

I. Ritual Performance in *Apocalypto*

This research explores Mel Gibson's movie *Apocalypto* through the perspectives of the ritual. The movie is set during the collapse of the Maya Empire and is partially based on a historical event. Rituals are one of the oldest forms of practices consisting of day-to-day behavior followed in almost all the societies, around the world. It consists of folk songs, stories, sayings, riddles, instruments, popular beliefs and omens. However, rituals are often found to be taboos for the people of other than the native culture. But, for the people of the same community, the customs, festivals, make ups, ornaments and traditional medicines and feeding habit make the rituals. Besides, the mysterious part of ritual include shamanism, cursing and blessing rituals, hairdressing, house decoration, folk art, dance and deities and totems. The formation of rituals is based on social, economic and cultural background which makes the ways of living of people and eventually which becomes performance of a community and its residents.

Performance includes day to day way of living associated offering regards and respects to some divine deity. The notion of divine in broad understanding includes the way of living of a communal structure and settlement pattern and the belief of the people associated with it. Similarly, types of house construction and their significance, family its types and significance, kinship, life cycle, social rites, economic organizations, religious beliefs, types of gods and goddesses, etc are part of the performance of people of the community. It also studies the impact of various economic, politics and religious transition on the life and living of people which becomes ultimately the course to the people within a community.

Culture and practices are a part of performance which in turn after repeated practices becomes ritual performance. It is a way of expression of desires and sentiments through

bodily gestures and activities in accordance to paying homage and respect to the Gods in heaven and earth. According to Richard Schechner in “Performance Study” it is:

It is the academic field concerned with the study of performance in any of its various forms. The term 'performance' is broad, and can include artistic and aesthetic performances like concerts, theatrical events, and performance art; sporting events; social, political and religious events like rituals, ceremonies, proclamations and public decisions; certain kinds of language use; and those components of identity which require someone to do, rather than just be, something. (7)

Consequently, study of ritual performance is interdisciplinary, drawing from theories of the performing arts, anthropology and sociology, literary theory, and legal studies. Though, this is a new trend in literary readings.

Ritual has been challenged as an emerging discipline. Many academics have been critical of its instability. As an academic field it is difficult to pin down; either that is the nature of the field itself or it is still too young to tell. There is, however, numerous degree granting programs that train researchers being offered by universities. Some have referred to it as an inter discipline or a post discipline of ritual study that has marked the beginning of a new form of literary theory in Universities.

In order to determine what should be focused on in the study of ritual it is useful to compare it to what we find in the study of natural language. Furthermore, the form of language in ritual performance is studied:

... by the subfields of phonology (sound form), morphology (word form) and syntax (sentence form). Meaning is studied by semantics and use is studied by pragmatics. The syntax of natural language combines fundamental building blocks (words, further analyzed into morphemes and phonemes) into complex sentences. (37)

The fundamental building blocks of ritual are stereotypical acts. It is far from trivial how the stereotypical acts of ritual must be defined, although this is the least controversial area in the study of ritual.

The stereotypical acts of ritual must be distinguished from individual habit and the acts of obsessive neurotics. Like the words and idioms of language, ritual acts belong to the socio-cultural repertoire of a community. But even there, some further distinctions must be made. Thus, washing one's hands before dinner may be a stereotypical act of some cultures, it is in principle something utilitarian (a matter of hygienic) and as such not a ritual act. The form the act of washing one's hands takes is completely determined by functional considerations.

This particular example can be contrasted with ritual hand washing, the form of which is not determined by hygienic but by the arbitrary rules prescribed by some community. But a ritual act must also be distinguished from certain non-utilitarian, possibly rule-governed stereotypical acts, namely those that are just play. There is a certain seriousness about ritual acts that commits the actors to the culture at hand. The notion ritual is notoriously hard to define, but that is of little relevance. In linguistics, it happened to be more productive to characterize the various subsystems of language. In which combinations such modules form a language is somewhat arbitrary and of little concern. A similar approach might be useful in the study of ritual.

The essence of ritual can be associated and found in the earliest forms of human civilization, as has been attempted by Mel Gibson in *Apocalypse*. The history of ritual culture has its root in the basic foundation of human society. The fact is rituals were present in almost every societies that later became culture and custom and people stepped on it to give rise to various notion of development and many more. There are several rituals followed in different parts of the world, even today which is harrowing to modern man. Harrington

Samuels in *The Atlantic* writes on the ancient civilization of the Mayan people in the following manner:

It gives rise to awe-inspiring architecture and surprisingly advanced science, the Maya civilization—which thrived in what are now Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras—began declining around A.D. 800. Archaeological evidence points to a multitude of factors that could have led to this decline, including internecine warfare, the loss of trade routes, drought, and disease.

(65)

There is no accurate information of the presence of the Mayan people; however, the archeologists believe that they were situated in what today is Mexico, Guatemala and the neighboring areas. These people were the earliest founders of human civilization despite the fact that they were barbarous and cruel.

Society, culture and environment are the organized form of any harmonious country, place or community. The people living together in a house, having the relation of blood and sharing a same kitchen form a family, whose accumulation in a particular area and time makes up the community. The community living in a certain area with mutual cooperation, coordination, harmony and intimacy delimited living in a certain norms and values make up a society. The society is formed with the groups of families living in a particular area, sharing a common pool resources encompassed by the various and distinct norms and values set within the place for these rights and certain taboos of the society. A society is a place for the interacting organizing sharing a populated environment. In human society intent, belief, resources, preferences, needs, risks and a number of other conditions may be present and common, affecting the identity of the participants and their degree of cohesiveness. The concept of society and culture has led to significant debate, and scholars are yet to reach an agreement on a definition of the terms.

Performance is a ritual to most people. It is associated with pleasing the Gods and taking their blessings for a specific period. As such, for example, the Flint tribe celebrate the hunting and killing of any animals twice; during slaughter and consuming. It is a form of mystery that is associated with belief, faith and inclination to a mystical power. The first performance is carried in the glory of the Almighty God who has provided them with opportunity of rain and environment to yield crops. This is associated with thanks giving to the God for giving the water, season and environment for rainfall. Similarly, the second performance before consuming is to thank the Almighty for his grace and divinity in giving them the food. These are the mythical aspects of practices followed from the ancient people.

