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Maya, the Blood of Kings: Idealized Visions vs. Savage Truths on Mayan Society and Culture

Questions:

1. How would you describe the "cultural screen" of the Mayan society as illustrated in this film?
 - a. The cultural screen of the Mayan society illustrated in this film depicts one of paganism and warfare. This could result in a hierarchical pyramid constructed of green on the top and red in the top and middle. Their pagan and warfare-based society came from their obsession with their gods, as a photographer in this film Justin realized that their vases illustrate how the Mayans were obsessed with the fearful and bloody gods of the underworld. The Mayans called the hellish place they believed in Sebulba. Some of these gods are very graphic in the vases, and they represent destructive spirits. One of their gruesome gods is known as the god of decapitation. This is a skeletal god, and he often holds a decapitated head and carries an odorous stench with him. As reflected in their paganism, the Mayans likewise treated *each other* harsh— even their children. They often flattened their children's noses, and Maya women had their teeth drilled without known anesthetics to place jewels and stones in them, and these rituals revealed the bold and vicious tendencies the Mayans learned from the stories of their gods. They practiced grotesque and bizarre practices, such as getting extremely drunk. One of the researchers in this film, Eric Thompson, was almost certain that the Mayans were very peaceful and did not fight, and even when he was aware of these



bizarre practices, he still did not want to veer away from his idealized vision that the Mayans were perfectly calm and peaceful towards each other. However, Giles Healy found a secret ruin that exposed a savage truth about the Mayans, which would alter the world's utopian vision of the ancient world forever: he found a room with paintings of the Mayans as fierce warriors! Indeed, the cultural screen of the Mayan society illustrated the film's depictions of paganism and warfare.

Figure 1.0: Giles Healy's discovery of the warrior painting proves Eric Thompson's idealized vision of the Mayan society wrong.

2. What were some of the technological innovations of this society? How did they help to define the people & their culture?

- a. The Mayans left an abundant written record as they independently invented an innovative writing system of which there are only five in the world. These were writings imbued with magical power, descriptions of their cosmos and chronicles of their dreams, and these texts were as momentous as the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt. They made the first written language of the new world, and in 1562, Diego de Landa, a Catholic priest, wanted to bring Christianity to the Maya, and he felt learning their language was the best way to do so. Landa dedicated his life to understanding the Maya and to saving their souls. Still, his memory is not revered, because he came to understand that while the Mayans declared themselves as Christianity, they continued to practice pagan rituals. This man of God burned hundreds of precious books about the lives of the Mayans. Only four of these books survived, and from this evidence would come remarkable insights about Maya culture. They invented a sophisticated mathematical system that was complex as it was closely tied to astronomy. Their observations of the sky were accurately recorded, and Eric Thompson, an archaeologist in the 1950s, concluded these were a people dedicated to studying the heavens and the meaning of time. He thought the Mayans were very peaceful, but he was wrong as mentioned in the answer to the first question. However, these discoveries help to define the Mayan people & their culture, because they reveal how the Mayans understood time, nature and religion. This also clarifies the Mayan piece of writing *Popol Vuh* in *Sourcebook for Frameworks* as their observations of the sky reveal how the Maya thought and understood the heavens, how they viewed the deities of nature and how they interpreted the meaning of time. Their codices they developed also mapped the positions of the stars and planets for centuries to come. And, probably one of their greatest achievements would have to be the Mayan calendar. The Mayan calendar was unlike any other; the hieroglyphics on the larger wheel marked the 365 days of the solar year, while the hieroglyphics on the smaller gears represented the priests' sacred calendar in 260 days. This shows that the Mayans lived in a society controlled by religion, and they highly respected the viewpoints and opinions of priests; in fact, the priests even predicted the precise time and place of solar eclipses as they were the leaders worthy to accomplish this in the inhabitants' perspective. With no doubt, these historical events and discoveries reveal how the Mayans perceived the heavens, how they observed the deities of nature and how they interpreted the complex meaning and significance of time.
3. How would you describe the hierarchical system? What responsibilities did each group have to the general welfare of the society?
 - a. The hierarchical system of the Mayans definitely included paganism and warfare, and there were additional responsibilities each group in the Mayan society had to fulfill for the general welfare of the society. Starting at the top of the hierarchy, one of these responsibilities included king of the city-state Palenque. Lord Pakal was king of this city state, and he ruled for almost seventy years, and he was one of the most powerful leaders as he commanded complex cities, large populations and vast areas of land. Leaders like Lord Palak ruled over their citizens with arrogance and disdain. Their subjects submitted to such tyrannical rule because their power is based upon belief of sacred power, and this brings us back to the

sacred rituals the Mayans believed in. Similarly, there were so many societies in history creating rulers to be powerful based on beliefs, whether it be religious, ritual-based or fear-controlled societies in the case of the Mayans. Also, another one of these responsibilities was those who wrote codices. While there was chaos involving Berlin, one of the soldiers grabbed a souvenir while everything around him was burning, and this souvenir was a book filled with Mayan codices. These codices have hieroglyphics about the history of the Mayans, and they were responsible for writing about time, astrology and how it relates to time, culture and history, and they had to keep records so that they could be passed on for future generations. As people developed codices, another one of these responsibilities contributing to the general welfare of Mayan society unfortunately consisted of captives fulfilling their roles to please and serve the Mayan warriors. It's very interesting how Eric Thompson was so unhappy with the discovery of the warrior paintings that he said that the blood marks could have been just red paint that the Mayans were experimenting with, and it is funny, because this reminds me of how some people try to justify their opinion even when it's constantly proven wrong. In this case, Thompson was proven wrong big time. These paintings revealed how the warriors' captives had the responsibility of serving them, and if they didn't obey their warriors their fingernails were destroyed.



Figure 1.1: Eric Thompson trying to justify himself even with the evidence of the warrior painting Giles Healy discovered.