

# The 2012 Phenomenon

## New Age Appropriation of an Ancient Mayan Calendar

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Robert K. Sitler

**ABSTRACT:** According to the ancient Mayan Long Count calendar, a cycle of more than 5,000 years will come to fruition on the winter solstice of 2012. While this date is largely unknown among contemporary Maya, some participants in the New Age movement believe it will mark an apocalyptic global transformation. Hundreds of books and Internet sites speculate wildly about the 2012 date, but little of this conjecture has a factual basis in Mayan culture. This paper provides an overview of the primary currents in the 2012 phenomenon, examines their sources, and speculates about developments as this highly anticipated date approaches.

The winter solstice of the year 2012 in the northern hemisphere<sup>1</sup> will mark the culmination of a cycle spanning approximately 5126 years in the ancient Mayan<sup>2</sup> calendar known as the Long Count. There is intense and growing speculation concerning the significance of this date among many New Age aficionados and others interested in Mayan culture.<sup>3</sup> Some mistakenly refer to the December 21, 2012,<sup>4</sup> solstice date as the “end of the Mayan calendar” and many suggest it will bring about a catastrophic destruction of the world and/or a radical renovation of human consciousness. In spite of a general lack of familiarity with Mayan culture outside of the Mayan homeland in Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize, several hundred Internet websites in over two dozen languages and a growing corpus of books already focus on the subject, often venturing into outlandish conjecture concerning the date’s implications.<sup>5</sup> Investigation of the principal trends in the

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2012 phenomenon reveals merely tangential connections to the realities of the Mayan world and even these tenuous links at times expose gross misinterpretations of Mayan culture by some associated with the movement. Contemporary Maya themselves have thus far contributed little to the 2012 phenomenon since only a small number have had any prior exposure to the topic.<sup>6</sup> The Long Count calendar fell into disuse well before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors and knowledge of its rediscovery by Western academics has reached few of today's Maya apart from the most educated. The 2012 date, however, has taken on vital importance for several Maya religious practitioners acting within New Age circles and their contributions have helped bolster interest in the movement. This paper provides an overview of the primary currents contributing to the 2012 phenomenon, examines their principal sources, and speculates about possible developments as this highly anticipated date approaches. In doing so, it will demonstrate that some New Age enthusiasts have selectively appropriated elements from Mayan culture, at times in collaboration with several contemporary Maya religious specialists who lend an authoritative indigenous flavor to the various "millennial"<sup>7</sup> theories concerning 2012.

#### WHAT IS THE MAYAN LONG COUNT?

Maya used the Long Count calendar during what scholars call the Classic Period of their culture, which lasted from roughly 250–900 c.e. In fact, use of this calendar on the ancient Mayan stone monuments literally defines the Classic Period. The December 21, 2012, date simply marks the last day of the current *b'ak'tun*<sup>8</sup> cycle, a period of 144,000 days roughly equivalent to 394 years. More significantly, it marks the end of the thirteenth *b'ak'tun*, the culminating period of a far larger calendar cycle that began on August 11, 3114 B.C.E.,<sup>9</sup> and that will come to fruition 1,872,000 days later on the 2012 winter solstice. It is important to point out that this so-called Great Cycle was only a minor component in far larger chronological periods that theoretically extend infinitely backwards and forward in time within a system of exponentially increasing temporal cycles that have no final beginning or ending points.

#### NEW AGE LEADERS OF THE 2012 PHENOMENON

The best known of the New Age movements tied to the 2012 date is that led by José Argüelles, the Mexican-American spiritual teacher responsible for the so-called Harmonic Convergence that took place in mid-August 1987. Argüelles believes that this earlier event marked "the exponential acceleration of the wave harmonic of history as it phases into a moment of unprecedented synchronization,"<sup>10</sup> words that reveal the cryptic nature of much of his work. The jacket of his best-known book,

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*The Mayan Factor*, called the 1987 date a “shift point into the last 25 years of the galactic beam,” a beam presumably due to shift once again in 2012, ushering in a period of greater human enlightenment. In the text, Argüelles revealed that before writing the book, he had “come to feel the spiritual presence of the Maya,”<sup>11</sup> a statement that assures readers that his beliefs arose from the inner realms of the indigenous soul.