A strategic method of resistance, as seen in postcolonial works, re-write colonial texts in order to dis-empower them as purveyors of colonialist ideology (Ashcroft et al. 6-8).

According to Walter Mignolo and Freya Schiwy, translation in its linguistic sense can both contribute to and enhance the colonial difference between Western and non-Western languages, as: All the same, they contend that a new form of double translation/transculturation is plausible in which the duo coalesce and produce a border-space that rearticulates the colonial difference from the subaltern position, resulting in what Mignolo has famously deemed border thinking (15).

The Mignolo and Schiwy's theory of double translation in order to eliminate or, at the very least, override the problematic that arises from the respective conceptualizations of representation seen in GayatriSpivak (1988) and José Rabasa (1993). Mignolo and Schiwy contend that the Zapatista theoretical conception of translation is not merely an interchange between two languages but rather a complex double movement involving the double translation/transculturation between Marxism/feminism and the cosmology of the Amerindians. The Zapatista discourse translates on a number of levels, including a translation between space and time. In transforming Amerindian memories of the past into the

perspective of today, the Zapatistas conflate the past into the requirements and necessities of the present and global time. Via their amalgamation of the past/present and Marxist/feminist/Amerindian cosmology, the Zapatistas, Mignolo and Schiwy note that “a particular kind of translation/transculturation . . . in which a dense history of oppression and subalternization of language and knowledge is being unlocked” (10).

The Zapatistas unlock the knowledge by translating the subaltern perspective into Western understanding, a feat achieved by a process of re-education. Mignolo and Schiwy explain that the urban intellectuals (i.e. Subcomandante Marcos) dismantled their former tools—high, urban culture and the –isms of Marxism/Socialism/Leninism—and reconfigured them with the knowledge of the indigenous community leaders and the guerrillas (13). As a result, the movement succeeds in its project of translation, practicing a border thinking that serves “as a place of epistemic and political confrontation” and “undoes the dichotomies that sustained the modern/colonial world-system and its hegemonic epistemology” (16).

Mignolo and Schiwy’s theory disseminates the perspective that is underscored by subaltern epistemology, thus thinking from subalternity in order to provide a critique of the imperialist project. There are volumes of racial history and physical characteristics that embrace the studies of racial, historical background of the Maya people. Their similarities and dissimilarities with other neighboring communities, their relation with the other communities, chronicles, ancestral homes, occupation, nomadism, its reason and impacts, physical features, hereditary traits, the effects of biological and geographical environments, their physical states, the differences and divergences of the community and type , reasons and impacts of exogamous marriage relations of the people.

Ritual performance covers the study of the social and cultural conditions of the people and the area of their settlements. Their villages, districts and panchayats, natural positions, topography, cottage industries as a means of livelihood, elevation, soil, minerals, flora, fauna,

the effects of geographical environment and the social, economic background make the way of their living. Performance is associated with religion, dress, food, health, population, etc which adds to the socio-custom of the people living within a geographical territory.

Ritual performance has to do with the way language is spoken and interpreted. Language family, linguistic acculturation and its sources, various lexical items, and morphemes have a special place in performance. The syntactic patterns and the dialect variations of language, and its sociological and anthropological aspects determine the ways of living and lifestyle of a specific group of people. In general, performance study is carried out against the social and geographical background.

However, understanding of ritual has to do with the notion of performance and this has its root in the traditional belief and practices. Unlike the traditional belief, performance is not only limited to theatre or close-room acting, it is a wide range of practices followed in work place, prayer rooms and during singing and dancing. Ritual is like an open-theatre performance practiced in paddy field. This is an age-old tradition, in almost every part of the world. Despite the varying of language and gestures, the essence of performance remains the same. People around the world practiced it to please the rain god and make sure that the divine grace continues to remain with them. Hence the following of performance has gone local to global. In regards, Dwight Conquergood in “Intervention and Racial Research” opines:

It is no longer easy to sort out the local from the global: transnational circulation of images get reworked on the ground and redeployed for local, tactical struggles. And global flows simultaneously are encumbered and energized by these local makeovers. We now are keenly aware that the local is a leaky, contingent construction and that global forces are taken up, struggled over, and refracted for site-specific purposes. (59)

So, to say any art or performance is local is mere a farce. It is this unique feature in performance that makes things of international level and that of global to local. This is the charismatic feature of performance that makes things interwoven.

Working in group has multiple advantages. They add to our combined efforts and lessen our physical burden. When working in groups it makes sure that everyone is equally participating. It gives a sense of communal feeling. Human is a gregarious animal and hence lives in community and groups. Rituals also take place for common welfare of the groups and community. As such, ritual in the form of work is the most widely followed practice around the world. People have been practicing this, knowingly or unknowingly for ages. This has been a part of human life since the evolution of mankind.

Since ages, the idea of performance and ritual has gone side by side. Performance has remained as a method of textual study, as an aesthetic event, and as a social and rhetorical act and that is an offering to the Gods. The performance explains operates as a way of knowing, of being, and of acting in our world, this area of the department offers a broad range of courses concerned with performances that occur in classroom spaces, theatre spaces, everyday spaces, and social spaces. With these spaces and operations in mind, this area of the department offers students a series of interrelated courses in textual study; oral history and ethnography; and the theory of and practice in writing, designing, and directing performative events. Performance can be as simple as classroom study.

Traditional rituals extend into a wide variety of gestures that has formed itself as the theatric and, unconsciously people have adhered to this notion. Hence, at the academic level, and the co-curricular level, including seminars with visiting scholars; participation in regional and national conferences and festivals; campus performance/production work; joint ventures with local, regional, and nationally prominent authors; and social activism through performance work in the community. Then it can extend as far in to the fields of a humble

farmer and a layman. Thus, the boundary of performance is beyond the so-called fences of theatres and concrete walls.

