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'Apocalypto' wrongly portrays Mayan natives as bloodthirsty

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A solar eclipse interrupts a sadistic mass human sacrifice during the climax of "Apocalypto," briefly sparing the film's audience and its protagonist, Jaguar Paw, from the relentless savagery of deranged Mayan characters. Unfortunately, like much in the movie, the eclipse severely distorts reality, erroneously placing the event on a full moon, an astronomical impossibility any ancient Mayan astronomer would have immediately recognized. But the film's poor understanding of the heavens is a minor mistake when compared to its wholesale misrepresentation of the Mayan world.

Much has been made of movie's use of Yukatek, one of 30 contemporary Mayan languages. Setting aside that this was not the language of the ancient Maya, even the film's Yukatek is poorly rendered. Instead of hiring cast members from among the over 800,000 people who actually speak the language in Mexico and Belize, the production chose non-Mayan native actors for all of the lead roles. I attended "Apocalypto" with Patricio Balona, a Yukatek-speaking friend and News-Journal reporter, who said that the artificial pronunciation of the dialogue was so poor that it forced him into reading the subtitles. In fact, he lamented, the old storyteller and the girl oracle were the only characters of any significance in the movie who could properly speak the language. We noted only two Mayan names in the final credits. Clearly, accurate portrayal of Patricio's people and his ancient culture was not one of Gibson's priorities.

The film's closing scene shows the arrival of Spanish ships and noble Christian explorers, implicitly bringing salvation for Gibson's decadent and bloodthirsty Maya. But when the real Spanish invaders began their plunder of the Mayan world in the early 1500s, the powerful city-states like that shown in the movie had already been in ruins under tropical vegetation for centuries. The real Maya were living in rural communities growing corn and tending to household chores.

It was the xenophobic Spaniards, fresh from their bloody purge of Jews and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, who were the real savages in the Americas. They violently subjugated the "pagan" Maya in a genocidal campaign that, combined with the ravages of European diseases, killed off as much as 90 percent of the Mayan population. Along with other native peoples in the Americas, Maya suffered the horrors of the largest mass extermination in human history.

Sadly, "Apocalypto" will leave mainstream American moviegoers seeing the Maya as savages. Real Maya will barely recognize themselves or their ancient culture in this cinematic bloodbath. Unlike the heartless and ultra-violent Maya in "Apocalypto," real Maya intensely nurture their infants. They revere both elders and ancestors, embracing human mortality in the context of a cultural heritage going back more than a hundred generations. Most still grow their own sacred corn, live in tight-knit communities and face life with genuine humility. Maya share a profound and deliberately cultivated sense of respect that cuts across religious lines and includes a heartfelt reverence for nature.

Apocalypto's portrayal of the Maya as demonic barbarians unwittingly reinforces a long-standing regional tradition of intense racism against the Maya among the conquerors and their Hispanic descendants. Even the earliest depictions by Spanish friars portray the Maya as a crude people dedicated to devil worship -- an image used to justify conquest and forced conversion to Christianity. This savage image of the Maya

has helped the Hispanic minority justify the slaughter, enslavement and oppression of the majority Maya population over the past 500 years.

Guatemala's best-known literary figure, the Nobel Prize winner Miguel Angel Asturias, made a career out of writings about barbaric Maya while portraying himself as their defender. Tragically, ugly stereotypes about the Maya also played a significant role in the Guatemalan military's massacre of nearly 200,000 native civilians in the country's recent civil war, replicating the horrific destruction brought by the Spanish conquistadors depicted as saviors in "Apocalypto."

As with most societies, the Maya have had an ample share of violence and warfare in their millennial history. But there is no evidence for the severe moral decadence and cynical religiosity used in "Apocalypto" to explain the decline of ancient Mayan civilization. Pits of sacrificial victims, such as the one discovered in the film by Jaguar Paw, never existed. Maya sacrifice was a solemn and highly ritualized affair with leaders typically offering their own blood as a holy offering on behalf of their people. Even Mayan warfare generally focused on the capture of the enemy's leaders rather than randomly inflicting civilian casualties.

The real ancient Maya were not vicious evildoers. Instead, they were victims of their own agricultural skills, sustaining ever-larger populations on notoriously poor soils. After centuries of remarkable success, the depletion of the forests for food production and construction led to a prolonged drought, forcing the Maya gradually to abandon their ancient civilization.

Many reviewers of "Apocalypto" have praised the scenes of relatively tranquil Mayan village life early in the film. But even here, the characters are cartoon-like exaggerations reminiscent of the caricatures of Africans in old Tarzan movies. At home, the movie's Maya seem equally brutish, finding uproarious amusement in loud public displays of sexuality and perverse trickery. While real Maya are as sexual and fun-loving as any other humans, their cultural tendency is toward modesty and public decorum. Even the movie's supposedly "nice" Maya have little in common with real Maya people.

The millions of real Maya living today far outnumber their ancient ancestors and have a vital and internally diverse culture. They are currently reasserting themselves after centuries of oppression, forming by far the largest nexus of native peoples in our continent. "Apocalypto" will not help their cause. The film, like the growing hype surrounding the year 2012 in the Mayan calendar, instead benefits a few entrepreneurs hoping to take financial advantage of the mystique of an exotic culture. In doing so, it mirrors current tourism advertising in the Mayan region that employs images of the Maya for the personal profit of non-Maya businesspeople.

"Apocalypto" 's demonizing treatment of the Maya, I hope, will quickly fade from the popular American imagination. The next decade may see the region's first Maya president in Guatemala and the political emergence of a Mayan nation at America's doorstep. Let's take the time now to get to know our neighbors better. In spite of "Apocalypto" 's mean-spirited depiction, they are not savages.

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