In 1993, he made a far bolder attempt to build upon his connections to the Mayan world by declaring that he had come into communication with what he called Telektonon, a “Talking Stone of Prophecy.”<sup>12</sup> The Telektonon purportedly revealed itself to Argüelles in a channeled message delivered through a stone “tube” that extends upstairs from the crypt of the famed seventh-century Maya king, K’inich Janaab’ Pakal, in the Temple of the Inscriptions in Palenque, Mexico. (This curious archeological feature actually exists.) Since then, Argüelles has acted as spokesperson for the ancient Maya king, among other things proposing a global shift to a self-invented thirteen-month lunar calendar in preparation for 2012. He asserts that in 830 C.E. the Classic Maya leadership “departed back to space, back to the other dimensions from which the Maya keep their watch on things.”<sup>13</sup>

While Argüelles approaches many aspects of Mayan culture with similar creative abandon, his most audacious use of it is the creation of a personal version of the 260-day Mayan ritual calendar commonly known as the *tzolk’in*. This “day count” is arguably the most significant of all Mayan calendars since it is the only one of the numerous Mayan chronological systems still in use by some Maya today. Argüelles’ Dreamspell calendar, which he calls “a precise expression of the prophetic tradition of the *Chilam Balam*,”<sup>14</sup> shows only superficial resemblance to the *tzolk’in* calendar used by contemporary daykeepers in the Guatemalan highlands and has only limited connections to the Yucatek Mayan *Chilam Balam* books of prophecy. Argüelles has recently acknowledged the fundamental discrepancies between the Dreamspell calendar and that of contemporary Maya, explaining only that his calendar is “Galactic Maya” rather than “Indigenous Maya.”<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, however, his extensive work with New Age audiences has created a situation in which his recently invented Mayan calendar may now be even more widely known outside of the Mayan world than the actual ritual calendar that Maya daykeepers patiently developed and maintained in an oral tradition dating back more than two thousand years. Argüelles now refers to his work and followers as “New Dispensation Maya,”<sup>16</sup> and he has taken the name Valum Votan (“Closer of the Cycle”) for use in his work spreading what he says are prophecies from the seventh-century *B’akal ahaw* (Lord of Palenque).

Argüelles is merely the best-known teacher in an expanding international group that includes dozens of highly inventive and often eccentric individuals reaching out to the New Age public with ideas concerning 2012. One unidentified man outdoes Argüelles by claiming that he is

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actually a living reincarnation of Palenque's K'inich Janaab' Pakal, not just the modern spokesperson, a move that presumably guarantees the authenticity of his indigenous ties. His website<sup>17</sup> includes a running clock that marks the time, second by second, remaining until the 2012 date and even contains an interview with the living "Lord Pakal" outlining his hopes for the future. This curious bilingual (Spanish and English) site even urges readers not to "forget to check the Official Lord Pakal's Maya Store for apparel and cool stuff," suggesting that this current incarnation of the royal Maya figure has an entrepreneurial side. Another New Age specialist on the 2012 date, Richard Boylan, believes that Earth will become part of an extraterrestrial federation in 2012.<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, a teacher named Jelaila Starr believes that she channels beings from a planet called Nibiru that will rejoin our solar system on that fateful year.<sup>19</sup> One popular New Age book by Adrian G. Gilbert and Maurice M. Cotterell even posits that in 2012, the Earth's magnetic field will reverse, producing cataclysmic results.<sup>20</sup> The few theories mentioned here represent merely a small fraction of the growing amalgam of New Age materials now available concerning the 2012 date, including compact discs of music, videos, on-line discussion groups, and even commemorative t-shirts.

Scores of allegedly Mayan, equally peculiar, and sometimes contradictory prophecies concerning 2012 now appear on the Internet in a multitude of languages. Most of these prophecies are products of purportedly channeled contacts with ancient Maya spirit beings or extraterrestrial entities and few have any substantive connection with the actual Mayan world and its ancient culture. One New Age current from Spain outlines seven prophecies ostensibly derived in part, like Argüelles' calendar, from the *Books of Chilam Balam*, a collection of almanacs kept by Maya religious scribes in the post-conquest Yucatan peninsula. According to this site, one *Chilam Balam* text states that the current *k'atun* cycle<sup>21</sup> of approximately twenty years will end in 2012 bringing a period of darkness followed by the "coming of the men of the sun bringing a sign for the future."<sup>22</sup> The site's reference to this authentic Mayan literary expression is intended to leave readers with the impression that this prophecy and the writer's other claims regarding world renewal arise directly from an ancient indigenous tradition. However, this particular passage from the *Chilam Balam* most likely refers to the late 1700s and explicitly makes clear reference to the end of the *k'atun* named 13 Ahaw. 2012 actually marks the culmination of *k'atun* 4 Ahaw,<sup>23</sup> preceding *k'atun* 13 Ahaw by nearly forty years. By a simple omission of temporal specifics regarding this prophecy, believers in 2012 as a transformational year provide what appears to be a solid support from the Mayan cultural context when none actually exists. Other New Age 2012 prophecies lack even weak ties such as this to the Mayan heritage.

