The Importance of Musical Instruments to the Maya

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Abstract

When one mentions the ancient Maya, it is usually in relation to warfare, traditional sacrificial ceremonies and a ‘play to the death’ ball game. However, there are many other important aspects that make up the ancient civilization of the Maya, including pottery, art and music. These three topics were all important to the ceremonies and traditions that occurred during the period of the Maya. Through extensive excavations at sites such as Pacbitun and Bonampak, it has become apparent that musical instruments played a significant role within the life of the Maya. Evidence of musical instruments found in the archaeological record shows the inclusion of music in the day to day activities of the Maya. Elaborate murals found at the site of Bonampak in Mexico, show the extensive use of musical instruments for sacrificial victory celebrations. Many of these ceremonies were completed in hopes of creating a better afterlife for the Maya by praying and offering gifts to the gods. Indeed, it is apparent that the use of musical instruments was important to the inhabitants of these Maya sites.

Introduction

The ancient Maya are known for their incredible pyramids, and elaborate hieroglyphs that depict a life of war and luxury in Mesoamerica. The ancient Maya have been presented in society as a rather mysterious civilization compared to other cultures that we have learned about, such as the Greeks and Romans. With the growing attention to the Maya lifestyle, in recent years, it has become apparent that there are many things that we still do not know about this ancient civilization. That said, archaeologists have been working in the area of the ancient Maya for decades and have uncovered an endless amount of artifacts, monuments and architecture that have helped aid in discovering who the ancient Maya really were. In their time of occupation during what we would call the Classic period, the Maya were living a glorious lifestyle amongst their growth of crops, carved ceramics, jewelry and beads made of precious jade. It is evident that the Maya displayed their wealth to the public through dress and artwork as well as through very ritualistic and traditional ceremonies. It was through these ceremonies that the ancient Maya were able to worship their gods and pray for a peaceful transition into the afterlife.

Music was an important aspect to their performance during these ceremonies, which is evident based on the amount of instruments found in the archaeological record at the various sites that have been excavated. When examining the context of the musical instruments at these Maya sites, it is apparent
that music was a significant aspect to the ceremonies performed during the abandonment period. By examining who made the musical instruments and who created the images that depicted the use of these instruments, one will be able to better understand their purpose within the context of the ancient Maya civilization.

Interpreting Music in the Archaeological Record

It is important to remember when one is examining the artifacts found in the archaeological record that it may not always be what it seems. It is important to look at the context that the objects are found in when interpreting the use and purpose of an object. This type of analysis pertains to any type of object found in the archaeological record, such as ceramics, pottery, figurines, human remains and even paintings (Pohl 1981). How these objects are seen within the surrounding area helps provide a deeper insight as to what they were used for and when they may have been used by the Maya. In reference to musical instruments, by looking at the surrounding objects, if there are any, one will be able to see if the instruments were used in conjunction with other practices (Pohl 1981). The law of disjunction is important to keep in mind when interpreting the artifacts found in the archaeological record (Pohl 1981). Even though something may look the same throughout a period of time, the function and use of the object could have changed significantly. This pertains to all types of artifacts found through excavation such as figurines, stelae, ceramic pottery pieces, vase paintings and murals (Pohl 1981).

It is evident, based on the artifacts found in the archaeological record, that figurines were commonly used in rituals and ceremonies by the Maya. The figurines were often presented during these ceremonies as offerings to the gods, as well as for musical purposes (Triadan 2007). There were a wide variety of purposes for these figurines, and their use was very much dependent on the style and shape of the object. Although the use of the figurines changed little throughout the Pre-Classic and Post-Classic time periods, the way that they were made and shaped seemed to change considerably (Triadan 2007). In the Pre-Classic period, majority of the figurines found were in the shape of a female, and were solid and modelled. However, there were some whistles found during this period as well (Triadan 2007). In the Post-Classic period, the figurines found were hollow and also included mold-made whistles that depicted both male and female bodies (Triadan 2007). Animals were also common shapes found among the figurines in this time period, along with odd supernatural creatures that were elaborately dressed (Triadan 2007). The change in style could represent a multitude of things, ranging from changes in gender roles to changes within power and hierarchy. The different manufacturing techniques and function of the figurines also help decipher the type of changes that may have occurred within the state cities at the time (Triadan 2007). Different manufacturing techniques could mean they came from a different site through trade or that there were advancements at the site that which they were found.

