

Modern Maya

by

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In suburban homes and in rural communities, clusters of ‘seekers’ have resurrected the religion of the Ancient Maya. I stumbled upon them by accident and – perhaps because of my ambivalence – have been given access to their story. They have chosen me to raise their pleas to stop the persecution by the people they work with and by the government they elected. The Maya demand equal right to come out of the shadows and live in the open with every other citizen.

The Mayan civilization was very successful for generations a millennium before Europeans found the ‘New World.’ Given their advanced development of writing, mathematics, and astronomy, one could hardly argue that the Maya were not a superior race and maybe if not for a surprise, instantly eradicating cataclysm, their civilization could easily have dominated the Americas. With so much to admire in the Mayan civilization, *fin de siecle* North Americans chose to emulate them vigorously. Abuses

during the last century, however, forced them into hiding. Today, seeing the American Constitution and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms liberating minorities of every kind, they've decided to now shine a light on their beliefs, to demand fairness and equality. Moreover, they are confident that once we see the beauty and power of the Mayan option, we will embrace it ourselves.

North America is, of course, advanced well beyond that of the last Ancient Maya. Our society offers much that no citizen would dream of giving up: liberty from tyrants; safety from the wild and others who would do us harm; housing and indoor plumbing; 300 television channels all showing M*A*S*H at some point during the day; and plenty of consumable options. So there's no real comparison in that respect. But the Ancient Maya would have undoubtedly evolved their 10th-century ways with continuing technological advances. One way or the other, the Modern Maya believe these features are well-enhanced by – or simply, enhance – Mayan culture.

The surviving civilizations and their primary religions have remained fundamentally unchanged over the centuries. Mayan devotees are thus certain that the Mayan religion, too, would have survived intact. And so it is the foundation of belief that defines who they, the Modern Maya, are today. They keep faith with this timeless, contextless truth and wisdom of the ages. As a simple matter of spiritual integrity, they have no choice but to uphold all symbols and rites, catechisms and rituals of their glorious forebearers. It is critical to both individual well being and to their organization's strength.

Sadly, they have long-suffered hostile, anti-Maya persecution throughout Canadian and American society. Canada, in particular, deeply disappoints them.

Canada, the one place in the world where any and all *deeply historic* rights and the freedom to practice a religion are not merely accepted but incorporated into society for all. Even in Canada though, too many others gawk, critique, and then interfere in Mayan ceremonies, customs, and recreations. Try as they might to privately and separately uphold their religion in all its forms, the *New West* persecutes them. Consider a few examples.

Male Maya are unjustifiably stopped from enjoying public transportation and many public places while carrying the ceremonial Maya Machete – despite their taxes supporting these facilities. A man’s identity and his lifelong pact with the Sun god is bound in that instrument, and although the machete was a practical tool in the harsher Ancient time, today it is a critical symbol, utterly essential to religious conformance. The men don’t make a display of this burden and duty, typically concealing the Machete *except* for when it must be drawn in the cause of piety. Still, no go from Air Canada, Via Rail, or Parliament. All kinds of people get on with guns that have no religious significance, and others are cut slack for their spiritual symbols. Why, the Maya want to know, must a Mayan man give up a critical part of his identity just to ride the bus? After all, they were – the Maya, that is – here long before anyone else.

The rituals that Maya carry on throughout their lives – rituals that existed a thousand years before Canada and the United States – are sacred and, in their faith the root of their enduring strength. Unlike many other common religions in North America, the Mayan belief system is tied inextricably to nature and the power of the natural world. Rites are conducted in harmony with nature and in large open, typically public, spaces. But they are stopped from enjoying public spaces for these ceremonies.

As a young man comes of age, before taking his place among the wise warriors and carrying a Machete, he must prove his readiness by a test of his faith. The high priest takes the young warrior-to-be and, after opening the skin, drives a three-foot wooden shaft through both shoulder blades pinning the stick firmly across his back. The boy is then attached to a post to stand facing the sun for seven days. The Sun god blesses the faithful and strong young man, and on the seventh evening the shaft is pulled out of the proven warrior's back and he is presented with his custom-made Machete. The family and community bestow other symbols of great admiration on him. Today's Maya emulate the rite as best as possible. A hockey stick or javelin is used instead of a sapling trunk and the boy is attached to a flagpole on the family's property, not in the middle of the community. Yet, unless the Maya conduct the ceremony in hiding, Child and Family Services always shows up to interfere and disrupt the Sun god's work.

As far back as the Mayan memory will extend, nature has been appeased by sacrifice. The traditional approach to keeping mother Earth happy, made more horrific than beautiful in movies like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, was to rip out the heart of an enemy warrior or mature virgin at the edge of a live volcano vent. The priest would eat the heart as it still beat and the sacrificial body would be cast into the earth's fire. That's a little harder to do here, now. Finding an eighteen year old virgin is almost impossible and in place of valiant warriors the Maya have to use lawyers or accountants. And because volcano vents are uncommon in the top half of North America, the Maya make do with manholes. But they do it and, based on the 'before' and 'after' environmental conditions, it seems to work. In any event, it is mystic religious ritual that

the dominant North American culture does not understand, can't possibly appreciate, and will not respect. So it does everything it can to stop the tradition.

It may not be well known that Maya women belong to the family, one defined by the spiritually-dominant Maya warrior. By custom, women are blinded upon maturity so that they see the world through the family, making the family and the whole community stronger. The women understand this; they like and prefer it. Being blind makes it much easier to live a virtuous life in the decadent and often immoral Western world. One Maya woman, standing with her husband and his brothers nearby for support, told a group of neighbours how much easier life is when the difficulties and complexities are in the rightful hands of the spiritual warrior Sun god. Thoughts of the time before she saw through the eyes of the Sun god, her warrior and the family, make her weep. As figurative tears flow from the sockets where eyes once were, neighbours hurled abusive language at the Maya men. Why, they asked me later, do these people – their friends mostly – judge and interfere with others' historical beliefs? Why do they impose their own culturally-based laws on a perfectly proper way of life?

Even simple things like the games they play are tortured. Hockey players draw blood and maim opponents in fights, and boxers beat each other into comas, but the Maya play one game of community basketball and the police get involved. The Mayan game of basketball has deep historical and religious import. Not only is it a pastime, but it tests the important character traits of a man: strength, endurance, commitment, team play, and unswerving belief. A true, god-fearing man is prepared to die or to kill for his team. So what if the losing team is literally slaughtered? It's tradition and part of the game.

The Maya are tired of living with these double-standards. Islamic fundamentalists will martyr themselves in *suicide* bombing, and ‘terrorism’ scares everyone. More security, more precautions, less liberty for all is not accepted but welcomed. That’s OK. Still nobody stops Muslims from being Muslims and doing Islamic things. In fact, Islamist living is cosseted to preserve their culture and religion as perfectly as we can make it here, both actually and spiritually far away from the Prophet Muhammad’s stomping grounds. Yet when the Mayan ball players play an ancient game, the only ones getting hurt are them, the law demands that they stop and give up their religious belief. What’s wrong with just not playing? Stay out of their game if you can’t understand it, they say.

Ultimately, the Maya only want to be treated with the fairness of other religious groups. They want the Charter and Constitutional rights afforded to everyone else for practice of their religion. They want only that the prevailing system and those who follow it altered to accommodate their admittedly unusual but crucial needs. Pretty simple stuff. It’s not like anyone is demanding that the traditional human altars be erected at the centre of every village for the sacramental eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood. That would be asking too much, they concede.

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