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### MAYA PARTICIPANTS IN THE 2012 MOVEMENT

A few New Age teachers actually are Maya or claim partial Mayan ancestry. One might assume that living indigenous traditions would substantially inform these teachers' thinking on the 2012 subject and lend a certain authenticity to the movement. For the most part, however, their approaches seem deeply entwined with those of non-Maya New Age teachers. The best known of the Maya teachers involved in the 2012 phenomenon is Humbatz Men, a Yúcatek Maya said to be from the "Itza lineage." He works closely with the aforementioned José Argüelles and shares many of Argüelles' views on 2012, though adding a few elements of his own. According to Men, the Maya have lived all over the world since ancient times, including Egypt, India, and even Atlantis. He further concludes that a spiral motif common in Mesoamerican iconography represents the Milky Way, suggesting that the ancient Maya somehow knew of our galaxy's whirling shape.<sup>24</sup> Academic literature on the Maya does not support these and many more of Men's ideas concerning his culture. However, the fact that he is actually Maya adds sufficient authority to his ideas that he has succeeded in developing a loyal following.

A Mexican calling himself Quetza Sha is another associate of Humbatz Men and refers to himself as an Aztec-Maya shaman, a claim that for many New Age readers would guarantee his authority. For Sha, the 2012 date represents the dawn of a new spiritual awareness for the world. He states that the Maya "came from the stars" and then "disappeared, without any apparent reason, hundreds of years ago," glossing over the presence of millions of contemporary Maya.<sup>25</sup> Sha also teaches that the legendary Feathered Serpent, K'uk'ulkan, returned to Earth in spirit form during a 1991 eclipse in the Mexican state of Yucatán.

Like Sha, another New Age shaman working under the name Tze'ec Ba'lám (his spelling) is also part Maya and uses the honorary title Alom Ajau. Ba'lám explains that, "we are moving through the final years of the Tzol'kin [sic] Sacred Mayan Calendar and are moving toward the dawn of a new cycle."<sup>26</sup> Given the perpetual nature of the ritual *tzol'kin* calendar currently in use in the Mayan highlands, the idea that it has a "last recorded date" seems nonsensical. His website also offers a music CD that "was approved by the Mayan Counsel (sic) . . . and authenticated by the International Mayan League,"<sup>27</sup> organizations one presumes to be of considerable stature. In fact, the Mayan Council is a New Age group led by Humbatz Men and the International Mayan League is a tiny cultural revitalization group in Vermont run by a couple of Maya refugees. The fact that this individual has sought out such authentication points once again to the desire of many New Age teachers to demonstrate convincingly that their teachings regarding 2012 have origins in a genuinely Mayan cultural context.

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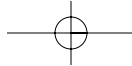
### INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER: JOHN MAJOR JENKINS

While scholars have understood the basic components of the Long Count calendar for a century or more, only recently have some focused attention on the potential significance of its 3114 B.C.E. “beginning”<sup>28</sup> date. Given the importance of astronomy to the ancient Maya, investigators logically have examined the potential astronomical importance of the August 11, 3114 B.C.E., “zero” date in the Long Count that hieroglyphic texts link to the mythical events of cosmic creation, but they have found little of consequence occurring in the night sky. However, an independent researcher named John Major Jenkins has looked in the opposite temporal direction and proposed that the Maya instead used the close of the Great Cycle in 2012 as a set point or “zero” date for the Long Count. In his book, *Maya Cosmogogenesis 2012*, by far the best-researched of the numerous books that focus on the 2012 date, he theorizes that Classic Maya astronomers set the Long Count on the 2012 solstice date after noting an alignment on that day between the Milky Way galaxy and the sun.<sup>29</sup>

Jenkins makes no claims regarding his own ties to the Mayan world and has a working understanding of Mayan calendar systems and astronomy. Even though experts on Mayan astronomy such as Anthony Aveni and Susan Milbrath dismiss his conclusions<sup>30</sup> and at least one scholar has aggressively attacked his central thesis,<sup>31</sup> Jenkins’ relative familiarity with the pertinent astronomical issues gives him a privileged position among New Age aficionados who are generally uninformed about the subject. As a result, he has been a central influence on the 2012 phenomenon and his impact is likely to increase. In fact, Jenkins has written an extensive foreword for a recent publication that promises to be the most comprehensive book on the 2012 subject to date.<sup>32</sup>

Key to Jenkins’ theories is the fact that the coming completion of the Great Cycle occurs on a winter solstice. Munro Edmonson credited Victoria Bricker with first making this observation and stated that “there appears to be a strong likelihood that the eral calendar [Long Count], like the year calendar, was motivated by a long-range astronomical prediction, one that made a correct solsticial forecast 2,367 years into the future in 355 B.C.”<sup>33</sup> Independently, Terence McKenna was the first to note that a rare winter solstice conjunction of the sun with the Milky Way galaxy was approaching,<sup>34</sup> an alignment that takes place approximately every 25,800 years, the length of the astronomical cycle known as the precession of the equinoxes. In the early 1990s, Jenkins combined and elaborated upon these observations, reaching the conclusion that ancient Maya established their Long Count based on the 2012 winter solstice in recognition of the extraordinary astronomical conjunction that would occur on that date.<sup>35</sup>

