

Global Warming from Mexico to Washington, D.C.

Ronald J. Brown
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The evening of October 9, 2017, I was sitting on the small balcony outside my budget hotel in Palenque, Mexico, when I first met the ancient Maya god Unen Kawiil.

I had learned to expect Mexican cataclysmic manifestations of nature from my many visits there. I experienced earthquakes strong enough to wake me out of a deep sleep, the periodic eruptions of a volcano near Mexico City, rain storms, lightning displays, hurricanes, and roaring thunder enough to make me appreciate the pagan gods who controlled them.



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Mexicans are so accustomed to natural disasters and death they have created national holidays to them. The unique Mexican holiday called *El Día de los Muertos*, “The Day of the Dead,” stretches from October 31 to November 2 and is its most popular holiday. The residents of a death-plagued country spend an entire week honoring death.

My vacation in Mexico from September 25 to October 16 was preceded by natural disasters. On September 7, the state of Chiapas in the southernmost part of the country was rocked by an earthquake measuring 8.1, and aftershocks almost as strong for days afterwards. On September 19, another quake measuring 7.1 struck Mexico City, killing hundreds.

My rich experiences with the powers of nature well-prepared me for the arrival of the Maya god of lightning. I caught my first glimpse of Unen Kawiil announcing his arrival as he crept over the distant jungle. Like a giant, the storm marched across the fertile flat jungle, slowly approaching the base of the Chiapas Mountains and ruins of the many temples and palaces of the city of Palenque that once ruled the plains. Slowly the god crept closer and closer, each time announcing his presence with a flash of lightning from his eye.

Sent ahead to prepare his arrival was a windswept cloak of black clouds and the first pattering of raindrops. By my third glass of wine, he was hovering above, surrounding me with wailing winds, lashing rain, and most importantly, blinding bolts of lightning. It was not the rain or wind that announced the arrival of the god but rather the shattering bolts of lightning.

According to the complex mythology of the kingdom of Palenque, it was such bolts of lightning that first separated the earth from the primal sea and prepared the world for the advent of humanity some 5,319 years ago. According to Palenque inscriptions, Unen Kawiil was born in the year 3,121, only 188 years after creation according to inscriptions.

Other lightning bolts created the animals of the jungle and finally one massive bolt opened up the Maize

Mountain, making corn seeds available to humankind and forming the basis for the rise of the Kingdom of Palenque and all the Mesoamerican empires. With its back to mountain Yehmal K'uk' Lakam Witz, part of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas mountain range to the south, Palenque grew from a small settlement in 250 AD to the capital of a great empire that ruled over the vast fertile plain in front of it.

Crucial to the Palenque and other empires of southern Mexico were the torrential rainstorms like the one I experienced on the small patio at my hotel. The first indication that a storm was approaching was a faint flash of lightning in the distance. Gradually the sound of thunder and a darkening sky announced that a life-giving and civilization-sustaining storm was arriving. Eventually Unen Kawiil flung his lightning strikes ever nearer and I soon felt the first drops of rain.

I beat a hasty retreat to the safety of my hotel room and watched the storm grow in intensity until rivers of water gushed down the stairwell outside my room and only the raised metal plate at the bottom of my door kept the rushing waters from my room. Bolts of lightning and the boom of thunder literally rocked the hotel and sent my room into pitch blackness when the electricity failed. The last time I had experienced such a storm was during a visit to New Orleans years ago when the ancient Caribbean god of lightning and thunder, Juracan, had unleashed his fury against the city (the English word "hurricane" is derived from the Taino word *juracane* in honor of this god's mighty powers).

Having survived the horrendous storm of the night before, I visited the ruins of Palenque the next day. I wanted to pay my respects to the Mayan god who had affirmed his command over the powers of nature to me. This once glorious city covered nearly a square mile and its ruins contain over a thousand major temples, palaces and official buildings, plus a still unknown quantity of unexcavated ruins.

I made my way to the well-photographed Group of the Cross complex of temples where the rites, rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies to Unen Kawiil were conducted. The principal temple to this god is today known as the Temple of the Foliated Cross after its elaborate decorations. The ruins of the temple itself stand aloft a six-story stone pyramid with a broad, very steep flight of stairs leading upward to the entrance.

