The Mayan Cultural Effect

El Salvador’s unstable nation of modern times has many influences from the ancient Mayan era. Argeuta’s novel, *One Day of Life*, captures the side of the story of the El Salvador conflict from a lower class farm laboring family’s point of view. Many connections can be made between this family’s way of life and traditions and that of the ancient Mayan society that the El Salvadorans descended from. These influences may provide insight as to why the laboring social class was exploited during the time of conflict occurring before and during the El Salvador civil war. Some of these connections include social class structure, gender roles, agricultural lifestyle, and the belief that many events are out of human control.

The first influence that the Mayan culture had on modern day El Salvador is the structure of social classes. Pre-civil war, El Salvador’s class structure resembled the major imbalance of power that existed in ancient Mayan society. Mayan society was comprised of three main social classes which are nobles, commoners, and slaves. Mayan nobles owned orchards and land (Carmack, Gasco, & Gossen, 2007, p. 113). This type of division parallels social classes focused on in *One Day of Life*. In the book, the three classes were the land owners, the “authorities”, and the laborers. The authorities were a class created by the land owners to protect their investment: “The authorities are short on words; they don’t want to lose their strength by speaking to civilians. They act. That’s
the only way they can defend *property, which is sacred*. That’s why many of them are paid by landowners” (p. 63).

In ancient Mayan society “warfare was often performed for the purpose of raiding for captives, some of whom were sacrificed, whereas others became slaves” (Carmack, Gasco, & Gossen, 2007, p. 113). This also is similar to the manner in which the upper classes in *One Day of Life* treat the lower class, treating them as a pawn in their game of greed: “At bottom we help produce the wealth of the landowners when we take care of the children by ourselves”… “That is to say, we are giving our time to the landowners so that our husbands can produce more, can be better exploited” (p. 204). They do not take into account the laborers’ living conditions, since accommodating them would lower profits. In the pre-civil war era, El Salvadoran laborers were paid a bare minimum wage that was barely enough to live on. Even though El Salvador was considered a democracy by its leaders, this great separation of power caused the laborers to live in *slave-like* conditions. An example of the landowners’ oppressing power over the lower class is described in Argueta’s novel: “If one stops atop a wall or a cliff, everything the eye can see belongs to one owner. Even the horizon is theirs. And the sky, too” (p. 63).

Another main connection that can be made between ancient Mayan civilization and contemporary El Salvador is the dominant agricultural lifestyle. The *Encarta Online Encyclopedia* states that the Preclassic Mayans’ society was heavily based on farming: “Later in the Preclassic period, they adopted intensive farming techniques such as continuous cultivation involving crop rotation and fertilizers, household gardens”. It is apparent in Argueta’s novel that Lupe’s family’s life is based around the *intensive labor of farm work*. A vivid quote late in the book sums up this
lifestyle: “We are also slaves, slaves obliged to clear the fields of the plantation, to pick the coffee on time and to make sure that the cotton is not messed up by the rains or by insects” (p. 204).

Another similarity between the two cultures is gender roles. In Mayan society “Men hunted and farmed, and women prepared foods, wove, raised small animals, and cared for the children” (Carmack, Gasco, & Gossen, 2007, p. 442). This is similar to the roles portrayed in One Day of Life. An example narrated by Lupe can be found in the text. She explains how she makes her way around to water all of the plants in the household, then prepares food for the pigs (p. 9-10). An example of the male role of laboring in the fields is also explained by Lupe: “My brothers used to kill themselves chopping and hoeing. My father, too” (p.13).

A fourth resemblance of Mayan culture is the belief that many things are out of human control. The main example of this in Argueta’s novel is when Lupe describes how children died in her parents’ family, and how her son died of diarrhea. She explains how people in their situation can’t afford medicine. She talks about how they would take the babies to the priest, and he said there is virtually nothing you can do to save the baby. This situation is illuminated by quotes such as these in the text: “We couldn’t do anything, only accept; it was God’s will” and “Well, the priest had so enthralled us that even our hearts were turning to stone. I didn’t even cry for my son when he died, because death had become so natural that we thanked God for taking him away” (p.22). It is common knowledge that in this time period there were easily accessible medications (to our society at least) that could have saved these children with ease, but these lower class El Salvadorans just accepted these unnecessary deaths as a fact of life. The Mayans
believed that the gods controlled everything, so whatever happened was due to the mercy of the gods. The Encarta Online Encyclopedia states “The early Maya worshipped agricultural gods, such as the rain god and, later, the corn god. Eventually they developed the belief that gods controlled events in each day, month, and year”.

These similarities to the ancient Mayan culture, although in certain cases subtle, provide a better understanding of the human condition of the farm laboring class of contemporary El Salvador. Lupe’s family and other low class families in El Salvador were being exploited by the landowners and their authorities who possessed more technology, money, and power. The Mayans were overrun by the Spanish who possessed more technology, money, and power (Carmack, Gasco, & Gossen, 2007, p. 176-180).

Comment [s18]: I can’t dispute you here, Quinn, even though I NEED MORE INFO ON THIS FATALISM among the Mayans. They NEVER really CHANGED—they never worked to MOVE their culture along a curve of progress. They had found their truth in their gods and in the planting and harvesting and re-planting of corn. You could do a little more here, but the paragraph coheres very well, and you’ve written well in it.

Comment [s19]: I don’t disagree with that. However, you miss two opportunities here, Quinn: one, to return to that very interesting HYPOTHESIS you develop in your THESIS that drives the paper and to use it in the conclusion to do the SECOND THING—bring into play a few undeniable DIFFERENCES between the ancient Maya and the pre-civil war Salvadorans that you are prepared to ADMIT but discount quickly because of the point of view toward the two cultures you’ve adopted. Do you see what I mean? You’re very close here. I would have liked MORE on the Maya in at least TWO of the sub-divisions of your paper, simply because you are USING them to set a FOUNDATION for the points of comparison you want to find in the Salvadorans. I think you get what I mean. That’s basic. That having been said, the paper is well-written, sourced (I HATE the ENCARTA source—don’t rely on it again; you could do so much better), and organized, and you’ve done a very ELEGANT job of integrating QUOTES.

The paper is a marginal A-, but could I get your permission to circulate it to the rest of the class? Some folks are having difficulties integrating the quoted materials. You’ve got something important to show them in that regard. Let me know. Nice job overall.

GRADE: 90 A-
References

