

In the Shadows of Conquest: The Modern Maya Syncretic Legacy

Modern Maya Syncretic Legacy

By: Kimberly Weaner

Research Questions

- How did the Maya survive to the present time and still live on the same land as their ancestors?
- What makes the Maya unique from the likes of the Inca/Aztecs?
- How can two cultures form a hybrid culture, rich with melted customs despite violent beginnings?

Understanding Guatemala's Ancient History

The cultural history of Mesoamerica can be divided into three periods:

Pre-Classic: 2000 B.C. to 250 A.D.

Classic: 250 to 900 A.D.

Post-Classic: 900 to 1500 A.D .

Background

- Earliest Maya civilizations around 2000 BC
 - Mostly in the highlands of Guatemala: City-states, trading networks in Central America
- The Peak: The Classic Period 250-900AD
 - Maya civilization that we know of collapsed between AD 800-1000
 - At its height, Maya civilization consisted of more than 40 cities, each with a population between 5,000-50,000
 - Tikal fell around 900 AD much like the rest of Maya world

Spanish Conquest

- Spanish arrived in 1524, Pedro de Alvarado
 - Battles continued up until 1548
 - Maya had collapsed into several, small fortified kingdoms, easily conquered
 - Challenging due to the dense jungle and humid temperatures
 - The “conquest” lasted until 1821 when Guatemala gained independence

Spanish Conquest

- Many Maya were subjugated and integrated into the Spanish Empire
 - Many Maya were left undisturbed if they acknowledged the authority of the Spanish Empire
 - Allowed to maintain some parts of their heritage/religion
 - Especially in regional areas with little missionaries/conquistadors (Tikal was long gone by 1525)
 - This occurred due to lack of precious metals

Impact of Spanish Imperialism

- Every facet of Maya life underwent some form of change
 - Treadle loom introduced in 1530's
 - Smallpox (Estimated that between 40-50 million of the native population from the New World died from this)
 - Measles and mumps
 - The establishment of the ruling elite: Spanish Empire
 - Introduction of Catholicism

Weaving

- Seen as a form of resistance
 - Hidden language of symbols and colors
 - Preserves stories and cultures
 - Created unity within Maya civilizations
 - Fabrics/Prints represent different communities and indigenous Maya group

Destruction of the Maya

- Maya codices, only 4 survive
 - Seen as pagan and corrupt
- Ciudad Vieja (Antigua) established 1527
 - Baroque style of 18th century
 - Former seat of the Spanish colonial government between Lima and Mexico City
 - Hub for exportation of religious imagery
 - Antigua has maintained its original grid plan established in 1543

Antigua: A Cultural Melting Pot

- Barroco Antigüeño
 - Regional adaption of Baroque style, specifically built to withstand earthquakes
- Las Leyendas
 - Retold Maya stories
 - Most famous: **El Sombrerón**

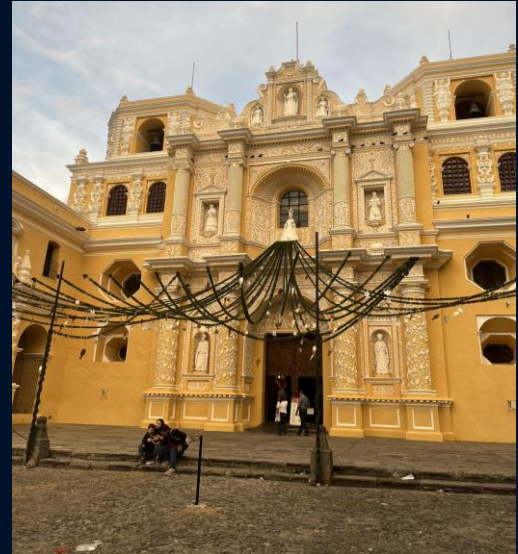


Figure 1: By Kimberly Weaner taken in Guatemala 2023

Antigua: Semana Santa

- Processional: Passion of Christ
 - First Christian procession: March 10, 1543
 - “Los cucuruchos”
- “Las Alfombras”
 - Colorful sawdust “carpets”



Figure 2: By Eden Por Salud Monthly Newsletter. <https://www.edenporsalud.org/>

Chichicastenango

- Market center for the Maya before the conquest
- Chichicastenango Cemetery
 - Native Catholicism
- Church of Santo Tomás
 - Dominican monastery dating from 1542
 - The Popol Vuh was found here in 1690

Mask/Dance

- Dance of the Conquest
 - Aided in evangelizing Maya and assimilation in the Spanish Empire
 - Narrates the story of the Spanish victory over Maya king Tecun Uman in 1524
 - Dances end in a unifying dance
 - Used to present the conquest in a pro-Spanish perspective

Popol Vuh

- The original K'iche' creation story
 - The single most important example of Maya text to have survived the Spanish conquest
 - The most complete and detailed indigenous text of Mesoamerica
 - Written around 1554-1558 to save the history and religion of the Maya
 - Written anonymously by Quiché lords who escaped Pedro de Alvarado and sought refuge in Chichicastenango

Maximon (San Simón)

- A blend of pre-Conquest Maya god Maam, a god of the underworld and Christian Saint Simon
 - Folk Catholicism: conflicting imagery
 - Day of the Holy Cross: May 3rd
 - Pilgrimages
 - Festival of San Simón: October 28th

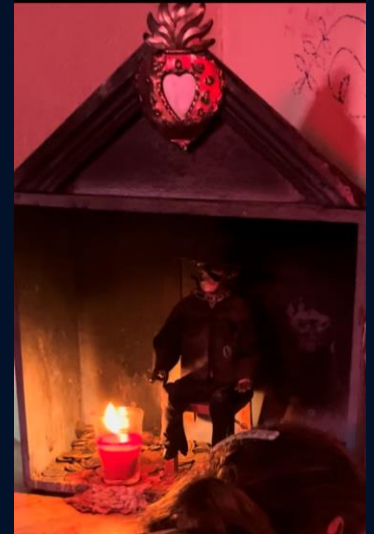


Figure 3: By Kimberly Weaner taken in Guatemala 2023

Maya Legacy Today

- Guatemala Civil War (1960-1996)
- 1/3 of Guatemala now claims to adhere to Protestant Christianity
- Resulting from 1980's Civil War chaos
- Moving away from Catholicism

Maya Legacy Today

- 31 Maya languages are still spoken
- Maya population currently at 7-8 million
- Maya revivalist/cultural resurgence movement
 - Shamans
 - Language learning
 - Guatemala Civil War/Holocaust: promoting education and legal rights for the Maya

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