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Guatemalan Activists and International Scholars Find New Mayan Movie Racist, Revisionist, Dangerous to Indigenous

by Mike Leffert

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Indigenous leaders in Guatemala have appealed to the government to censor a film they consider racist and offensive to Mayan descendents, their culture, and their history. The film is *Apocalypto*, directed by US actor and director Mel Gibson. Presidential commissioner against discrimination Ricardo Cajas told reporters on Jan. 8 of his intention to request that the Ministry of Culture condemn this film that "resumes racial and offensive persecution" against the country's Mayan majority. It has not yet been shown publicly in this nation where 60% of the population has some indigenous heritage.

The movie is set around the time of the conquest and is filled, say scholars, with anachronistic and historic inaccuracies, but these are not the focus of Cajas' objections. He said the film is intended to "present a society filled with deprecations and self-destructiveness" without taking notice of the scientific advances of the ancient Mayas. "It presents the Spanish conquest as the only solution and justifies the barbarities committed during the conquest up until today, which seems to us highly racist because it induces thinking that society internalizes and creates a rationale for the belief that we are a society without scientific abilities."

As an example of what he objects to in the film, Cajas recalled a scene in which the protagonist is saved from having his heart cut out atop a pyramid by the serendipitous occurrence of a solar eclipse. "How could that be possible?" he asked. "The Mayans had very precise astronomical studies and knew when eclipses would occur." Cajas said he believed *Apocalypto* had set back understanding of the Mayan people by 50 years, comparing its impact to the stereotypical and negative way that Native Americans were depicted in US movies, the Westerns of the 1950s.

Andres Cholotio of the Consejo Nacional de Educacion Maya (CNEM) also found the movie offensive. "The Mayans have made contributions to science and to culture, and at no time were they savages and ignoramuses," he said, adding that Guatemalans ought to reject it. Anabella Giracca, director of Edumaya at the Universidad Rafael Landivar in Guatemala, had not seen it but objected to stereotypes drawn from Mayan history.

General agreement on the ahistoricity aside, not every cultural worker in Guatemala is down on the movie. Film critic and journalist Leon Aguilera insisted, "The film is plagued with anachronisms and historicocultural errors, but at the end of the day, it is only an entertainment film and must be seen as such. The film is rich in production, costuming, and makeup, as well as the beauty of the actors," he said. Aguilera's take was that, as other critics have pointed out, the film harkens to the often-quoted dictum of Will Durant that "civilizations fail when they begin to rot from the inside." As such, he said, he found similarities in the film with policies of President George W. Bush's administration in Iraq.

Scholarly critique

Outside the Mayan world of today, international Mayan scholars have expressed opinions about Gibson's cinematic effort. Anthropologist Liza Grandia, a fluent Q'eqchi speaker, has worked with contemporary Mayans since 1993. She found the movie "deeply racist." She wrote, "I fear the repercussions Apocalyppto will have on contemporary Maya people who continue to struggle for survival under discriminatory governments that consider them stupid, backward, and uncivilized for wanting to maintain their customs and language. Gibson's slanderous film reinforces the same stereotypes that have facilitated the genocide of Maya peoples and the plunder of their lands starting with the Spanish invasion of 1492 and continuing through the Guatemalan civil war to the present."

Grandia found four racist messages the film sends:

1. Native Americans are all interchangeable. She pointed out that Gibson had employed actors who do not look or sound Maya and who butchered the Yucatec dialect used throughout the film. The hero was played by Cree actor Rudy Youngblood. She noted that Gibson had boasted how little he had to pay his actors, and she asked, "If someone exploited local labor to make a cheap film about gang violence in Brooklyn and employed heavily accented Australian and British actors, would critics still praise it as authentic simply because the actors are speaking English?"
2. Mesoamerican cultures are all the same. Grandia observes that the movie "jumbles together mass Aztec sacrifices with Maya rituals as if they were the same." They were not. Mayas did make human sacrifices to gods, "but nothing on the holocaust-level scale that Gibson portrays...."
3. Indigenous people should remain noble savages, since attempts to build cities and more complex political organization will bring their inevitable demise. Historically, by the time of the arrival of the Spanish, Maya peoples had already become either urbanized or been agriculturists for hundreds of years, maintaining complex trade networks, but Gibson creates out of whole cloth his hero's tribe "as crude but happy rainforest peoples living in isolation, blissfully ignorant of the corrupt cities neighboring them." He then goes on to contrast these noble savages with evil city folk, "slave traders, despotic politicians, psychotic priests, and sadistic head-hunters all living amidst rotting sewage, filth, disease, and general misery." This belies the high degree of sophistication of real Mayan cities.
4. The Spanish arrive as if to save the Maya from themselves. This, she says, ignores the far greater genocide native peoples were about to endure. Within a hundred years of the conquest, "the Spanish were responsible for killing between 90% and 95% of the Maya population through disease, warfare, starvation, and enslavement."

Another scholar, Traci Ardren, is a professor of anthropology at the University of Miami. She has studied Classic Maya society for over 20 years, living in contemporary Maya villages of the Yucatan. She notes that the film's appearance of authenticity masks the reality of the period, asking, "And who really cares that the Maya were not living in cities when the Spanish arrived?" She notes that the Spanish arrived 300 years after the last Maya city was abandoned.

Also hidden in the lavishly filmed spectacle is the message that "the end is near and the savior has come." Agreeing with much of Grandia's critique, Ardren says the film "communicates that there was absolutely nothing redeemable about Maya culture, especially elite culture, which is depicted as a disgusting feast of blood and excess." Ardren has studied child sacrifice during the Classic Maya period and is well aware of the ritual violence of which the Maya were capable. But, like Ricardo Cajas and the others, she is concerned that "no mention is made of the achievements in science and art, the profound spirituality and connection to agricultural cycles, or the engineering feats of Maya cities." She seems unwilling to let this be just a movie. It is, she writes, an offensive notion that the Mayans were brutal to each other and thus deserved and needed rescue.

What is wrong with this, in her view, is that "this same idea was used for 500 years to justify the subjugation of Maya people and community leaders throughout the Maya area today. In fact, Maya intellectuals have demonstrated convincingly that such ideas were manipulated by the Guatemalan army to justify the genocidal civil war of the 1970-1990s."

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