Yet, *Apocalypto*, tries to focus on colonialism through colonialist cinematic endeavor but fails in its attempt to represent the waning days of the Mayan empire. Though aiming for authenticity with its Mexican set and Yucatec Maya script and actors, the film holds true to patterns already established in Gibson's filmography: violence and gore are the central protagonists. The Mayas function as mere background. People magazine's film critic is on target: "Want to see a knife plunged into the chest of a still-alive man, his heart pulled out and his head cut off? Park yourself right here" (38). Gibson depicts the Maya as a savage people in need of saving; he insinuates that the missionaries' arrival in the film's closing minutes is a welcome respite from brutal infighting. Anthropologist Traci Ardren in her article "Is Apocalypto Pornography?" opines that

The message? The end is near and the savior has come. Gibson's efforts at authenticity of location and language might, for some viewers, mask his blatantly colonial message that the Maya needed saving because they were rotten at the core. Using the decline of Classic urbanism as his backdrop, Gibson communicates that there was absolutely nothing redeemable about Maya culture, especially elite culture which is depicted as a disgusting feast of blood and excess. (67)

The excessive of blood flowing and people demonstrating the longingness for blood is yet another form of rituals that seems to hurt the Mayan people. However, there is no denying that this fact of blood call was a rampant feature of the ancient people around the world. This is something that has its presence in almost every religion around the world.

Dealing on the history of performance that Richard Schechner opines that the performance culture is as old as the beginning of mankind. Even when there was no human

history there was performance. The sings that humans used to communicate and express their wants, desires and feelings were the earliest forms of performance. They became so common that people forget newness in it and they were accepted as a normal course of day-to-day life.

Schechner in “Performance Studies” has following opinion:

The variation of cultural pattern and geography alters culture and customs of various places; however there is no variation in the essence of communication it passes. As such, even the tough form of performance has become so simple that people often tend to think them as a normal day action. This is the inherence of the cultural mores adhered in human society, simplified in the form of performance. (5)

As such, the simple way of understanding performance is action oriented. It is not only the way that makes difference in the simpler way of humans but also puts a lasting impact on the way of life and living of an individual and the society.

To find out what the Maya Empire was really like, Stefan Lovgren checked in with Zachary Hruby, a Maya expert at the University of California, Riverside. They found that:

Before the fall, the Maya ruled the region from seats of power in dozens of cities. It is this so-called Classic period [A.D. 250 to 900], and especially its end, that the film most resembles, though no date is specified in *Apocalypto*. During the Classic period Maya settlement was so widespread that you lived at least within 10 to 20 kilometers [6 to 12 miles] of a large community. Pyramids were never more than 20 kilometers away from anywhere in the Maya world. (97)

So, the idea is the information provided in *Apocalypto* does not accurately meet the historical facts. However, the ritual performance of Jaguar Paw who lives in an idyllic hunting village set deep in the jungle is in itself a ritual. This is largely depicted in the form of the thatched

huts away from any types of modern equipments and facilities. Their source of living is hunting and they pray to every prey before they accept them as the food. The idea of leaders exist in the remotest form in the form of the brave is the ruler.

In consideration to several criticisms and ideas discussed above, the present researcher takes, 'ritual performance' based in Gibson's *Apocalypto* to depict the inherent relationship between ritual and performance, and vice-versa.

II. Ritual Performance in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*

While hunting tapir in the Mesoamerican jungle, Jaguar Paw (RudYoungblood), his father Flint Sky (Morris Birdyellowhead), and their fellow tribesmen encounter a procession of traumatized refugees. The group's leader explains that their lands were ravaged, and asks for permission to pass through the jungle. When Jaguar Paw and his tribesmen return home, Flint Sky tells his son not to let the refugees' fear infect him.

The next morning, after Jaguar Paw awakes from a nightmare involving the refugee leader, he sees warriors entering the village and setting the huts on fire. The raiders, led by Zero Wolf (Raoul Trujillo), attack and subdue the villagers. Jaguar Paw slips out with his pregnant wife Seven (Dalia Hernández) and his little son Turtles Run (Carlos Emilio Báez), lowering them by vine into a deep vertical cave, tying the vine off so they could climb out later. Jaguar Paw then kills a raider and returns to help the village. He is eventually subdued and a raider named Middle Eye (Gerardo Taracena), whom Jaguar Paw almost killed, slits Flint Sky's throat while the bound Jaguar Paw can only watch. Before the raiders leave with their prisoners, Snake Ink, one of the raider captains, notices Jaguar Paw staring toward the cave. Suspicious of the tied-off vine hanging into the cave, he cuts it, trapping Seven and Turtles Run. Jaguar Paw and the other captives are then led off into the jungle.

A short distance from the village they join another group of raiders who have captured the refugees Jaguar Paw met the day before. Later, Cocoa Leaf, a wounded captive tied to the same pole as Jaguar Paw nearly tumbles off a cliff, but Jaguar Paw and the others are able to pull him back up with incredible effort. Though Middle Eye, who is guarding them, is impressed by this show of brute power, he kills Cocoa Leaf by cutting him loose and pushing him off the cliff.

The raiding party march toward a Mayan city, encountering razed forests and failed maize crops, along with villages decimated by plague. A little girl dying of plague prophesies

that there will be a solar eclipse and a man running with a jaguar will bring the raiders to those who will scratch out the earth and end their world. In the city's outskirts, where the prisoners come upon slaves working in lime quarries, the female captives are sold as slaves while the males are escorted to the top of a step pyramid.

