

The Role of the Mayan Calendar in Shaping the Religious and Spiritual Practices of Mayan Civilization

Krikash Prashnamoorthy

Abstract: *This paper explores the profound influence of the Mayan calendar on the religious and spiritual practices of the Mayan civilization. It delves into the intricacies of the three main Mayan calendars: the long count, The Tzolkin, and the Haab, and how they dictated the daily lives of the Mayan people, influencing their agricultural practices, rituals, and personal introspective activities. The study also highlights the impact of these calendars on the broader society, contributing to the development of one of the most advanced civilizations in the Americas.*

Keywords: Mayan Civilization, Mayan Calendar, Religious Practices, Spiritual Practices, Mesoamerican Culture

1. Introduction

Mesoamerica is a historical region extending from the southern part of North America to most of Central America. It comprises the regions of modern - day Northern Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Belize, and Central to Southern Mexico. One of the many inhabitants of Mesoamerica has been the Mayan People. (The term Maya is only a modern - day collective term used to describe the remaining Mayans living in the region now. However, the term was never used by the indigenous population to describe themselves as the “Mayans” had no sense of common identity or political unity.) Religion and culture exist in close proximity, while religion can influence culture through art, architecture, and literature, culture can impact the way human beings hold religious beliefs.

The Mayans were especially religious, Stephen D. Houston, an Archaeologist and Mayanist scholar writes “For them, religion was not a matter apart from everyday life, but rather one that explained it, undergirded it, enveloped it and provided an idiom for appropriate behavior”. Akin to many cultures and civilizations, the Mayans had a religious calendar that they used to determine dates for when to conduct activities and rituals that were meant to please their many gods. It is therefore not surprising that the Mayan calendar heavily influenced the religious and spiritual practices of the Mayan people.

Parts of the Mayan Calendar

The Mayas had 3 main calendars: the long count, The Tzolkin and the Haab, let's look at how they worked and what impact they had on the practices of the Maya people.

Haab –

The Haab is the Civil, Harvest Calendar used by the Mayan people. Similarly, to the Gregorian calendar a year according to the Haab consist of 365 days. It has 18 months with 20 days each and at the end of the year it has 5 extra days make up their own month, these 5 extra days were known as the Wayeb (or the Uayeb in 16th century orthography).

Harvest – Similarity to many ancient civilizations, farming was an extremely integral part in the lives of the Mayan people. The Mayans used celestial calendars to track the position of the sun, moon and stars. Then they would use the Haab to monitor the solar year, the changing of the seasons, duration of daylight and rainfall patterns. Eventually they would make connections between celestial events and the climate conditions find the best time in the agricultural cycle to plant crops.

The Wayeb – These days the Wayeb is most commonly known as the “nameless days”. As the name suggests the Maya consider these days to be extremely unlucky. During the Wayeb the Mayans believed that the gods rested, causing the boundaries between the underworld and the mortal world to blur, and leaving the people with no protection. The Mayans believed that these 5 days were an ominous time which would cause death, danger, and bad luck. To prevent chaos and bad luck, the Mayans would not make long journeys, not make important decisions, and even observe fasts.

Throughout the Unlucky days the Mayans did rituals and even human scarifies (which was very common in Mayan culture) hoping that the gods would come back. Even though this time was extremely unlucky, all of the actions done by the Mayans during this time were not negative, as this was the time when the Mayans let go of the negativity in the past and prepared for the new year. So even though this was a time of chaos it was also a time that the Mayan people forced on personal introspective actives and reflection to cleanse themselves before entering the new year.

The Tzolkin -

The Tzolkin is also called the 260 - day count, which measures the human gestation period. The Tzolkin has 13 weeks with 20 named days. (13 x 20 = 260) Each day has a unique combination of coefficient/day name and not until number 1 to 13 has been attached to all the 20 named days is the cycle complete.

Here are the 20 named days –



Effects of the Tzolkin on Mayan Lives and spiritual practices

The Tzolkin is the main religious calendar of the Maya Cavillation. The Mayas considered the Tzolkin for weddings, rituals, birth and naming ceremonies, festivals, and pilgrimages. All of this was important as the Mayas believed that certain days in the Tzolkin were associated with specific characteristics and gods.

The Long count

The long count starts counting days from a starting date that historians believe was August 11th, 3114 BCE, in the Gregorian calendar. According to the Maya this was the date when the universe was created. The long count is an astronomical calendar, and one cycle lasts for 5, 125 years. According to the Maya once 5, 125 years have passed both the cycle and the universe reset and the world ends, which led to many doomsday predictions. The first long count cycle ended on December 12, 2012, which many believed was going to be the end of the world, due to the Mayan prediction, this was called the 2012 phenomenon. (Tzolkin)

2. Conclusion

The Mayan calendar, comprising the Haab, The Tzolkin, and the long count, played a pivotal role in the lives of the Mayan people. These calendars, working in unison, dictated the timing of harvests, rituals, and daily activities, significantly influencing the religious and spiritual practices of the civilization. The calendars influence extended beyond the spiritual realm, shaping the societal structure, and contributing to the development of one of the most advanced civilizations in the Americas. This study underscores the profound impact of the Mayan calendar on the ancient Mesoamerican society and its enduring influence on the modern world.

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