What Does Time Have To Do With It?

Time. Some people think there is not enough of it in the day; however, when we are young and can’t wait to drive, drink, or vote, it seems there is too much of it in front of us. Regardless of what you may think, we can all agree upon one thing. Time is a measuring system used as a major subject in religion, science, and philosophy. It controls every aspect of our lives so much that we are constantly checking the clocks and planning everything we do around it.

There are many different systems of time: Atomic Time, Universal Time, Dynamic Time, Terrestrial Time, etc. (Matsakis). For this paper, however, I will be concentrating more on the concept of time, how the Maya calendar system was composed, and how current day Salvadorians use this system, be it circular or linear, in their everyday lives.

To start off, I would like to state that time is an illusion. It is not a real tangible thing that can be seen or touched, but is more of a thing of our imagination. Would time still exist if we did not see change happening around us? Our Western concept of time is linear and derives almost directly from astronomy. We studied the endless repetitious movements between the solar bodies and our own fixed planet. This concept has come under much change since the acceptance that our planet is, in fact, not the center of the universe. However, it was fundamental in that it allowed us to begin to create some sort of measure of time. The development of clocks, likewise, has allowed us to create a more accurate measure of time. Be that it may, do not the visual changes on our planet also present us with a sense of time? Watching water cascade over a cliff gives some sense of passage. Watching a vehicle get smaller and smaller on the horizon gives us some sense of passage. The life and death cycle also...
presents us with a sense of passage. Unfortunately, none of these examples gives us a true
definition of time and, in truth, I do not believe there is a true definition.

In a philosophical sense, there are two theories on time and space. One is the absolute or
Newtonian theory and the other is the relational theory. Absolute theory implies that time exists
independently of the space-time relation of physical events. Relational theory states that it does
not. To state more simply, absolute theory describes space-time as a container or dimension for
events. It would exist with or without the events. Relational theory implies that there might be a
container, but it would not exist without the events or objects. We gain our sense of time and
space by comparing objects in that space to other objects in that same space (Dowden, 2007).

There are some experts who argue that time is an effect of language. Without language,
one would have no sense of the passage of time (Zerzan). I would argue this point simply
because one does not need language to visually see things like the waterfall, the passing of a
vehicle, or the cycle of life and death. But language does help one to describe what one has seen
and, therefore, makes it recordable for future generations.

To switch gears, explaining the Maya concept of time is quite simple. They believed that
time as a whole followed a circular system, but at the same time believed a linear system
controlled their everyday lives much like our Western society believes. Maya life as a whole
held a constant flow between creation and extinction, but things in everyday life happened one
after another. In One Day of Life, things seem to happen in a linear sequence. Lupe gets up to
start her day when she sees the star over her hut. Chepe leaves to work on the plantation. The
guards arrive to “keep the peace”. The demonstration takes place at the church (Argueta 1991
pp. 4, 47, 26 & 146). Everything happens one event after another.
To explain the Maya calendar, one needs to know three main components used in its construction. First is the long count. The long count is a mixed based-20/based-18 representation of a number that represents a day (WebExhibits). In date form, long count would look as such: 0.0.0.0.0. The basic unit is the kin, or day, and it is the last number in the long count. Next, going from right to left, the units are as follows: the uinal, which equals 20 days; the tun, which equals 1 year; the katun, which equals 20 years; and the baktun, which equals 394 years (WebExhibits). The kin, tun, and katun numbers range from 0 to 19, the uinal numbers range from 0 to 17, and the baktun numbers range from 1 to 13 (WebExhibits). Although not mentioned in the long count, the Maya had names for larger spans of time such as the pictun, which equaled 7,885 years; the calabtun, which equaled approximately 158,000 years; the kinchiltin, which equaled approximately 3,000,000 years; and the alautun, which equaled approximately 63,000,000 years (WebExhibits). Logically, the first day in the long count should look like 0.0.0.0.0, but since the baktun ranges from 1 to 13, the first day instead looks like 13.0.0.0.0. This could have been the Mayas’ idea of the creation of the world (WebExhibits).