Patricia Seed, one of the prominent voices in regards to ceremonies narrates this concern as a savage practice existent in human society. Seed in *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe* writes:



(Source: Mel Gibson's movie Apocalypto, time 1:17:49)

The high priest sacrifices several captives, including Jaguar Paw's friend Curl Nose (Amílcar Ramírez), by cutting out their beating hearts before beheading them. When Jaguar Paw is about to be sacrificed, a solar eclipse occurs. The high priest looks at the emperor and the two share a knowing smile while the people below panic at the phenomenon. The priest declares the god Kukulcan is satisfied with the sacrifices. He asks Kukulcan to let light return to the world and the eclipse passes. The crowd cheers in amazement and the priest orders that the remaining captives be led away and disposed of. (32)

As the foundation of the Mayan civilization begins to crumble, one man's previously idyllic existence is forever changed when he is chosen as a sacrifice needed to appease the gods in director Mel Gibson's mythic, end-times adventure. The Mayan kingdom is at the

absolute height of opulence and power, but leaders are convinced that unless more temples are constructed and more human sacrifices made, the crops, and ultimately the people, will suffer. Jaguar Paw (Rudy Youngblood) is a peaceful hunter from a remote forest tribe whose life is about to be changed forever. When Jaguar Paw's village is raided and he is prepared as a sacrifice that the Mayan deities have demanded, the brave young hunter is forced to navigate a horrific new world of fear and oppression.

Fearlessly determined to escape his captors and save his family from a harrowing demise, Jaguar Paw prepares to risk it all in one final, desperate attempt to preserve his dying way of life. However, few who have seen the sacrificial alteration of the Mayans have managed to live to see another day. Now, in order to rescue his pregnant wife and young son, Jaguar Paw will have to elude the most powerful warriors of the Mayan kingdom while using his vast knowledge of the forest to turn the tables on those who would rather see him dead than set free. Inspired by such ancient Mayan texts as the PopulVuh, *Apocalypto* marks a comprehensive collaboration between director Gibson, Cambridge-educated screenwriter FarhadSafinia, and world-renowned archeologist and Mayan culture expert Dr. Richard D. Hansen -- whose services as a special consultant on the film lent the production an unprecedented degree of historical accuracy.

An artfully crafted chase film that is as breathless as it is brutal, Mel Gibson's end-times tale of peril is, when all is said and done, a typical action film with some decidedly atypical qualities. Jaguar Paw is a good-natured hunter from a peaceful forest village, but his life is turned upside down when invading Mayans emerge from the trees seeking sacrifices to appease their angered gods and entertain the masses. Despite managing to usher his pregnant wife and young son to safety before being spirited away to an uncertain fate, Jaguar Paw remains determined to escape his captors, rescue his family, and return to the forest where he hunted with his father, and will one day hunt with his children.

His desperate quest is complicated, however, by a sadistic group of Mayans who will hunt him to his dying breath. While the subtitles and sweeping trailers may have given some the impression that Gibson's follow-up to *The Passion of the Christ* was a grandiose epic richly detailing the downfall of a once-powerful kingdom, the fact is that, despite surface appearances, *Apocalypto* is about as typical an action film as they come. All of the pieces are perfectly in place here -- from the noble young hero on a mission to save his loved ones to the intimidating villain who simply seems too powerful to overcome, his sickeningly sadistic sidekick, and adrenaline-soaked action scenes that will have viewers gripping their seats as they duck to avoid lethal projectiles. It is an absorbing tale of survival punctuated by an extended, expertly crafted chase sequence that will likely elicit sweat from the palms of even the most skeptical of viewers.

The fact that the cast is largely comprised of unfamiliar faces and that the film is spoken in an unfamiliar dialect goes a long way in allowing viewers to lose themselves in the story, with Gibson's and co-screenwriter Farhad Safinia's strong eye for character offering colorful details for even some of the most inconsequential of supporting players. In an unusual move for such a seemingly serious-minded film, Gibson and Safinia allow the characters to define themselves not only through their actions in times of great danger, but their humor and warmth in times of peace as well. It is an interesting move, and one that makes the horrific massacre which sets the plot into motion all the more effective. Artistically, the film is a feast for the eyes with awe-inspiring sets, fluid jungle photography, and an appropriately primal score by James Horner punctuated by chest-thumping percussion. Assured editing keeps things moving at a brisk, satisfying pace that stealthily belies its somewhat intimidating running time well over the two-hour mark. For multiplex viewers willing to give a subtitled action flick a fair shake, *Apocalypto* delivers the goods with fierce abandon and forceful intensity.

The movie *Apocalypto* is expertly directed and visually stunning, but the level of violence is hard to take. Mel has explained that the violence is upsetting because they care so much about the characters, but she disagreed. As a woman, she found it difficult to bond with the characters after the opening series of very male-oriented jokes and vignettes, but she was still shocked by the relentless horror of events that comprised most of the movie. Mel is brilliant, but she hopes that he will find stories to direct that are more uplifting and inspiring. The world needs gifted story-tellers like Mel to offer us healing dreams, not nightmares.



(Source: Mel Gibson's movie *Apocalypto*, time : 14:14)

During the medieval period, such communities and people were abundantly found and their source of living was hunting which was like a ritual. Whenever, they caught an animal they performed prayers to it. They thanked the deity God for giving them food to eat and hence, their life is possible. On the other hand, the Maya were an agricultural people. They

hunted, but wild game was a relatively small percentage of the diet, and meat in general may have been seen as more of a luxury item.

At that time, it appears that almost all the forest was maintained, manicured, and owned by somebody, and that a Maya group in *Apocalypto* that does not practice agriculture is virtually impossible. They are shown in amidst the wild forest living and almost depended on hunting. This seems practically very difficult; however, one cannot deny that life is possible even in such extremes of situation. They were hunters and they worshipped the forest deity “Oh merciful Lord of forest have mercy on us” prays the central character Jaguar Paw.



(Source: Mel Gibson's movie *Apocalypto*, time : 1:48:27)

Although houses may have been of perishable materials, they had stone foundations and were often built in cleared plazas but certainly not in the wild jungle. House lots were planned and intensively managed spaces where fruits, vegetables, and medicinal plants were grown and where some domesticated animals were raised.

There's no evidence that innocent women and men were harvested from the hinterlands and sold into slavery or to provide flesh for sacrifice. Generally captives appear to have been taken during war between polities. Jaguar Paw and the other captives who are brought to the city have never heard of such a place.

