa, a person with cross-eyes meant that they were a devotee of the sun and/or marked to be a future priest. This lends support to Marcelo Tuz May’s informal theory that strabismus helped with seeing into another dimension.

Raise your head high,

do not mistake,

instruct well with your eyes

to gather the prize.

The Watcher, Leon-Portilla & Shorris 551

Priests or distinguished elders took on the role of relaying messages of the UpperWorld or Underworld to the MiddleWorld. Mayan practice of strabismus is also evident in the depictions of their gods. Visual representations of Kin “Sun-Day Time” and Kinich Ahau “Lord Solar Eye” depict him with large, obviously crossed eyes. Chaac, a deity of the cornfields and the manifestation of water forms is represented with a “serpentine eye, with a pupil in the form of a spiral” (Schmidt 243). Along with the fact that strabismus is still practiced today by some Mayans, we can assert that Mayans of old and present day understand their substance as the same substance that creates the stars and constantly renews.

Ear and Nose Spools

In codices, glyphs, and excavations we find evidence of ear and nose spools made of jade, obsidian, and other precious stones indigenous to the Yucatan, Guatemala, and Belize. Ik, the anthropomorphic deity of wind, correlates with the breath that enters and exits the body to feed the heart. Ik was fed by sweet speech and scent. Mayans recognized that in their creation what made them unique is their ability to communicate their knowledge and to worship their creators. Their songs and incantations were carried by the wind and its sound echoed through their city centers and jungles.

It had cost them suffering to become great knowers, through it all they became flautists, singers, and writers, carvers. They did everything well. They simply knew it when they were born, they simply had genius.

Popol Vuh from Leon-Portilla & Shorris 418

This “genius” caused them suffering but also produced beauty. The beauty of speech and smell entered through the air portals of the body. Mayans adorned the entrances of these portals with four-petaled flowers made of jade and other precious stones. It was adornment with the purpose of paying homage to the given gift of communicating their consciousness of existence.

Only fragrant is the passing breeze

And its sweet perfumed smell.

Its center comes

To the middle of the sky,

Just lighting the earth

With its glow.

Over everything there is happiness

For all good men. *Flower Song (Kay Nicte)*

“Flowery speech” entered through the ears, and elongating the lobes with ear spools is thought to have helped the ears hear the sounds better. This reverence for their genius carried on air is also reflected in the language. In Mayan, “l’ol” means vibration, flower, and consciousness. Glyphs show the deities with air symbols flowing out of the “mouth” of the ear spools. Today “flor y canto”, or flower and song are often used to describe the spoken and sung poetry. Flowers and trees grew upward toward the sun, the Upper World, a floral mountain that served both as an abode for gods and ancestors and as a means of ascent into the paradise-like realm of the sun (Taube 1) Mayans also saw relation between the flowers, the soul, and happiness. In Cakchiquel, for example, to be happy and content was literally said, “to have a flowering heart”. Because the Maya believed that their soul lived on through their surroundings into other lives, they adorned the deceased with these ornaments as well.

Dental modification

Speech and song meant breath and voice, an immaterial essence of body. Thus placing the jade at the entrance of the mouth was also another homage to Ik.

Maya rulers are often shown with a bead levitating in the air before their nose; this is their precious royal breath, symbol of life. Jade denotes life, what is green and living, and it conferred immortality on those who possessed it. Schmidt 255

Excavations of Mayan burial sites reveal that they altered their teeth, filing them to points and also encrusting them with the precious jade and other valuable stones. According to Diego de Landa, tooth filing from a young age was a ritual also conducted by women. “They had a custom of filing their teeth leaving them like the teeth of a saw, and this they considered elegant.” (Herrera 125) In Cuello, an early Maya site in Belize, a female skull shows inlays of jade as well as skull deformation. (Saul and Saul in Rush 112) When a Mayan filed their teeth, and were looked at straight on these teeth imitated the “T” shape of the hieroglyph for “Ik” and wind. This also caused speech patterns that accentuated the force of air being expelled from the mouth and helps with pronouncing the forceful “ix” sound of the Mayan language. Jade and other precious stones that represented wealth were seen as the “breath” of gods. Today with contemporary Mayans, the adornment of teeth is still practiced. Since jade is no longer of such value to the Mayans today, they instead encapsulate their front teeth with silver and gold. “Este es belleza”, this is for beauty, says Marcelo Tuz May, to represent wealth, a social status. Everyone that does deeds that benefit the Mayan culture emulate Chaac (he gives rain that benefits the crop) who is represented with filed “Ik” teeth as well.

