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GUEST COLUMN: Mel Gibson's movie scratches surface of Mayan history

By RICK STEPP, LIZA GRANDIA
Point of view,

Mel Gibson received initial praise from film critics for having casting unknown Native American actors in his most recent film epic, *Apocalypto*.

While Gibson's bloody rainforest romps may make for rousing cinematography, what will be the film's impact upon ordinary living Maya?

As anthropologists who work among contemporary Maya peoples in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, we are troubled by Gibson's fantasia about a real civilization that has suffered more than 500 years of genocide at the hands of Euro-Americans.

The rural Maya farmers we know would scarcely recognize themselves or their history on the screen.

Gibson has chosen to focus on perhaps the lowest moment of Maya history, a time of internal political chaos before the Spanish invasion.

Missing from the film are any high moments of more than 1,000 years of ancient Maya civilization with advanced agronomy, medicine, astronomy, calendrics and trade. Through agricultural experimentation, the ancient Maya gave the world many domesticated crops including corn, tomatoes, cacao, avocados.

The Maya also invented one of the world's earliest writing systems and invented the concept of "zero" hundreds of years before Europeans, along with other examples of highly advanced mathematics.

The filmgoer learns nothing of the astronomical sophistication of Maya architecture, nor that at their peak, some Meso-American cities were larger than London at the time.

The Spanish invasion brought this all to a grinding halt. The film ignores well-known historical evidence about the second Maya "apocalypse."

Within a century of the Spanish invasion, about 90 percent of Meso-American peoples perished as the result of pandemic European diseases, massacres, forcible resettlement and political executions of their leaders.

Not only did the Spanish slaughter the Maya, but they also destroyed their intellectual traditions by burning thousands of Maya books.

Somehow, the Maya people recovered from this onslaught. Over 6 million Maya are alive today, speaking some 29 distinct languages across Southern Mexico and Central America and even the U.S. as a result of emigration.

In Guatemala, the Maya people now constitute a majority of the country's population, despite a third "apocalypse" of genocide.

Three decades of civil war in Guatemala left an estimated 200,000 people dead or "disappeared," 200,000 children orphaned, 1 million internally displaced, and 50,000 international refugees. Fueled by U.S. military aid, the Guatemalan military massacred at least 400 indigenous villages in the early 1980s.

A United Nations truth commission concluded that such atrocities constituted acts of genocide. In many instances, the Guatemalan military justified its actions by depicting the Maya as savages, much in the same way Gibson does in *Apocalypto*.

Still the Maya endure.

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But another apocalypse looms before them, as international institutions try to fix what they paint as the economic "backwardness" of the Maya region.

Since NAFTA's implementation in 1994, more than 1.5 million Mexican farmers, many of them Maya, have lost their livelihoods as a result of corn dumping by highly subsidized U.S. agribusiness cartels.

The further reduction of Mexican corn tariffs from 27 percent next month to 0 percent in 2008 will serve a final blow to the Mexican countryside. CAFTA will have similar impacts on the Central American corn market. Maya farmers displaced by both these trade agreements will likely join the steady flow of illegal Mexican immigration to the United States.

Meanwhile, in the small country of Belize, the Inter-American Development Bank has encouraged the government to reorganize its land tenure system to emphasize private leases. In response, Mayans are filing a claim before the Belize Supreme Court this month to demand customary rights to the communal lands they have farmed for generations. Unfortunately, the recent discovery of oil in Belize will probably dash Maya hopes to gain land tenure.

Across the border in Guatemala, a similar titling project financed by the World Bank is fueling land speculation in the Maya lowlands. Narco-traffickers, cattle ranchers and African palm planters are buying or simply seizing Maya properties.

The Puebla to Panama Plan, ostensibly an economic development program for Mexico and Central America, will plunder Maya lands through the construction of highways, factories, electrical grids and hydroelectric dams.

While the Maya people have shown continued resilience over centuries of conquest, these neoliberal threats to their lands and livelihoods may prove their final "apocalypto."

Both Rick Stepp and Liza Grandia are cultural anthropologists who, combined, have carried out more than two decades of research about the Maya. A native of Stone Mountain, Ga., Grandia is a postdoctoral fellow at Yale University and speaks Q'eqchi' Maya fluently. Stepp is an associate professor at the University of Florida.

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