There was a great sense of political connectedness between different groups. Even small villages in the hinterlands of large cities were connected to some political center. The city is depicted as one of both great wealth—with a lot of people wearing jade jewelry—and great poverty. Jade was usually reserved for royal families. Even in cases of relatively impoverished sites ... the king would wear false jade beads made of painted ceramic, indicating that the veneer of wealth was crucial no matter what the reality.



Icon Distribution



(Source: Mel Gibson's movie Apocalypto, time : 1:12:40)

Jade was the symbol of royal power and wealth. You don't find these goods in commoner graves and even very rarely in non-royal elite burials. The Maya civilization is impressive for a number of reasons—a fully developed writing system, amazing architecture, and a complex political system. But life expectancy was low. Near the time of the collapse, people were generally undernourished, which is reflected in their bones, and they had bad problems with their teeth.

The city features dazzling pyramids but is also seen to be in a great state of disrepair. It may be modeled after Tikal in Guatemala, a great Mayan city. But it is more of a combination of architectural features from both the southern and northern lowlands on the Yucatán Peninsula. If *Apocalypso* is meant to show the terminal Classic—the Classic Maya collapse—then it may have looked in a state of disrepair. The decline in social organization may have made the upkeep of public buildings a difficult economic and political endeavor.

Jaguar Paw and the other captives are to be sacrificed on a column-shaped stone to appease the gods and avert a drought. This type of sacrifice resembles one that may have been carried out by the Mexica (an Aztec-related group) in central Mexico. The Aztecs who presided over an empire in Mexico in the 15th and 16th centuries used a column-shaped stone on which the captive would be splayed out, back arched, allowing the sacrifice to more easily access the heart from beneath the rib cage to make a heart forfeit.



(Source: Mel Gibson's movie Apocalypto, time :1:15:42)

This type of sacrifice is unknown within the Maya area. In the movie hundreds of people appear to be sacrificed at once. The Aztecs are known to have sacrificed large numbers of people, though according to the archaeological record, we are unsure of how many would be sacrificed at one time. There are no data to support that the Maya carried out sacrifice on such a large scale.

The evidence we have suggested that sacrifice was a very personal thing, and so even the captives were personal objects. Even after death, the bones of those captives were owned by the sacrifice. Another form of [nonlethal] sacrifice to the Maya is auto-sacrifice, or bloodletting, which was carried out by males by perforating the penis and by women who would pull ropes through their tongues. This blood was used in ancestor veneration and other rituals. The movie suggests that the Maya relished torturing their captives. The captives the Maya wanted were the elites from opposing polities, because they represented competition.

Capture, humiliation and torture of an elite warrior meant usurpation of their goods and resources. The Maya did not necessarily relish torture and violence, but they relished making their political opponents suffer. Fingernails were torn out, genitalia and breasts

exposed, and starvation was common. In the movie the king is shown as a bystander to two other individuals during the sacrificial ritual. Most monuments depict the king as the central figure—dancing, bloodletting, scattering incense. The king was the one who supposedly conducted rituals in front of a large audience. He played a major ceremonial role.

The Maya kings were seen as potent mediums in terms of communicating with their own ancestors, and the king would also impersonate deities. By doing so, the king could replay important mythological scenes that connected to events that were happening in the city at the time. It was a combination of religion and politics, but not in the sense that we think of an Egyptian pharaoh as a living god.



(Source: Mel Gibson's movie *Apocalypto*, time : 1:21:13)

A solar eclipse plays a pivotal part in the movie. When the solar eclipse covers the sun and the earth turns dark, the chief priest of the Mayan people calls to stop the sacrifice. Jaguar who is not at all worried of dead is pronounced to be disposed which we later come to know another of form of killing-ritual among the Mayan warriors. There are hieroglyphs to suggest that the Maya observed the eclipse. In this regards, Patricia Seed, in *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World 1492-1640* opines:

The Maya calendar supposedly ends in 2012, and people have hypothesized that the Maya thought the world will end at that time. But even in Mayan

creation mythology, there is no explicit connection between the end of the Maya calendar and the end of the world as also depicted in the movie *Apocalypto* for when there is solar eclipse, the sacrifice of the prisoners is stopped. (97)

The movie suggests that there were several reasons for the Maya collapse. There are many causes for the fall of that form of Classic-period social organization. Multiple historical, economic, and environmental factors were in play simultaneously at that time. It was a time of particularly bad drought. There was heavy deforestation. The ancient Maya overused their land and were no longer producing the amount of food they needed.

At the same time, populations were going through the roof. There were too many people, and the pie simply wasn't big enough. There was also increased warfare in some areas. Royals were trying to kill off each other. This appeared to have occurred over a 100- to 150-year period, so it wasn't one single event. And it occurred largely in the southern Maya lowlands.



(Source: Mel Gibson's movie *Apocalypto*, time : 1:14:22)

In some areas in the north, the construction of Pyramids and other buildings continued unimpeded after A.D. 900. It is important to remember that the Maya did not disappear. They reorganized. So we should think of it more as a social reorganization than a collapse. By the

time the Spaniards arrived, the social problems associated with the Classic period as portrayed in *Apocalypto*, did not exist.

In a rare pause in Mel Gibson's breakneck *Apocalypto*, the film's protagonist decides to give a speech. Jaguar Paw - a name over-literalized in later action - puffs out his chest and turns to face his pursuers. Having just leaped over a roaring waterfall, he is allowed more than a touch of hubris, as he makes announcement, as: "My name's Jaguar Paw, I'm a hunter and this is my forest, he shouts gesturing to the dark expanses about him. He further claims, My father hunted here and so will my sons. I am Odysseus, I sack cities, my dad Laertes was pretty good at that himself but now lives at home in Ithaka, where I'm going."