The various clusters of temples, palaces, and other structures date from the founding of the kingdom in 250 AD through its apogee under the rule of King K'inich Janaab Pakal, called Pakal the Great, who reigned from 615 to 683, from the age of 12 to 80. A series of enlightened kings expanded the empire across the coastal plain, built a system of elevated roadways, and imposed peace that allowed the kingdom to flourish. Over the centuries, a succession of rulers constructed the temples, palaces and structures that still grace the site.

It was the son and successor of Pakal the Great, Kinich Kan Bahlam, ruling from 684 to 702 AD, who presided over the first stages of the decline of the empire. Fervent in common Maya belief was that Mayan dynasties were descended from the gods, and the intermediaries between man and Unen Kawiil, such as Kinich Kan Bahlam, interpreted the first signs of drought as a sign of Unen Kawiil's displeasure. To placate the god he undertook the massive temple building campaign that resulted in the Group of the Cross temple complex.

He expanded his realm and to thank the gods who aided him, constructed the monumental, and many argue, most elaborate Mayan temple cluster to the complex in 692. The Group of the Cross complex, as it is now called, contains the Temple of the Foliated Cross in honor of Unen Kawiil, the god of lightning, the Temple of the Sun in honor of the life-giving power of the sun, and the Temple of the Cross venerating the centrality of water in sustaining life.

While one would expect every civilization to venerate the sun and water, two essential elements for life, Palenque attributed special importance to the torrential storms that ravaged the area. It was the ten-month period of torrents from June to March which Unen Kawiil heralds with his bursts of lightning that enabled the Palenque Empire to emerge and survive the sweltering heat of the rest of the year. Unen Kawiil drenches the entire state of Tabasco with an annual average of 79 inches of rain, making it one of the places with the heaviest precipitation on the planet.

Kinich Kan Bahlam built the three temples in a unique Mayan style that can best be seen in Palenque and only at the Temple of the Cross Complex. Like all Mayan and Mesoamerican temples, a steep flight of stairs dominates the façade of the stepped pyramids with the stone temple perched atop the structures. What is unique at the complex is the two-story tall, latticed roof-comb that graces the tops of the temples. Called *cresteras* in Mexican Spanish (crests or crowns), the structures were public declarations of the king's powers to intervene with the life-giving and empire-sustaining gods who controlled the rains that sustained the empire. The priests and kings performed their sacrifices, ceremonies and rituals atop the pyramid in full view of the masses and rested assured that the god was content with them.

According to ecologist and geographer Jared Diamond in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005), as the rains dwindled and signs of drought became obvious, Kinich Kan Bahlam and

other Mayan kings responded with increasingly monumental temples to placate the angry gods. This also entailed wars to capture more temple human sacrifices, territorial expansion to seize more agricultural land, and of course, more taxes and forced labor from the peasants and slaves to finance it all. Diamond argues that this only led to more deforestation, over-use of land, decline in wild animal population, erosion, and waste of natural resources. “Ecocide” is the term Diamond invented to describe the willful human destruction of their environment.



The author at a Palenque, Mexico, Mayan temple complex.

When Kinich Kan Bahlam dedicated the surrounding complex of palaces and temples to the god of lightning in 692 AD, Palenque was already entering the first of the great droughts that would end the empire. By 900 the site was abandoned.

As I wandered through the ruins, I could not help but see a parallel between the decline of Palenque and the current debate between the Trump administration and scientific community over global warming. Like the population of Palenque, the rulers, religious establishments, elites, and scientific community are bitterly divided. All agree climate change is an undeniable fact, but disagree if humans are responsible for it.

In August, 13 federal agencies leaked their 2017 National Climate Assessment report, mandated every four years, fearing its release might be suppressed by the administration. The report’s executive summary confirmed, “based on extensive evidence, that it is extremely likely that human activities, especially emissions of greenhouse gases, are the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.” The report was officially released in November, but the White House simply downplayed the significance of the study and its findings.

Last June, President Trump announced the United States was pulling out of the historic 2015 Paris Climate Accord, signed by 194 states and the European Union. Will Trump become the Kinich Kan Bahlam of the American empire?

Dr. Ronald J. Brown is a professor of history, political science and ethnic studies at Touro College and teaches courses in world religion at Unification Theological Seminary. A docent at the New York Historical Society with degrees from Harvard Divinity School, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the University of Geneva, Switzerland, Brown is the author of A Religious History of Flushing, Queens; Into the Soul of African-American Harlem; and How New York Became the Empire City.

Illustration at top: *Mayan ruins at Palenque, Mexico.*