

Professor says Mayan calendar does not portend Earth's doom

By Steve Reeves

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TUSCALOOSA | Does our planet have only a scant 10 more years of existence left?

Some people believe the ancient Mayan calendar suggests the end of the world will come on Dec. 21, 2012.

But University of Alabama professor Enrique Gomez is not among them.

"The world won't end in 2012," laughed Gomez, who teaches in UA's astronomy and physics department. "I can assure you of that."

Gomez, a native of Mexico City, said he is much more interested in Mayan culture and how the Maya wove together ideas about creationism, astronomy and their calendar into a narrative about their view of the world.

He will talk about the Mayan civilization on Jan. 17 at 6 p.m. in room 227 of Gallalee Hall on the UA campus.

The Mayan civilization, which was located in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, began to crumble around 900 A.D., but its people left behind valuable contributions to art and literature.

They built pyramids and invented an elaborate system of writing, which they used to record significant events in their history.

"The Mayans were a very sophisticated culture, and they were a very literate culture," Gomez said.

Early Mayas, who had a keen interest in the stars, came up with two calendars ó the "Short Count" and the "Long Count." Each is intricate and relies on aspects of astronomical cycles. The Long Calendar used special symbols to signify each day, week and month.

The Mayans put their Long Count system in place more than 2,300 years ago, and for some reason made Dec. 21, 2012 the end of the calendar.

Some researchers believe that date is important because it coincides with the winter solstice, and on that date the Milky Way galaxy, on which the Mayans placed great significance, will align with the sun.

May authors and scientists have said Dec. 21, 2012, is the day the Maya believed the world would end. Gomez said no one knows for sure if the Mayans intended to portend the end of the world on that particular day.

“It’s kind of hard to say exactly what they meant,” he said. “We do not know exactly what person came up with the calendar and the significance of certain dates.”

Gomez said what is really significant about the Mayan calendar is that it was in use for at least 26 continuous centuries.

“It was a calendar that was used by many different cultures and in many different languages,” he said. “It’s part of our common heritage.”

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