His awed pursuers gape at the man who until recently had been their captive. For a moment, they - and the audience - can glimpse a hero as large as those in epics far worthier of the genre than Mad Mel's blockbusters. One recalls Odysseus, having just eluded Polyphemus the Cyclops, brazenly turn and identify himself

The inevitable follows all such heroic pronouncements. Poseidon curses Odysseus to storm-tossed years of wandering. Jaguar Paw's pursuers themselves jump the waterfall and chase him bloodily back to his home. Yet, at the end of the day, blunt heroic hubris perseveres; a wizened, but still capable Odysseus returns to Ithaka, while Jaguar Paw turns the tables on his foes and is safely - if predictably - reunited with his family.

But quoting Homer only gets Gibson so far down the road of epic artifice. The Mayan world of the film is at once lush and entirely two-dimensional. Despite its lunges towards grandeur and allegory, *Apocalypto* remains stuck in the mud of aged clichés. The film is further evidence of the sinister vacuity of Gibson's craft. His imagination is not simply moronic. A sliver of substance lies beneath the slick gloss of style, but it is more poisonous than insipid, more disingenuous than air-headed. I am ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille –

or is it Mr. Spielberg, or maybe even Mr. P Jackson? Mel Gibson's Mayan action-hero-quest is all Hollywood -- savagery, salvation and stereotypes.

At the heart of Gibson's darkness is the eternal forest invoked by Jaguar Paw. The film opens in this jungle. In its green glow, Jaguar Paw and his friends live happily. They play jokes on each other, hunt boars, exchange amorous glances with their women and sit around camp fires listening to an ancient storyteller rattle his folktales. It's an uncomfortably serene scene. None of the villagers harbour larger ambitions; they are content, simplistic, and if left to their own devices, one feels they would go on as they are till the end of time.

This is how Gibson conjures the first of two pedigreed, but insidious stereotypes: the romantic savage - proud, primitive, for most intents and purposes mainly, and above all timeless and unchanging. Anthropologists and specialists of Central America have noted that the Maya - a living, not extinct people - continue to face discrimination in Guatemala and Mexico on the grounds of their supposed barbarity. Gibson's film does not help matters with its brutal portrayal of Maya traditions and history.

More tragic than this disservice to the living Maya, however, is the praise *Apocalypto* has won from Native Americans themselves. The head of the Chickasaw nation in the United States hailed Gibson for his use of an entirely Native American cast, with actors plucked from Canada, the US and Mexico. Such indigenous casting helped "make the film more realistic" and served "as an inspiration to Native American actors who aspire to perform relevant roles in the film industry."

With such statements in mind, one almost longs for the days of grainy westerns, where "Injuns" were whooping cannon fodder for intrepid Yankees, and aspired to be little more than cannon fodder. Such a vocation is less reprehensible, perhaps, than having one's "authenticity" turned into a vehicle for foaming Christian reverie. Through Gibson's vivid

realism, little (except willing disbelief) protects the natives from the impression that “this is how they actually were.”

The seeming authenticity allows Gibson to conjure the romantic world of the jungle and the corrupt world of the city with ease. In this false binary lay the demise of most colonised societies. With its Christian soft power, European empire expunged the rotten political class while shepherding the noble but simplistic natives towards modernity.

It is depressing - hardly ironic - that when marginalized peoples finally make it to the big screen, it is to violate the complexity of their culture, to reinforce the historical narrative of their current marginalization, and then, only afterwards, to do violence upon their bodies for our entertainment.

Finally, the ending of the movie move towards the idyllic lifestyle by Jaguar Paw. The protagonist to rise up and make a difference for his people rather than merely disappear again into the forest/jungle and his previous way of life visions from the unforgettable movie *Brave Heart* certainly influenced my expectations). What changed as a result of the protagonist's heroic experiences? His immediate family was saved (certainly a good thing), but nothing else changed as far as I could see, so what is the point of enduring such a gruesome plot line Dennis Donoghue (1959) to suggest that, indeed, there exist multiple cinematographic languages.

Donoghue explains that modern drama relates to poetry, though beyond the superficial level of mere language. As each of the “concrete elements” of drama unite—plot, agency, speech, gesture, and so on—they exhibit a coherence similar to that which is necessary between the words of a poem (10). And, in the same fashion, these elements may be considered a network of distinct languages that must cross and combine to transmit the interplay of the drama.

Many of the same elements that constitute theatrical drama transfer to the medium of film. Thus, the script, the scenery, the actors' gestures, the soundtrack, the thematic content, the reception, and even the camera's movements might be seen as contrapuntal languages that compose the poetry of the film. Film's plural language translates a subject matter already in existence—be it literary or historical—and imparts upon it a new dimension, as Walter Benjamin notes in regard to the art of translation:

[T]ranslations that are more than transmissions of subject matter do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it. The life of the originals attains in them to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering. [N]o translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes change. (72-73)

As Benjamin suggests, translation critically alters our perception of the original work, and perhaps even more so in cinematic translation due to the change of medium: in this respect, the translation corresponds to Roman Jakobson's "intersemiotic translation or transmutation," or what Tullio Maranhão simplifies as "pure and simple invention inspired by the original text" (Emphasis in Original, 233, xiv).

Indeed, Maranhão acknowledges that translation is not limited to the traditional linguistic transfer of source language (written or spoken) to target language; instead, "there is a broader sense of the word 'translation' in which it can refer to . . . cultural and inter- and intrasemiotic systems" (xi). In the translation of history to film—an intersemiotic cultural system—the Benjaminian afterlife of the event is precisely what unfolds on the screen, imbuing a message within the viewing public.



(Source: Mel Gibson's movie Apocalypto, time :1:28:52)

Mel Gibson, the director seems to consider the ideas of translation of rituals i.e. The rituals of the Mayan. Zero Wolf takes the captives to a ball court. The captives are released in pairs and forced to run the length of the open space within the ball court, offering Zero Wolf's men some target practice, with a cynical promise of freedom should they reach the end of the field alive. Zero Wolf's son, Cut Rock (Ricardo Díaz Mendoza), is sent to the end of the field to "finish" any survivors. The raiders target the runners with atlatls, arrows and large stones. The first pair are Jaguar Paw's last living friends, Smoke Frog and Blunted (Jonathan Brewer). Smoke Frog is struck by a heavy stone, then finished off by Cut Rock while Blunted is impaled through the stomach by a dart launched with an atlatl.