The second component of the Maya calendar is the Tzolkin. The Tzolkin is the Maya combination of two “week” lengths (WebExhibits). Our calendar uses a single week length composed of seven days, but the Maya calendar had a numbered week of 13 days and a named week of 20 days (WebExhibits). The names of each day in the 20-day week are, in order: Ahau, Imix, Ik, Akbal, Kan, Chicchan, Cimi, Manik, Lamat, Muluc, Oc, Chuen, Eb, Ben, Ix, Men, Cib, Caban, Etznab, and Caunac (WebExhibits). Each day also had a corresponding symbol. One should also take notice that the 20-day week synchronized with the smallest long-day count, which was also twenty. Therefore, if the last digit of the long count was zero, then it is be Ahau.
(WebExhibits). Each of the numbered and named weeks changed daily, just as our calendar system does, which means that the day after 3 Cimi is not 4 Cimi, but 4 Manik (WebExhibits). The next Cimi rolls around 20 days later and will be 10 Cimi. The next 3 Cimi does not occur until after 260 days have passed (WebExhibits). This system supports the idea that life held a circular pattern to Maya culture, in which things always returned to a single point.

The last component of the Maya calendar was the Haab. The Haab was the civil calendar and consisted of 18 months, each 20 days long, followed by an extra five days known as Uayeb. Tallying the days, one should notice that a year consisted of a similar 365 days (WebExhibits). The names of the month were, in order: Pip, Uo, Zip, Zotz, Tzec, Xul, Yaxkin, Mol, Chen, Yax, Zac, Ceh, Man, Kankin, Muan, Pax, Kayab, and Cumka (WebExhibits). Unlike the Tzolkin dates, which changed daily, the Haab dates changed only every 20 days. Five Zotz was followed by 6 Zotz...up to 19 Zotz, which then went back to 0 Tzec (WebExhibits). The use of the 0th day of the month is unique to the Maya calendar and belief is that the Maya discovered the number zero long before Europe or Asia did (WebExhibits). This number zero brings about a distinct feeling of extinction, or creation. Our culture does not use zero because it seems to be an irrelevant number. With the Maya, it is important to notice because it fits perfectly with the circular flow; creation to extinction to creation.

Going back to the Uayeb days, these days were associated with bad luck and often were times of prayer and mourning. Anyone born on these days was “doomed to a miserable life” (WebExhibits). Since the length of the Tzolkin was 260 days and the length of the Haab was 365, one finds that the smallest number evenly divided by both is 18,980. This cycle, known as the Calendar Round, took place every 52 years and brought about public panic as the people
assumed the world was ending (WebExhibits). This system took into account three different calendars, making it more accurate than the European Gregorian calendar. It included the movements of the sun and the moon, coordinated with the planting and harvesting of corn, dictated proper times to be married, times to go to war, times to attend church, and even took into account the natural life and death cycle. Time had a bearing on everyday life and was a major concern, just as it is in our culture. While the Maya were not concerned with being on time for a job interview, they took time very seriously and were constantly aware of it.

Lastly, the Maya concept of time still has some bearing on modern day Salvadorians. Today, El Salvador rests in the Central Time zone just like Minnesota. Since the Maya believed time was both linear and circular, that belief has passed down directly to the Salvadorians. The Salvadorians see everything during the course of the day as happening in sequence, one after another. Many of its people get up extremely early to start their day and work late into the evening. This can be seen in Manlio Argueta’s One Day of Life by the fact the book starts at 5:30 A.M. and ends at 5 P.M. (Argueta 1991 p. 3 & 213). Lupe’s life also follows a linear pattern, but it is also circular in a sense that it repeats itself each day, day after day. She gets up, works the home, waits to see Justino, etc. Time seems to pass very quickly and, in parts, very slowly in One Day of Life. The book skips through times of day as if they were unimportant, yet slows time down for the truly important parts. Like when Lupe is entertaining the guards who are waiting for Adolfin (Argueta 1991 p. 80). In aspects to modern El Salvador, time carries great importance and can pass very quickly or very slowly depending on whose shoes you are in.

In conclusion, I hope I was able to give you a brief description of time, as well as give you an understanding of how the Maya calendar was composed and how it relates to modern day
El Salvador. As I stated before, time is an imaginary thing that exists only in the context of our minds. Its representation comes from your beliefs and your culture. It can be take the form of a linear or circular pattern. It can be measured with clocks and can be seen in the changes that happen around us. In truth, time has no definition and is intangible. Whether you think there is too much or too little during the course of the day, I hope we can all agree to that.

Comment [s24]: Nice return to the beginning, Josh. Nice job. You’ve addressed most of the issues I wanted you to. But you STILL miss an important opportunity with LUPE and the manner in which the BOOK is structured to place PAST, PRESENT, and FUTURE within ONE DAY in this book. THAT is very similar to Mayan time. If you get a chance to revise this thing one more time, I think THIS is where you should place your efforts.

GRADE: 90
A-
Bibliography


Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://www.iep.utm.edu/t/time.html#H6


http://www.primitivism.com/time.htm