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The Sober Racism of Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*

by Liza Grandia

Film critics appear split on how to handle Mel Gibson's newest production, *Apocalypto*. A few refuse to patronize the film in symbolic protest of Gibson's drunken rants over the summer. Others suggest we should temporarily suspend judgment about Gibson's anti-Semitism and judge this action film on its own merits.

Remarkably, none of the critics seem to be asking whether Mel Gibson has produced a film any less racist than his summer tirades about Jews. Hollywood seems willing to admonish Gibson for certain kinds of bigotry, while oddly excusing other kinds of racism - especially if targeted at poor, brown, and indigenous peoples.

As a cultural anthropologist who has worked for thirteen years among different Maya peoples of Mesoamerica and who speaks the Q'eqchi' Maya language fluently, I found *Apocalypto* to be deeply racist. The Maya in the film bore no resemblance to the hardworking farmers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, businessmen and women of Maya descent that I know personally and consider among my closest friends.

I fear the repercussions *Apocalypto* will have on contemporary Maya people who continue to struggle for survival and political governments under discriminatory governments that consider them stupid, backward, and uncivilized for wanting to maintain their customs and language. Gibson's slanderous film reinforces the same stereotypes that have facilitated the genocide of Maya peoples and the plunder of their lands starting with the Spanish invasion of 1492 and continuing through the Guatemalan civil war to the present.

Rather than quibble about *Apocalypto*'s many historical and archaeological inaccuracies as other academic critics have done, I focus here on four racist messages the film sends to audiences:

1. *Native Americans are all interchangeable.* Many critics have offered facile praise to Gibson for having filmed his bloody epic in a contemporary Maya language and employed various Native American actors. Gibson has boasted to the press how relatively cheap it was to make the film because he had pay so little to these actors and his Mexican crew. To me, these actors didn't look or sound Maya at all. Their Yucatec diction was terrible and lacked the real lyric cadence of Maya languages. If someone exploited local labor to make a cheap film about gang-violence in Brooklyn and employed heavily-accented Australian and British actors, would critics still praise it as "authentic" simply because

the actors are speaking English?

2. *Mesoamerican cultures are all the same.* While keeping some of the archaeological details accurate for "authenticity," Gibson then jumbles together mass Aztec sacrifices with Maya rituals, as if they were the same. Certainly at the height of classic Maya civilization, the ruling classes made occasional human sacrifices to their gods, but nothing on the Holocaust-level scale that Gibson portrays in Apocalypto with fields of rotting, decapitated corpses that his hero, Jaguar Paw stumbles across as he attempts to escape his own execution in the city. With the advice of archaeologist Richard Hansen, Gibson seems to have researched anything the Maya might have done badly over a thousand year history and crammed it all into a few horrific days. How would the gringos look if we made a film that lumped together within one week the torture at the Abu Ghraib and Guatanamo prisons, the Tuskegee experiments, KKK lynchings, the battle at Wounded Knee, Japanese internment camps, the Trail of Tears, the Salem witch hunts, Texas death row executions, the Rodney King police beatings, the slaughter upon the Gettysburg battlefield, and the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki - and made this look like a definitive statement on U.S. culture?

3. *Indigenous people should remain noble savages, since attempts to build cities and more complex political organization will bring their inevitable demise.* Gibson purportedly wanted to make a statement about the decay of empires in this film. However, the only clear message I could take away was that indigenous people should have remained friendly forest hunter-gatherers and never have attempted to build their own civilization. Ignoring the fact by the time of the Spanish invasion, all Maya peoples had been either urbanized or sedentary agriculturalists for hundreds of years and maintained complex trade networks, Gibson nevertheless depicts his hero's tribe as crude but happy rainforest peoples living in isolation, blissfully ignorant of the corrupt cities neighboring them. He contrasts these noble forest savages with evil city dwellers such as slave traders, despotic politicians, psychotic priests, and sadistic head-hunters all living amidst rotting sewage, filth, disease, and general misery. Real Maya cities were places with sophisticated water and sanitation systems, great libraries, and extraordinary artwork and architecture. If Gibson wanted to make a statement about the consequences of environmental destruction, as he has claimed to the press, why not produce a film about corporate excesses at Love Canal or Three Mile Island instead of mucking up the historical reputation of the ancient Maya?

4. *The Spanish arrive as if to save the Maya from themselves.* After enduring two hours of horrific violence, in the last minutes of the film, we witness the miraculous rescue of the film's hero Jaguar Paw from his stalkers by the appearance of Spanish galleons off the coast. This short, final scene shows dour Spaniards approaching the mainland in boats bearing Christian crosses across still water. After forcing his audience to endure two hours of horrific violence, Gibson uses this placid scene allow the movie-goer a sigh of relief in the hopes that these European Civilizers have arrived to make order out of the Maya mayhem. By ending his film there, Gibson ignores the far greater genocide to befall the Maya. In fact, within a hundred years of conquest, the Spanish were responsible for killing between 90 and 95 percent of the Maya population through disease, warfare, starvation, and

enslavement.

To stereotype and slander ancient Maya civilization and to imply that the impending holocaust of Maya peoples by the Spanish is a "new beginning" shows how truly racist Gibson really is-whether drunk or sober.

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