Next up are Jaguar Paw and the refugee leader from the beginning. Although they almost make it, the refugee leader is shot through the head with an arrow. Jaguar Paw is shot in the waist with another arrow although he is able to break off the arrowhead. As Cut Rock approaches to finish Jaguar Paw, the not-quite-dead Blunted trips Cut Rock, buying Jaguar Paw time. Cut Rock gets up and savagely kills Blunted, then turns to finish off Jaguar Paw,

who reaches up and slices through Cut Rock's neck with the broken-off arrowhead. Jaguar Paw then pulls the arrow from his back and stumbles away towards the jungle.

The entire movie is a depiction of chase for life among the raiders of the Mayan civilization and Jaguar Paw. As Cut Rock bleeds out with Zero Wolf easing him into the next life, Jaguar Paw runs through a withered maize field and an open mass grave of sacrificial victims before finally reaching the jungle. The enraged Zero Wolf and his eight men pursue Jaguar Paw into the jungle and back toward Jaguar Paw's home. Eventually Jaguar Paw climbs a tree. The pursuers move past him, but a black jaguar that has made the tree its home is angered by him, and gives chase. The raiders see Jaguar Paw and the jaguar. At first they only see Jaguar Paw. They move to intercept him, but the jaguar kills one of the raiders. The raiders are forced to stay and kill the jaguar. They ponder this next fulfillment of the girl's prophecy.

Again in pursuit, another raider, Drunkards Four, is killed when a venomous snake bites his neck. Eventually, after running all night, Jaguar Paw finds himself caught between a high waterfall and the raiders and is forced to jump. He survives and declares from the riverbank below that the raiders are now in his homelands, echoing his father's challenge to the refugees at the beginning of the film.

After listening to Jaguar Paw's challenge, Zero Wolf says they must pursue him over the waterfall, but Snake Ink says they will climb down around the side after Jaguar Paw. Zero Wolf stabs Snake Ink for his impudence. Zero Wolf then gives the order that he and his men will jump the falls. While most make it alive, one smashes his head on the rocks below and is killed. The remaining men swim to the shore and restart their pursuit. Jaguar Paw escapes a pool of black quicksand and, now camouflaged in black mud, resolves to become the hunter rather than the hunted. First he disables his pursuers by throwing a hornets' nest into their midst. The coating of mud protects Jaguar Paw from the hornets. Next, Jaguar Paw prepares

poison darts with poison he extracts from a tree toad. The darts allow him to kill another raider. This leads to his showdown with the sadistic Middle Eye, whom Jaguar Paw bludgeons to death with the Mayan war club of the raider he just killed. Now, to add to Jaguar Paw's worries, it begins raining heavily. The cave where Jaguar Paw's wife and son are trapped is starting to flood. As Jaguar Paw rushes to save his family, Zero Wolf confronts him and shoots him again with an arrow. As Zero Wolf advances to finish Jaguar Paw, he blunders into Jaguar Paw's hunting trap; he is impaled and killed.

Following Zero Wolf's death, the two remaining raiders chase Jaguar Paw out to a beach where, much to the surprise of all three of them, they encounter conquistador ships anchored off the coast, with men making their way ashore. The amazement of the raiders allows Jaguar Paw to flee. He returns into the forest to pull his wife and son out of the flooded pit where they are hiding, and where Seven has just given birth to a second son. As the reunited family look out from the forest towards the Spanish ships, Seven wonders if they should go to them, but Jaguar Paw says they should return to the forest in search of a new beginning.

Certainly, the alleged premise for the conquest of Latin America was the evangelization of the un-Christian and savage land, as evident in the decree of the Requerimiento, which suggests that the Amerindians could opt for voluntary Christianization as opposed to a violent conquest. The colonial encounter did not unfold as such, however. Though Tzvetan Todorov insists that

Infinitely more than gold, the spread of Christianity was Columbus's heart's desire. The earliest explores, Columbus's letters make apparent that the desire for riches functioned as the primary incentive for his expedition, as it did for the immense numbers of expedition that succeeded him. (10)

Similarly, Herzog translates the avarice and opines that accompanied the Spanish evangelization of Latin America by means of the film's central story, which portrays man's quest for riches, fame, and power, admittedly with the accompaniment of an ecclesiastical representative. Though Aguirre's expedition is essentially a search for El Dorado, simply the sight of the monk Gaspar de Carvajal reminds viewers that the conquistadores have arrived upon unknown and mysterious lands "through the grace of God, as servants of the Holy Roman Church."

Furthermore, Pizarro's proclamation in the film's first moments opens with the statement "as long as the Virgin Mary is with us" and closes with "may God be with us," thus reiterating the belief that regularly appears in the narratives of conquest: divine will accompanies the Spaniards—God is unquestionably on their side. In addition to the implicit references to Christianization, Aguirre is at other times explicit in regard to the matter. During the above proclamation, for example, the camera pans to the monk Carvajal's face as Pizarro reminds his men that, "as on all expeditions, the word of God must be brought to the pagans." Thus, it is god that is at the center of all the expeditions and adventures led by humans. This is presented in the form of several of rituals and practices followed among people around the world in several of human civilizations, including the Mayans and the Aztecs in the Americas.

Later, as Emperor Guzman and the black slave Okello wistfully lust for the riches of El Dorado, the former imagining food on gold platters and the latter ironically commenting, "and perhaps I will even be free," the monk reminds them that they must not forget their true mission: to spread the word of God. With impeccable timing, Guzman reminds him that a jewel-encrusted cross will indeed be a nice substitution for his misplaced silver one.