Along with figurines and whistles being found at a number of sites, there are also other musical instruments and depictions of instruments present within the archaeological record. At certain sites, there is evidence of drums, whistles, rattles, trumpets and flutes, that all pertain to the musical influence that the
Maya had on one another during their ceremonies (Healy 1988). Two sites that contain this remarkable evidence of musical instruments are the sites of Pacbitun in the Cayo District of Belize and Bonampak in Mexico (Healy 1988). Both of these sites have proved to be very influential in the understanding of how important music was to the Maya and their ritual ceremonies. Based on the context that these instruments were found in, it is apparent that they were of great value with the funerary rituals and the celebration of victory after battle (Healy 1988). By examining these locations and the instruments found at Pacbitun and Bonampak, one will be able to see how important these instruments were to the ceremonies and rituals of the Maya despite their lack of abundance within the archaeological record.

Music in Maya Ceremony and Daily Life

It is evident that ritual ceremonies were a very important lifestyle among the ancient Maya, not only for special occasions but also for their everyday lives. Some of the rituals included food offerings, blessings, and bloodletting; all of which projected a type of symbolism about the Maya culture (Coe 1993). Burial ceremonies were one of the most significant events that the Maya took part in as they worshipped the gods on a daily basis to ensure that they passed onto the afterlife under good honour (Coe 1993:182). There were many traditions and rituals that took place during these ceremonies that involve specific tools, instruments and offerings to the gods. With the ceremonial burials being such an important event within society, it seems logical that there was some type of music played throughout the ceremony.

Along with burials, artwork was another common way for specific cultures to distinguish themselves from other civilizations. In the case of the Maya, artwork was a way for them to present their life history to the world around them (Ruppert et al. 1955). It was a way that the elites could re-tell their family history through paintings on the walls of the pyramids and temples, or by the carvings in the stelae. It is evident through extensive excavation and research at the sites in the Maya region that the majority, if not all, of the paintings and artwork are related to a ritual ceremony of some kind (Ruppert et al. 1995).

Therefore, it was not shocking to find large mural paintings on the walls at the site of Bonampak in Mexico. However, what these paintings depicted, not to mention how articulate and large they were, was an astounding find for Maya archaeology. It is rare to find paintings that have been this well preserved for an extensive period of time due to the continuous change in climate, hot temperatures and lasting rainfalls, as well as the destruction of the buildings themselves from general wear and tear (Hammond 1982). When looking at what the artwork is depicting, it is clear that there was a lot happening at this site during a specific time period. They are not only paintings of a battle but they also show a victory celebration involving a variety of musical instruments (Hammond 1982). Evidently, this is a depiction of how the Maya used instruments in a celebratory way. Also, the variety of instruments portrayed in this mural shows that this was an event to be remembered. It is not very well known how common it was for the Maya to use instruments like the ones shown at Bonampak because the paintings often did not preserve well due to changes in climate. Although, one can assume that they were plentiful, based on the number displayed in this mural.

In this scene, there was a twelve man
orchestra; the five men at the beginning of the line are carrying a rattle, next is a drummer, followed by three men who are beating tortoise shells with antlers (Ruppert et al. 1955). At the very end of the orchestra line are two men playing the trumpets and another using what is believed to be a whistle (Ruppert et al. 1955). Artwork was such an important aspect for the Maya that it is of great value to find a mural of this caliber today. Displaying their artwork was the most common way that the Maya passed down their history to future generations; to ensure that the younger generations knew what their predecessors had accomplished within their lifetime. Warfare and victory was important to the Maya, which is what we see today throughout their murals, vase paintings, stelae carvings and other artifacts. The fact that music was displayed in this piece of artwork within a temple of high status shows that its involvement in this event was of great importance to their existence.

Music was not always a performance feature that was played in times of celebration of victory or of the passing of life. It was something that was experienced on a daily basis within the Maya population. Music was, and still is, something that everyone could partake in at any age. There have been a number of whistles found in the archaeological record that have aided in deciphering the use and purpose of musical instruments in the Maya area. These whistles are often referred to as ‘ocarinas’ and are a common instrument found in the archaeological record (Healy 1988). A number of ocarinas were found at the site of Pacbitun in the Cayo District of Belize (Healy 1988). These very articulate figurine-like ocarinas were found along with a drum, two flute-maracas, and five flutes in a burial at Pacbitun (Healy 1988). There were a number of burials found at the site of Pacbitun; this particular one dated to the Late Classic period (Healy 1990). The Late Classic period, represents a time when the Maya were the most complex throughout their occupancy of this site. This is evident based on the elaborate burials found at the site that dates to this time period (Healy 1990). These burials consisted of a large amount of offerings to the gods such as vessels, human sacrificial victims, as well as the musical instruments (Healy 1990). The fact that these burials were the most complex of this period, shows that music was an important aspect to the overall funerary practice. With little evidence known about the musical instruments, it speaks volumes to find these types of artifacts within a burial as significant as the one located at Pacbitun. It is evident that music was an attribute of the complex society that the Maya are recognized for.

