Maya Sun

The Maya and the Sun

NARRATION:

My Maya ancestors built pyramids and other buildings to record solar alignments at key times of the year.

The equinoxes, when day and night are of equal length, mark the transitions between the rainy and dry seasons in the Yucatán.

The equinoxes remind us in March that it is time to prepare our corn fields for planting; and in September, we need to get ready for the harvest.

Our ancestors built temples to honor the Sun. The great pyramid at Chichen Itzá, has four staircases with ninety one steps each, plus a temple on top. The sum total of the steps plus the temple equals 365, which is a reference to the number of days in a solar year.

During the equinoxes, a fascinating thing happens when triangles of light and shadow appear on the side of the pyramid. After the last triangle takes shape, the Sun shines on a giant serpent's head carved from stone at the bottom of the staircase. This entire effect resembles a snake slithering down the pyramid.

Our grandparents tell us that this snake is Kukulkán, the feathered serpent; the slithering snake of light that brings the energy of the Sun to the Earth for planting.

At sunrise, in the ancient city of Dzibilchaltún, the Sun shines through the main portal, transforming the building into the shining face of the Sun.

In our tropical homelands, the Sun can be seen directly overhead twice a year, marking an important event that astronomers call the zenith passage. When the Sun is at the zenith, the shadows of vertical objects disappear.

The zenith passage was tracked by using solar alignments with buildings and other structures in ancient Maya cities. At Uxmal, the zenith passage can be observed by watching the shadows of vertical monuments disappear at midday.

At Chichén Itzá on the day of the zenith passage, the Sun sets behind the Great Ball Court, in precise alignment with the Chac Mool statue.

The opposite of the zenith is the nadir passage of the Sun, when the Sun is directly underneath us at midnight. This astronomical event was also known to our ancestors.

In Palenque, the nadir passage is marked by the alignment of architectural features with the Sun at sunrise and sunset on that specific day.

In the land of the oldest Maya cities, the Sun is at the nadir, or directly underneath, in early November.

It is no coincidence that Day of the Dead happens then too, because this is when the Sun is visiting with our ancestors in the Underworld.

Maya astronomy is thus recorded in our ancient buildings and lives through the traditions that are still practiced today in our homelands.