Jenkins’ argument depends on whether or not Maya astronomers knew of the long-term celestial shifts resulting from precession, an effect



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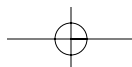
produced by the Earth's wobble that manifests in an apparent slow shift in the constellations of the night sky that is detectable only after hundreds of years of observation. Since the ancient Maya could keep accurate records using their hieroglyphic and numerical systems, and were attentive to apparent celestial dynamics, such a supposition is quite plausible. Anthony Aveni notes that while there is no evidence that the Maya were aware of precession, they made use of a band of constellations along the ecliptic arc that would have been a first step for observing this movement.<sup>36</sup> That said, the lack of convincing proof that the ancient Maya were actually aware of precession may prevent Jenkins' ideas from ever gaining broader academic acceptance.

Jenkins' work also suffers in the eyes of scholars due to the lack of any incontrovertible references to the 2012 date in ancient Mayan texts, much less specific references to it as a Long Count "set" date. One might argue that the generally accepted practice of setting the Great Cycle "zero" date in 3114 B.C.E. is equally speculative, especially in light of the text on Coba Stela 1 that makes use of far larger calendar cycles than the Great Cycle to refer to the same "zero" date cosmic creation events. However, this argument in no way bolsters Jenkins' theory. The lack of scholarly certainty concerning the Long Count "set" date will matter little to those in the New Age movement searching for a meaningful model that can "factually" explain the rationale behind the 2012 phenomenon, especially one based on real astronomy with authentic ties to the indigenous world. Even if lacking in scientifically convincing evidence, Jenkins' 2012 theories bolster the beliefs of many New Agers who are generally uninformed regarding astronomy and Mayan culture. Such is already the case with the best known of the 2012 proponents, José Argüelles, who has stated that:

John Major Jenkins answers the question: why did the Maya choose Winter Solstice, 2012, as the end-date to their thirteen-b'ak'tun "Great Cycle" long count? In the process of reading the account to this fascinating solution to the reason for the famed Maya end time date, Jenkins takes the reader through a well-researched psychoarcheological and astronomical excursion of the Mayan mind field of time.<sup>37</sup>

### **WORLD RENEWAL AMONG THE MAYA**

There are currents that exist within a few contemporary Mayan communities that in some ways parallel the 2012 movement and that eventually may provide additional indigenous cultural fodder for its adherents. Just like those in the 2012 movement, these indigenous beliefs point to an approaching period of significant, even catastrophic, world change, but they do not specify the year 2012. For example, within





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the prophetic tradition of the Cruzo'ob'<sup>38</sup> Maya in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, there exists a belief in a rapidly approaching cataclysmic period of warfare that will lead to the destruction of the current world and the creation of a new Mayan society. According to Paul Sullivan, Maya of the Cruzo'ob' village of Xkakal Guardia believed in 1989 that war was "not much further off than the year 2000 and that it is inevitable."<sup>39</sup> According to one Mexican anthropologist, "the wait for fulfillment of the promises of the Cross, the imminent arrival of the end of the world and the creation of a new Mayan society are dynamic elements that are present, strong, alive and active."<sup>40</sup> It bears mentioning that the temporal focus of this world-ending war around the year 2000 may have arisen from recent Christian millenarian currents since Nelson Reed's lengthy study of the Cruzo'ob' noted no such specificity during his visit to the community in 1959.<sup>41</sup>

Among Lacandon Maya in Chiapas there has also been a belief among some traditionalists that the end of the world is at hand. In 1978, the late well known spiritual leader of Najá, Chan K'in, stated, "Our Lord Hachakyum will make everything die . . . The grass wishes to die. The seed, the animals all wish to die. And the True People also [the Lacandon]—we all die. In thirty years Hachakyum will destroy the world."<sup>42</sup> Like the Cruzo'ob', one of Chan K'in's surviving sons envisions a new world after the great destruction: "The world will be new. The forest will be new. There will be no cares. Everyone will pray and make offerings."<sup>43</sup>

Recently, a Mam Maya *costumbrista* (participant in traditional Mayan religious practices) in Todos Santos Cuchumatán, Guatemala, echoed these sentiments, telling me that he and his friends believe that Maya are approaching the culminating period of a divine trial in which they have had to endure nearly five hundred years of oppression under the *mos*,<sup>44</sup> Guatemala's non-indigenous population. He stated that Maya are currently witnessing a process of purification that will prepare them for what he called in Mam the *Ak'aj Sqixa* or New Dawn. According to his understanding, the light of this New Dawn will return the Maya to their rightful place as rulers in their own lands.<sup>45</sup>