Similar to the musical instruments found at the site of Pacbitun, the site of Lubaantun, Belize, also contained a number of flutes within its archaeological record (Hammond 1975). The flutes are very different instruments than what is considered an ocarina, or whistle, although they are sometimes referred to as that. The flutes found at Lubaantun were only fragments. Therefore, it is difficult to decipher the actual size of the instruments, but the fragments range from 2-4.5 cm in length (Hammond 1975:369). It seems that they were likely not very large in size. Also found at Lubaantun, were figurines of what looks to be a musician beating on a drum and holding a rattle (Hammond 1975:369). This figurine, along with the instruments, seem to be similar depictions of the musicians represented in the murals at Bonampak. It is interesting to see how similar the artwork and ceramic artifacts are when portraying the musicians while they are playing these instruments. Lubaantun is a site in
Belize, as well as Pacbitun, while Bonampak was in the western part of Mexico. Therefore, it is likely that music was an activity that took place throughout the Maya region; it was clearly not subject to a specific site or location within the Maya region. This means that despite the lack of evidence in the archaeological record showing the use of musical instruments; it was very much a part of the Maya culture. With evidence present through artwork and usable form of musical instrument on both sides of the Maya region, it is undeniable that music played a significant role in the various ceremonies and traditions within the Maya region.

Conclusions: Past and Present Maya Music

It is obvious that there is a lack of evidence supporting the use of musical instruments in the Maya region as a whole. Many of the artifacts found in modern day are made from ceramics or the musical instruments have been displayed through art on the walls (Hammond 1975). Both of these materials are susceptible to damage especially with the type of hot, wet environment that encompasses the Maya region. However, many of the instruments that we are unable to find today were made out of more fragile materials such as wood and textiles (Hammond 1975). These materials do not preserve well within the archaeological record, if at all. This explains why it is rare to find any type of musical instrument besides the ceramic flute, or ocarina made out of a substantial material at a site. This also helps explain why the artwork found at Bonampak and the various flutes and whistles are so important to Maya archaeology. These artifacts are the only ones that have been found that relate to the use of musical instruments. Therefore, it is important to analyze them extensively to ensure that they are fully understood.

Music was a large part of the ceremonies and rituals performed by the ancient Maya, but even in modern times music remains a part of the Maya traditions. The Cargo ritual is a popular ceremony that involves a bullfight (Pohl 1981). This ritual, which occurs in the Highlands of Chiapas, is the main event involves the killing of a bull in which musical instruments are played throughout to add to the overall performance (Pohl 1981). The point of the ritual is to attempt to keep the evil spirits away and ensure that the Maya will have a good harvest in the upcoming year (Pohl 1981). Drums made out of turtle shells, beaten with corn cobs are an example of the type of instruments used in this ceremony (Pohl 1981). It is insightful that even with the multitude of new instruments we have in modern day; the Maya still use the same form of musical instruments that were used a thousand years ago. This represents the importance of tradition and ritual to the Maya, and shows how they believe that everything is connected. The fact that the Maya are still using the same type of musical instruments manufactured a thousand years ago only emphasizes the importance that these instruments had on the Maya and their rituals and ceremonies. It is important to remind oneself when examining these artifacts that even though one may not find the most abundant amount of musical instruments, it does not mean that they were not significant to the Maya.

Overall, it is clear that the ancient Maya took great care in producing and performing with the musical instruments that have been found in the archaeological record. Evidence of the Maya using musical instruments found at Bonampak, Pacbitun and
Lubaantun, is astounding. The craftsmanship, and incredible detail that went into the creation of these instruments was also present in the illustrations and depictions of the instruments on the wall murals at Bonampak. The murals at Bonampak are an expression of a time when the rulers had succeeded in battle and took pride in the victory enough to portray the events on a wall, which has now lasted a thousand years. The incorporation of the musical orchestra emphasizes the importance that the musical instruments had to their ceremonies and victory celebration. The various artifacts found at Pacbitun and Lubaantun, indicate that these musical instruments were not just used for celebratory or funerary purposes. The whistles and ocarinas were of significance to the everyday lives of the ancient Maya at these sites. Consequently, through extensive research one can say that despite the lack of overwhelming evidence to support the use of musical instruments in the Maya region, it is without doubt that the Maya did participate in the use of musical instruments. It is important to remember that one does not always need an abundance of a single artifact, like musical instruments, to prove that they were of importance. Rather, it is how one is able to interpret the use of a material object based on context that can prove whether it was of significance to the population or not.

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