Perhaps the most overt scene regarding the religiosity/riches amalgamation, however, occurs after Aguirre's mutiny, as the Spanish slowly drift down the river Huallaga. As they

meander aimlessly, a native couple aboard a canoe suddenly appears out of the jungle. In harmony with their Amazonian surroundings, the couple glides the canoe across the placid river, docking next to the Spaniards' dilapidated raft. As the Amerindians come aboard, their red and yellow attire—an extension of the jungle foliage—further suggests their connection to the land. The multiple fish that lay on the floorboards of their canoe indicate their relative ease amidst the wilderness, an ease that appears in stark contrast to the conquistadores, who, with ravenous shrieks of “fish,” immediately rob the natives' goods, fish included.

The Spanish, of course, at once unleash a barrage of questions upon the natives. Acting as an interpreter, the former Indian prince Balthasar prods the couple and discovers that they are members of the Yagua tribe, and he relays what the indigenous male states:

He knows from his ancestors that one day, the Sons of the Sun would arrive from afar, through great perils the strangers would come from thunder from tubes. They have waited a long time for the coming of the Sons of the Sun. For here on this river, God never finished his creation. (38)

By means of this declaration, Herzog translates to film the prominent myths that have surrounded the Western scholars for ages, as:

Europeans were believed to be gods who had arrived in a mythological second coming. Specifically, in the conquest of Mexico, Cortés's letters indicate that Moctezuma believed the conquistador to be the god Quetzalcóatl, while in Peru's conquest, Atahualpa allegedly accepted the New People's names as Viracochacuna, meaning “the gods” (emphasis in original). (13)

In order to concretize the myth, Herzog depicts Aguirre as the epitome of the Son of the Sun, the blonde haired, blue-eyed Aryan who constantly accompanies the “thunder from tubes”—that is to say, he walks alongside the cannon, which comes to symbolize his autocratic volition and power.

It is thus, there is a new beginning in the life of Jaguar and the children who had survived the bloody raids of the Mayans. Once again, the idyllic form of life is to take place and people are to live in connection and harmony with the forest and the forest creatures – a perfect balance of nature and humans.

III. Ritual Performance as the Way of Life

Rituals have been associated with human beings, since the beginning of human life. They have existed from simple daily habits like praying to food before consuming it to paying respect to the dead ones. There are no societies; primitive to modern that is sans rituals, of one or the other types. In fact, rituals are one of the oldest forms of life sustaining ways followed and practiced by people and communities around the world, since ancient time. People have adhered to different forms of practices in the process of sustaining life, initially in the wild and later in the social communities. These forms later on turned into of sustaining ways and turned into ritual performance. Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* is an attempt to depict one of the ways of life exposed of the Mayan people and theirs' way of living in the wild.

The simple living of the clan of Jaguar Paw and his people is limited to hunting, praying for the dead soul of the hunted animals and children and the forest. The forest is theirs' main source of life-giving source. As such, they are associated with this simple yet complex mode of living and leading life, they encounter the Mayan invaders, a barbarian clan and the village is destroyed and including Jaguar, most of them are caught and taken to the centre of Mayan city. The Mayan people are just the opposite of this humble tribe of Jaguar as they enslave people and others are used for sacrifice. This leads to the clash of civilization, the central theme of the movie.

However, this used to be the way of life among people in ancient time. There used to be lot of warfare and bloodshed making life difficult for the local is the way of life among the Mayan people. In contrary, the Paw's tribe is related to living to an idyllic form of life – hunting and making merry in the wild. They hunt in the wild and pray offers to the god before consuming the prey. This makes their life simple and limited to forest. It is their way of life. On the other hand, the Mayan people who live in large cities adhere to system of

sacrifice of humans. They attack the tribal people, enslave them and take them for sacrifice. The Mayans are shown as people who are conquerors and the imperial power in the wild of the South America. In one such raid, the Jaguar Paw and his men are enslaved and the huts are destroyed by the Mayan.

There has been specific pattern of living habit and culture among the people around the world. In this context, the Mayan people have adhered to making larger monuments like Pyramid, and which, in turn needs a large number of labor. As such, they find the nomadic people living in the forests, their easy target and often raid the forests to capture them for work and sacrifice. This is the way of living for the people during the Mayan civilization, and which has been depicted in *Apocalypto*. After the bloody raid on the tribe of Jaguar Paw, they are enslaved and brought for sacrifice; however, there is an omen in the form that the fall of the Mayan people is not far.

As such, rituals also lead to the fall of a community and its people, like the Mayans. The pattern and practice of human sacrifice and slavery system is supposed to have brought the downfall of the regime. This performance practiced as ritual became the cause of the downfall of the Mayan people.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Strikes Back: Theory and Practice Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Ardren, Traci. "Is Apocalypto Pornography?" *The Times Review* 72.36 (August 13, 2008): 66-69.
- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University, 2003.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Conquergood, Dwight. "Intervention and Racial Research." *The Performance Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2008: 369-80.
- Donoghue, Denis. *The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1959.
- Hansen, Richard D. Dr. Herzog, Werner and Paul Cronin. Herzog on Herzog. Ed. Paul Cronin. London: Faber and Faber, 2002.
- Hruby, Zachary and Stefan Lovgren. "Cultural Subversion in the Digital Age." *Literary Outline*. California: California University Press, 2009: 91-104.
- Mignolo, Walter D. & Freya Schiwy. "Double Translation: Transculturation and the Colonial Difference." *Translation and Ethnography: The Anthropological Challenge of Intercultural Understanding*. Eds. Tullio Maranhão and Bernhard Streck. Tucson: U Of Arizona P, 2003: 3-9.
- Pastor, Beatriz. *The Armature of Conquest: Spanish Accounts of the Discovery of America 1492-1589*. Trans. Lydia Longstreth Hunt. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992.
- Rabasa, José. *Inventing A-M-E-R-I-C-A: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1993.
- Samuels, Harrington. "Into the Insights of the Mayan Civilization." *The Atlantic* 32.9 (May, 2003): 58-69.

Schchener, Richard. "Performance Study." *Teaching Performance Studies*. Southern Illinois, University Press, 2002: ix-xii.

Seed, Patricia. *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World 1492-1640*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Patrick William and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia UP, 1994: 66-111.