At least two other Maya cultural leaders have similarly expressed themselves on the subject but with explicit reference to 2012. Asserting that ancient Mayan knowledge is reemerging through genetic ties to their ancestors,<sup>46</sup> José Mucía Batz states that what he calls the new *saqarik* ("dawn") will begin on the 2012 date.<sup>47</sup> The Maya novelist Gaspar González has also made reference to 2012.<sup>48</sup> González contextualized the recent Guatemalan civil war as part of an extended period of severe purification that would prepare the Maya for the next cycle in human experience. He said that the current age of the human beings made of corn was ending, and that beginning after 2012, there will be a societal rebirth into what he called "*una nueva era de la luz*" (a new age of light).



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As a senior member of the cultural revival movement known as the *movimiento maya*,<sup>49</sup> a serious scholar, a native speaker of Q'anjob'al Maya, and a member of the Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages, González has impeccable credentials as a Maya spokesperson. His specific reference to the year 2012 undoubtedly is a result of academic study of the Mayan Long Count calendar and other aspects of his own pre-Columbian heritage. However, his mention of the *nueva era* may have arisen, perhaps indirectly, from New Age currents since there are no scholarly sources on the Maya making this connection to the 2012 date.

Even if González was not influenced by the New Age, cross pollination between contemporary Maya and New Age participants in the 2012 movement may be inevitable, especially in the numerous locales in the Mayan world where New Agers have set up more or less permanent residence. There have already been workshops on the 2012 date in Momostenango and around Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, as well as in Mérida, Tulum, and Coba in Mexico. While New Age teachers conduct most of these events in English, there are now a few Spanish language equivalents, and participants are likely to have at least superficial interactions with members of local Mayan communities that may allow the 2012 phenomenon to gain a foothold among at least a few individuals. The annual New Age vernal equinox pilgrimages to the famed Castillo of Chichen Itza may also provide similar opportunities for interaction even though tourist interactions with the local Mayan population are more limited in this context.

I found an example that this process had already begun when I spoke with a Mam cultural activist who was learning about the significance of the 2012 date from a non-Maya Guatemalan workshop leader involved with New Age ideology.<sup>50</sup> I also have witnessed two separate ceremonies for tourists conducted at the ruins of Tujqmantxun, in Todos Santos Cuchumatán, officiated by Ladino (non-Maya Hispanic) visitors saying they were trained as "Maya priests" and were helping prepare for a coming period of transition. Both spoke of the 2012 date and seemed convinced that its spiritual significance was authentically Mayan.<sup>51</sup> While a few local Mam children were the only resident observers of these ceremonies, they told their parents about what they had seen and the adults were soon discussing the supposedly Mayan rituals as well. This incident demonstrates the ease with which non-Mayan variants of Mayan spirituality can pass into the contemporary Mayan population.

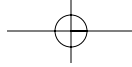
The concept of coming world renewal has entered the Mayan world most broadly through the teachings of the numerous fundamentalist Christian denominations that, until leveling off more recently, have grown rapidly in the region.<sup>52</sup> The disastrous earthquake that shook Guatemala in 1976 not only killed over twenty thousand Maya villagers, it brought with it a new wave of missionaries hoping to share their fundamentalist religious ideology with the native peoples along with much-needed relief

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supplies. The almost apocalyptic violence of the earthquake seemed to set the stage for the particularly brutal military repression of the Mayan population in Guatemala in the late 1970s and early 1980s when scores of thousands of Maya civilians perished and hundreds of thousands of others found themselves wounded or displaced. While there exist several complementary explanations for the massive Mayan shift towards Christian fundamentalism in recent decades apart from this violent context, when missionaries refer to the coming end of the world in accord with their interpretation of the Bible,<sup>53</sup> one can understand how some Maya might be inclined to believe them. With the earth shaking beneath them, witnessing their families and relatives dying in droves, lamenting a perceived degeneration of their own religious traditions, and seeing a notable decline in the quality of their natural surroundings, it might be a challenge not to conclude otherwise. Fundamentalist groups focus on passages in the biblical book of Revelation and, of course, make no reference to the year 2012. While there is no evidence that Maya fundamentalists will embrace the 2012 date, the fact that in specific parts of the Mayan world they literally share the streets and paths of their communities with New Age 2012 adherents makes it virtually unavoidable that the two “millennial” currents will eventually come into contact with one another.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE 2012 PHENOMENON