Tattoos

Ancient Mayans tattooed for many of the same reasons we do today. While many of us tattoo as signs of personal transformation and adornment, Mayans tattooed to signify social transformation, to intimidate their enemies, and also as a means of punishing and marking wrong doers. To denote social transformation, for example, men were hardly tattooed until after marriage.

Young men do not tattoo except to a slight degree until marriage. Women were tattooed from the waist up except breasts and with more delicate and elegant designs than the men. (Landa)

They adorned themselves with designs found on glyphs and their titles, conveying their social status. Ancient chroniclers speak of a noble man who wrote “certain letters on the flat part of his left arm of great importance so that he could be esteemed.” (Gordon 3) On the other hand, as a means of punishment Mayans tattooed the faces of noble class criminals. In Uxmal located in the Yucatan state of Mexico, a head found in the jaws of a serpent at the bottom of the Casa del Adivino displays tattoos “on both sides from the beard to the forehead” (Herrera 124), this was seen as a great disgrace. Tattoos were also used to intimidate their enemies and prove their fearlessness.

The more they do this, the more brave and valiant are they considered, as tattooing is accompanied by great suffering, and is done in this way. Those who do the work first paint the part which they wish with color and afterwards they delicately cut in the paintings, and so with the blood and coloring matter the marks remained in the body. This work is done a little at a time on account of the extreme pain. (Landa, from Foster 32)

The adrenaline that comes with tolerating great pain certainly affects the mind of one being tattooed and overcoming the infections or allergies that may follow this primitive type of tattooing equips individuals with a sense of survival and pride. Pain and sicknesses that ensued were seen as connections to the spirits. Mayans tattooed their skin as a means of marking the boundary between the internal and external physical world.

Conclusion

Despite the diversity of Mayan language and tribal groups, their worldview as a coexistent of their surroundings in Middle World is what ultimately ties them together and defines them as “Maya”. About seven million Mayan people live today in Mexico and Central America. Many Mayans still live deep in the jungle holding on to their way of life that allows the sacred to permeate through every aspect of their daily lives. Others are engrossed in the industry and mindset of today, focused on capital and self-advancement. Of course there are those in between these two extremes that blend the old ways of knowing with the demands of their survival today. Maya writers continue to create works in several Mayan tongues, proving that many of the languages survive and evolve, as does its culture.

The Mayans believed in renewal, where there is death there is birth. Looking back at the way Mayan individuals reflected and respected their surroundings allows us to contemplate how we individually project our world. Recognizing that we are human beings under everything, with no immediate control over the cosmos, we can begin to contemplate what it is we project of our community and ourselves. Despite the fact that we as human beings are indeed capable of harnessing our intelligence for the betterment of the world, we must not let it get the best of us. We must attempt to recognize these differences in knowing, find the similarities among indigenous cultures and our culture today to build bridges. By communicating and cultivating all worldviews we begin to find that we are more alike than different. The “manikins” were a failure in the eyes of the Mayan gods because they were unable to think, “meaning they were without the human attribute of language”. (Leon-Portilla and Shorris 397) They could not communicate and were thus destroyed. Their grinding stones rose up against them and tore their faces; the animals ate their remains before the flood came. By reflecting on the ways of indigenous cultures we can hope to create a balance to fight against the thoughtless advance of technology. When dust has settled we are of the same essence as the stars. By honoring the beautiful forms of nature and life that surround us we may feed our flowering souls and teach future generations to do the same.

I am a man of the earth and a man of the world,

but I tell my brothers:

I am the spirit of the thunderbolt, lightning spirit,

everything that I say happens;

I am going to speak to my spirit.

What I say, he says,

what he says, I also say;

we speak as one,

we have the same sentiments.

I conceal myself in cotton

and he conceals himself in mist.

A Song for His Wizard.

Cancion de Chontal. (Leon-Portilla & Shorris 562)

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