



Merchants and Mercenaries: The Lost Maya Civilization

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My opinion

Between 1 December and 5 December in Cancun Mexico – the heart of Maya land, Zing Conferences organized the Mathematical and Computational Medicine Conference 2012. (1,2) In the spirit of the Christmas Issue of the WebMedCentral, it is appropriate that I write about the venue and the perspective it provided for a congress on Mathematical and Computational Medicine, that I do not discuss the computational problems in understanding the three dimensional configuration of proteins or the human genome but rather discuss the mathematical genius of the Maya civilization.

December 21, 2012 marks the end of the Maya calendar. Predictions of apocalypse are rife. (3) We have it on the authority of the National Geographic News that long before the end of their calendar, climate change snuffed out the Maya civilization. (4) The Maya 'Long Count' is an astronomical calendar which was used to track periods of time called the "universal cycle". (5) Each such cycle is calculated to be 2,880,000 days (about 7885 solar years). According to the most common conversion, this calendar - the 'Great Cycle', started on August 11, 3114 BC of the Gregorian calendar. The end of the great cycle corresponds to December 21, 2012. To the Maya this is merely the start of a new calendar, a more enlightened era, rather than the end of the world. (6)

Maya culture existed from over 2000 years before Christ (BC). They cultivated maize, beans, squash and chilly and domesticated turkey and dogs. Their land was made mostly of limestone. This was useful as building block for their pyramids and provided good quality mortar to cement the stones firmly. They built a plethora of beautiful stepped pyramids and huge stadium for their games. They used paper made from bark. They had a well developed hieroglyphic writing system and devised a vigesimal counting system based on groups of 20. Maya cities reached their peak between c. AD 250 to 900 but even after that, they continued to thrive till the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century. (7) Not withstanding what climate

change may have done, (4) what pushed them over the edge were the Spanish conquistadores.

Did the National Geographic say the Maya civilization was extinct? It is true that there are few Maya people in the front lobbies of the five star resorts where big conferences are held. They have been banished from here but they are by no means extinct. Today there are about 6 million people who speak one of the Maya languages as their primary language. (8) About 5 feet tall, with lightly oblique eyes, small nose and salient cheek bones they share a distant resemblance to people from Mongolia. Their newborn children often have slate gray bruise-like birthmarks often on the back called Mongolian spots. They have ancient last names like Chan, Chi, Hau and Xiu. They are seen very often selling masks and trinkets at tourist sites in Cancun. They are very much in existence but only a shell of their former selves.

The Spanish invaders were attracted by the potential for finding gold in the territory. Ironically, much of the gold the Mayan women wore was probably pillaged from earlier shipwrecks of European expeditions which sank on hitting the reef that protected this beautiful land. Once the Spanish had penetrated these natural barriers and landed ashore with their guns, the locals were no match for their firepower. With the fervor of crusaders the Spanish demolished the huge 'pagan' pyramids and used the stones to make cathedrals. Subjugation of the Maya people was completed with the burning of the 'pagan books' and with it the knowledge of Maya writing. Only 3 of the books survived and are found today in European libraries in Madrid, Paris and Dresden. (9) The Maya retreated into the forests completely dispossessed, deprived of their homes, their rights, their heritage and learning.

The Spanish found no gold in the land that was made of limestone. But they proved to be alchemists who made gold from a thriving business in selling of captured Maya as slaves to Cuba, (10) and exporting sisal fiber for making rope needed for seafarers. (11) The memory of the Maya civilization was effectively and quickly erased.

It was rediscovered in the late 18th century, when a few abandoned but surviving pyramids were found in

the overgrown forests. (12)The hieroglyphics was translated. The Mayan calendar was understood. Their genius was recognized. Inscriptions showed the Maya working with sums up to the hundreds of millions and dates so large it would take several lines just to represent it. They produced extremely accurate astronomical observations; their charts of the movements of the moon and planets are equal or superior to those of any other civilization working from naked eye observation. (13)

What is remarkable is that a few bigots and mercenaries nearly erased the memory of this race by simply burning their books in the 16th century. In this age of the internet we assume this will never happen again. Bigots are however attempting it all the time. Recently in India 2 college girls were arrested for a facebook posting where they objected to the shut down of Bombay because of the death of a political leader. The orthopedic clinic of one of the girl's uncle was ransacked and vandalized. (14) In another instance the credit card company, Visa, tried to choke off support and donations to Julian Assange's whistle blowing site. (15)

Man has little respect for learning or of the rights of others. Self interest and the profit motive always triumphs. The Maya were right about the cycles of life, but perhaps not so right in their optimism that the new era will be more enlightened than the past. Selfish interests seem set to triumph into the next era too. It is interesting that the Zing Conference 2012 abstracts were not published; for fear that making the work freely accessible may somehow erode its commercial potential.

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