As the 2012 winter solstice date approaches, there will be increasing attention given to determining its true significance among those in the New Age movement. In the context of worldwide environmental degradation and perceived societal degeneration, the possibility of global civilization’s collapse seems ever more real, and the prospect of a revolution in human consciousness becomes more attractive for many. The Y2K phenomenon attracted the attention of millions around the world even though, in retrospect, the concerns about global digital collapse that reached international dimensions proved baseless. Similarly, public interest in 2012 does not depend on the date having any substantive significance beyond marking a cyclical change in an ancient calendar. The date’s presumed connection to an ancient Amerindian civilization that some in the New Age assume to have been more enlightened than our own gives 2012 an attractive power that may eventually even outstrip that of the Y2K non-event. New Age teachers and writers who are most able to establish the authenticity of their ties to the Mayan world increase their chances of success in the spiritual marketplace. Their self-promoting publicity will generate further interest in the significance of 2012 and, with time, the sheer volume of books, Internet sites, and other offshoots of the phenomenon will establish an undeserved credibility for the importance of the date among a segment of the public with



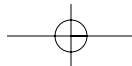
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little interest in verifying the authenticity of many of the New Age teachers' claims. Those who are less credulous may find John Jenkins' writings on the subject to be utterly convincing without recognizing their non-conclusive nature.

Given the developing contacts between Maya and the outside world due to New Age tourism, globalization, and Mayan immigration to the United States, it is possible that awareness of the 2012 solstice date will begin to increase among some contemporary Maya as well. Since the 2012 date has real connections to the Long Count calendar, it may attract the attention of those in the Mayan cultural revitalization movement attempting to resuscitate key components of their heritage. If Maya cultural activists lend credence to the 2012 phenomenon, they will almost certainly increase acceptance of its potential significance in the region. Likewise, if the "end of era" beliefs linked to 2012 by New Agers become known among Maya fundamentalists, it seems possible that some will connect the date with their own apocalyptic Christian ideology, adding further to the phenomenon's importance within the Mayan world.

### CONCLUSION

We may never know with any certainty why the ancient Maya established their Long Count calendar using the dates they did or if they believed that the 2012 Great Cycle changeover date would be in any way significant. However, we do know that the date has already begun to capture the popular imagination in a variety of contexts and in wildly diverse forms. Only recently, a man in India believed by some to be Kalki, the Kali Yuga's incarnation of Lord Vishnu, predicted the beginning of a new stage in human consciousness beginning in the year 2012.<sup>54</sup> Along with this self-proclaimed *avatar*, a growing number of people, especially some with a New Age orientation, are convinced that humanity will soon undergo a fundamental transformation in its earthly voyage. Many of the self-proclaimed leaders of the 2012 movement have successfully appropriated this date from an ancient Mayan calendar by explicitly linking themselves to the living Mayan world. They have done so with the help of a small group of Maya men who lend an air of indigenous authenticity to their 2012 teachings but who lack a substantial base in their own cultural heritage. In doing so, 2012 proponents have transformed belief in the global significance of the December 21 date into a snowballing phenomenon that no amount of evidence can constrain. Several years remain before completion of the thirteenth *b'ak'tun* and of the most recent Great Cycle, and interest in the 2012 date is already strong and developing rapidly. The question of whether there is any underlying substance to the 2012 date has become meaningless as its power as a self-validating set of ideas establishes a reality of its own among believers who have no interest in examining the authenticity of



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those beliefs. Thus, beliefs in the global significance of 2012 date will persist and gain momentum until the dawn of that year's winter solstice when all can experience for themselves whether the day brings a New Dawn for humanity or just another Friday morning.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> References to the winter solstice in this paper apply to the northern hemisphere.

<sup>2</sup> There are competing conventions among Mayanists as to how best to employ the terms "Maya" and "Mayan." Most agree that "Mayan" is not appropriate for a reference to a human being. For example, the phrase "a Mayan woman" would not be correct. This paper uses "Maya" to refer to people both as an adjective ("a Maya woman") and as a noun ("contemporary Maya"), and the word "Mayan" in most other cases ("Mayan culture," "Mayan languages").

<sup>3</sup> Collective references to the Maya are very problematic because they cannot adequately reflect the rich cultural diversity of the more than two dozen distinct contemporary Mayan ethnic groups. Even within a single Mayan language group such as the Mam, there are often substantial linguistic and other cultural differences. The word "Maya" is most closely associated with the indigenous people of the Yucatan peninsula, but researchers commonly use it to refer to all Native Americans in the region that partake of a broadly related cultural heritage. The word "Maya" may be more meaningful for the ancient culture since there appears to have been greater homogeneity in the Mayan world during the Classic Period (250–900 C.E.).

