

The Maya Tribe

Name:

Course:

Instructor:

Institution:

Date of Submission:

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History will be void without mentioning the Maya people. The Maya tribe is credited for establishing the Maya Empire. They reached the epitome of their civilization in the sixth century A.D. Due to their geographical location in the tropical rain forest; the Maya are believed to have prospered in agriculture and pottery. They were once among the most powerful and influential people in Central America. However, like any other civilization, their power declined. In discussing the Maya, this essay shall focus on their geographical location, culture, economic activities and the decline of their empire.

Demographics

According to Lovell and Lutz (1992), the Maya had reached a population of two million by the time Spaniards invaded them. At the time of their civilization, the Maya tribe lived in decentralized communities. Their birth rate and death rate due to warfare and colonization controlled the population. Trade and migration are factors that contributed significantly to the demographic growth of the Maya tribe.

According to Gordon (2010), the Maya were geographically located on both the Yucatan Peninsula and the present-day Guatemala. They were the only indigenous people who had learned the value of living in concentrated blocks. High population in these blocks ensured that they were secure from external invaders such as the Mesoamerican tribes. Furthermore, the Maya lived in three sub-areas; the northern Maya lowlands, the southern Maya lowlands, and the southern Maya highlands. These areas had different climatic conditions and the people practiced different cultures.

The Maya Culture

Due to the different sub-areas they lived, the Maya developed different languages. Those that live in the highlands speak Quiché and Cakchiquel. The sub-tribes that live in the lowlands speak Choirti, Yucatecan, and Chol. However, while their languages may be different, they remain loyal to their cultural heritage (Gordon, 2010). The cultural characteristics such as native deities, cosmological beliefs and calendar are similar.

Mayan calendar

The Mayan calendar is a notable feature in their culture. It comprised of glyptic symbols and various units to keep track of time (Gordon, 2010). As farmers, there was a need to maintain records of planting and harvesting seasons. Likewise, they were to predict the best time to launch warfare attacks on other communities. Although their calendar system was complicated and ranged into millions of years, it served its purpose at the time.

Sports

There is archeological evidence that Mayans played ball games. The Mayan city ChichénItzá has the biggest ball court in America. The rules of the Mayan games are not known. However, the courts had rings and posts similar to the ones used in basketball courts. In the ball courts, there is evidence of human sacrifice. Archeologists can only deduce that it might have been a spectator or a war prisoner sacrificed after the game.

Religion

Three different deities characterized Mayan religion. According to Sharer (1996), *Kab* was the visible deity and was represented by Earth. *Kan* was the invisible celestial deity represented by the sky. All the celestial bodies including the stars and the moon were under this realm. *Xibalba* was the underworld deity. Water represented it. They believed that caves were the

entry points to the underworld deities. They used the caves for religious ceremonies. Likewise, rituals were performed in caves. Dead bodies were also buried in caves.

Mayans believed in a supernatural being called Itzamnaaj(Sharer, 1996). He was the lord of the entire universe. He was believed to have power over day and night, the sky, and the entire universe. He was depicted as a snake or a deadly reptile. Other gods were all under him. K'inich Ajaw was the sun god; Chaak was a god responsible for rain and storm while K'awiil controlled lightning(Sharer, 1996). Their religion was also characterized with human sacrifices during special occasions and rituals. Spaniards later converted most of the Maya people to Christianity during their invasion

Education

Mayans had a rich record of knowledgeable accomplishments. They kept records of the climatic seasons. Likewise, they had architectural designs of their buildings that enabled them to build pyramid-like structures. Astrology was also carefully studied and documented among the Maya (Lovell & Lutz, 1992). This helped them develop calendars and predict the future with impressive accuracy.

Economic Activities

According to Coe (1980), what sets the Maya tribe apart from other societies is their ability to build a reputable civilization in the tropical rain forest. While other civilizations such as Mesopotamia flourished in dry climates, Maya prospered in wet conditions. Agriculture was their primary economic activity. Maize was their staple food, and they occasionally supplemented it with native beans and cultigens. With farming, they were able to control trade routes and feed their merchants and specialists.

They used beads and copper bells as currency. They lacked minted currency such as gold coins or silver. The Maya region lacked most of the precious stones and minerals use to make currency. However, limestone and obsidian were in abundance. Limestone was used primarily for construction of buildings, towers, and cities. They used obsidian rocks to make weapons since they lacked iron ore. Jade and quetzal were used for decoration. Mayan rulers derived their power from the ability to control natural resources (Coe, 1980). After the war, prisoners were subjected to forced labor. Having surplus food and building material attracted respect and fame.

Decline of the Maya Tribe

With their earlier rate of civilization, the Maya tribe should have risen to greater heights. Spanish invasion marked the final blow to the Maya civilization. The Maya troubles started just after A.D 800 (Coe, 1980). The main cities such as Tikal gradually became deserted. Power and heredity issues prevailed. Although there is no definite cause for the decline of their civilization, historians believe that internal feuds, competition, warfare, and drought could have caused Maya to decline.

The Maya tribe resisted all invasions to their culture and way of life. Although they were later scattered all over the region, they remain rooted to their culture and traditions. They continue speaking their native language and practicing their customs. Today they can be regarded as a hybrid tribe due to the intermarriages and interaction with other neighboring tribes. However, the Maya remain dominant.

References

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