<sup>4</sup> There is debate among Mayanists concerning when the close of the thirteenth *b'ak'tun* period will fall. The December 21 date used in this article relies on the so-called 584,283 calculation that coincides with the 260-day ritual calendar still used in the Guatemalan highlands, placing the period completion day of 4 Ahaw on the winter solstice of 2012. Many researchers prefer the 584,285 correlation and place the 2012 date on December 23. The issue may ultimately remain in doubt since, as Anthony Aveni states, "Astronomical data alone fail to resolve the two-day discrepancy between viable correlation constants" (Anthony F. Aveni, *Skywatchers: A Revised and Updated Version of Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001], 210). Aveni himself places this cyclic overturn on 8 December (Aveni, *Skywatchers*, 138). These differences have minimal significance for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> See the extensive lists of Internet links at <[www.diagnosis2012.co.uk/link.htm](http://www.diagnosis2012.co.uk/link.htm)>, accessed February 8, 2005, and <[www.greatdreams.com/2012.htm](http://www.greatdreams.com/2012.htm)>, accessed February 8, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> This conclusion is based on a review of the relevant literature and informal study for a total of thirteen months in over a dozen different Mayan linguistic communities, particularly in the Mam Mayan town of Todos Santos Cuchumatán, Guatemala.

<sup>7</sup> One thousand is a less significant number in the base-20 Mayan numerical system than in our decimal system.

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<sup>8</sup> Words in this paper from Mayan languages use the alphabet developed by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala.

<sup>9</sup> Scholars who prefer the 584,285 correlation generally place this date on August 13, 3114 B.C.E., while Anthony Aveni places it on August 12 of that year. See Aveni, *Skywatchers*, 138.

<sup>10</sup> José Argüelles, *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Bear & Co., 1987): 159.

<sup>11</sup> Argüelles, *The Mayan Factor*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> José Argüelles, "José Speaks Out," <[www.earthportals.com/Portal\\_Messenger/speakout.html](http://www.earthportals.com/Portal_Messenger/speakout.html)>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>13</sup> José Argüelles, "The Living Prophecy," <[www.13moon.com/Home-of-SkyTime's-Natural-Time-Calendar.htm](http://www.13moon.com/Home-of-SkyTime's-Natural-Time-Calendar.htm)>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>14</sup> José Argüelles, "Distinguishing Dreamspell from The Traditional Mayan Calendar," <[www.13moon.com/Home-of-SkyTime's-Natural-Time-Calendar.htm](http://www.13moon.com/Home-of-SkyTime's-Natural-Time-Calendar.htm)>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>15</sup> José Argüelles, FAQ <[www.13moon.com/Home-of-SkyTime's-Natural-Time-Calendar.htm](http://www.13moon.com/Home-of-SkyTime's-Natural-Time-Calendar.htm)>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>16</sup> José Argüelles, <[www.earthportals.com/Portal\\_Messenger/votan.html](http://www.earthportals.com/Portal_Messenger/votan.html)>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Lord Pakal Ahau, "The Search of Lord Pakal Ahau in the 21st Century," <<http://mexicanhorse.tripod.com>>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>18</sup> "Winter Solstice MMXII," <[www.beyondthedoors.co.uk/gate/et.htm](http://www.beyondthedoors.co.uk/gate/et.htm)>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Jelaila Starr, "The Nibiruan Council," <[www.nibiruancouncil.com](http://www.nibiruancouncil.com)>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Adrian G. Gilbert and Maurice M. Cotterell, *The Mayan Prophecies* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1995): 192.

<sup>21</sup> A *k'atun* cycle is a period of 7200 days

<sup>22</sup> Laura Sanmartín, "Las 7 Profecías Mayas" under "Historia," <[www.mexico-tenoch.com](http://www.mexico-tenoch.com)>, accessed 8 February 2005. My translation from the original Spanish.

<sup>23</sup> There are passages from the *Chilam Balam* scribes that may refer to world change in the *k'atun* 4 Ahaw. In the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, the text for this *k'atun* period refers to the return of the revered divine being known as K'ulk'ulkan, the famed Plumed Serpent linked to inspired societal renewal. However, it appears unlikely that either of these prophecies refer to the current *k'atun* cycle. *Chilam Balam* books make use of the so-called Short Count known in Yúcatek Maya as the *kahlay k'atuno'ob'*, a calendar based on thirteen repetitions of 7200-day *k'atun* periods. The entire cycle of thirteen *k'atun* periods repeated itself approximately every 256 years and the period referred to in this text is accompanied by a drawing explicitly referring to the previous *k'atun* 4 Ahaw period in the late 1700s.

<sup>24</sup> Humbatz Men, *Secrets of Mayan Science/Religion* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1990): 34.

<sup>25</sup> Quetzal-Sha, "El regreso del maya," <[www.galacticmaya.com/espanol/entrevista.htm](http://www.galacticmaya.com/espanol/entrevista.htm)>, accessed 8 February 2005. My translation from original in Spanish.

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<sup>26</sup> Alom Ahau Tze'ec Ba'lam, <www.themayansite.com>, accessed 6 September 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Alom Ahau Tze'ec Ba'lam, "Music & more," <www.themayansite.com>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Researchers have focused on the 3114 B.C.E. date since most Long Count inscriptions do not include units larger than the *b'ak'tun*. While the full cycle of the most recent thirteen *b'ak'tun* periods began in 3114 B.C.E., a date in Coba, Mexico, includes exponentially larger units of time referring to the same events mentioned in the more typical Long Count creation texts, implying that Long Count dates may have functioned as shorthand for far more extensive periods of time.

<sup>29</sup> John Major Jenkins, *Maya Cosmogenesis 2012* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1998): 159.

<sup>30</sup> E-mail responses to questions about Jenkins' work in September 2004.

<sup>31</sup> See Vincent H. Malmstrom, "The Astronomical Insignificance of 13.0.0.0," <www.dartmouth.edu/%7Eizapa/M-32.pdf>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Geoff Stray, *Beyond 2012: Catastrophe or Ecstasy: A Complete Guide to End-of-Time Predictions* (East Sussex, UK: Vital Signs, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Munro Edmonson, *The Book of the Year: Middle American Calendrical Systems* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988): 119.

<sup>34</sup> Dennis and Terence McKenna, *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975): 196.

<sup>35</sup> In fact, the alignment between the Sun and the Milky Way is already taking place on winter solstices and will continue to do so for decades to come.

<sup>36</sup> Aveni, *Skywatchers*, 100.

<sup>37</sup> José Argüelles, "A Portal into the Heart of Creation," <www.earthportals.com/Portal\_Messenger/izapa.html>, accessed 8 February 2005.

<sup>38</sup> This is a plural term in Yucatek Maya meaning "those of the cross," a reference to an oracular cross that led Mayan forces during the Caste War in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Sullivan, *Unfinished Conversations: Mayas and Foreigners Between Two Wars* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989): 162.

<sup>40</sup> Jesús J. Lizama Quijano, "Las señales del fin del mundo: Una aproximación a la tradición profética de los cruzo'ob" ("Signs of the End of the World: An Approach to the Prophetic Tradition of the Cruzos'ob") at <www.uady.mx/sitios/mayas/investigaciones/historia/tradicion.htm>, accessed 8 February 2005. My translation from original Spanish.

<sup>41</sup> Nelson A. Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001): 343–44.

<sup>42</sup> Victor Perera and Robert D. Bruce, *The Last Lords of Palenque: The Lacandon Mayas of the Mexican Rain Forest* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1982): 49. Hachakyum is the primary Lacandon deity.

<sup>43</sup> Perera and Bruce. *The Last Lords*, 290.

<sup>44</sup> In the Mam language this may be derived from the Spanish term *mozo* that was used to refer to hired day laborers in some Mayan areas who were often not from an indigenous background.

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<sup>45</sup> Personal conversation with a Mam *chmanb'aj* in mid-May, 2002; *Chmanb'aj* is the non-possessed form of the Mam word *chman*, which refers to both grandfather and grandchild. The word, along with *ajpom*, "he of the incense," is also used to refer to Mam ceremonial specialists.)

<sup>46</sup> José Mucía Batz, "*Nik*": *Filosofía de los números mayas* ("Nik": Philosophy of Mayan Numbers") (Chimaltenango, Guatemala: Editorial Rutzijol, 1996): 7

<sup>47</sup> Mucía Batz, "*Nik*," 12.

<sup>48</sup> Tape-recorded conversation with Mr. González on December 27, 1996.

<sup>49</sup> The Mayan Movement exists primarily in Guatemala among relatively well educated Maya, many of whom are linguists, and works to promote Mayan cultural values that its adherents feel are threatened.

<sup>50</sup> Discussion with Fortunato Mendoza in Todos Santos Cuchumatán, Guatemala in June 2002.

<sup>51</sup> The ceremonies and discussions occurred during May and June 2001.

<sup>52</sup> According to Edward Cleary, Protestant denominations make up about 25 percent of the total population in Guatemala. Cleary, "Shopping Around: Questions About Latin American Conversions," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (April 2004), <[www.providence.edu/las/Brookings.html](http://www.providence.edu/las/Brookings.html)>, accessed 8 September 2005. This figure may be much higher for the Maya alone.

<sup>53</sup> In Todos Santos Cuchumatán, belief in a coming *fin del mundo* ("end of the world") is commonplace among those belonging to the town's three principal fundamentalist churches.

<sup>54</sup> Sri Kalki Bhagavan, <[www.experiencefestival.com/index.php/topic/articles/article/1683](http://www.experiencefestival.com/index.php/topic/articles/article/1683)>, accessed 8 February 2005.