

EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

MAYA RELIGION

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Introduction

The Maya are probably the best-known, and one of the most researched civilizations, of Central America. There are indications the Maya migrated from North America as long ago as 2600 B.C. The existence of the Maya can be divided into three distinct periods. The pre-classical period was prior to 250 A.D. The classical period extended from 250 A.D. until 925 A.D. The post-classical period was from 926 A.D. until 1530.¹ The Maya reached their prominence around 250 A.D. developing a highly structured kingdom during their classical period. The Maya drew from ideas and inventions of the Olmec to develop astronomy, a calendrical system, and a hieroglyphic writing known as “glyphs”.

The Maya were also noted for their elaborate and decorated architecture, including temple-pyramids, palaces, and large observatories, all built without the use of metal tools. The Maya were also skilled farmers, clearing large areas of tropical jungle and even designing a ground/rain water reservoir for water storage. The Maya were skilled weavers and potters and developed extensive trade networks with other states in the Maya Kingdom.

For reasons - most unknown - the Maya civilization began to decline around 900 A.D. The southern Maya began the early decline and around the year 1200 A.D. the northern Maya became incorporated into the Toltec. Not all Maya centers disappeared however, with several surviving until the Spanish Conquest of the sixteenth century.²

Ideology

The Maya were governed by an order that transcended between the natural and the supernatural. All things, living or inanimate, had unseen power. This power inhabited rocks and trees, and embodied “deities”, both animal and human. This fusion was expressed by the concept of *cuxolalob*, the knowledge of rational and supernatural.³

The Maya believed in recurring cycles of creation and destruction. The Maya believed that there had been three worlds previous to this one.⁴ The first world was inhabited by dwarfs who are thought to have built the great ruined cities. The belief was that this work was done in darkness. The first world was ended with the *haiyococab*, the universal deluge.

The second world was inhabited by people called *dzolob*, the offenders. This second world was ended by the second flood. The third world was occupied by the Maya themselves, the common people. This third world was ended by the flood called *buckabal*, the “immersing”. The fourth and present world is populated by a mixture of all previous inhabitants of the Yucatan.

The Maya religion had both good and evil powers in its struggle for the conquest of man. The benefiting powers brought thunder, lightning, and rain, used to produce corn. The malicious powers characterized death and destruction which caused drought, hurricanes and war, which ruined the corn causing famine and sadness.⁵

The Maya believed the earth to be flat and four-cornered. At each corner was located a point and a color value. Red was used for the east, yellow for the south, black for the west, and white for the north. The center of the earth was green. To the Maya the

earth , in its flat form, was thought to be the back of a giant crocodile, resting among water lilies.

Some Maya believed that the sky was multi-leveled and was supported at each corner by gods with immense strength known as “Bacabs”. Other Maya believed that the sky was supported by four trees, each being a different species and color.⁶ The Maya believed that Heaven, or the Upperworld, was divided into thirteen layers, with the lowest level being earth. Each layer was ruled over by one of thirteen Gods of the Upperworld known as Oxlahuntiku. The top level was ruled by the muan bird, a kind of screech-owl. Much like the Upperworld, the Underworld was divided into nine layers. Each of the layers were ruled by a deity, Lords of the Night. The Underworld was cold, damp, and dark, and was believed to be the destination of most Maya after death.

The Maya even believed the Sun, Moon, and other heavenly bodies passed through the Underworld after they disappeared below the horizon. It is also thought the Maya believed in an afterlife. The future was divided into a place of suffering and a place of rest. Maya who committed suicide by hanging or those who were sacrificed, warriors who were killed in battle, women who died at childbirth, priests, and rulers all went directly to paradise. It was almost certain that those who hanged themselves went to heaven, so many who felt sorrow, trouble or sickness, took their own life to get to heaven. The Maya paradise was described as a place of great delight, where there was no suffering or pain and everyone had a cornucopia of food and drink. Those whose lives had been evil descended to the lowest level of the Under World, Mitnal, or Hell. There they were tormented by cold, hunger, and grief.⁷

Death from natural causes was dreaded by every Maya because you did not automatically go to heaven. The body was wrapped in a shroud, usually made of straw, then painted red. Their mouths were filled with maize and a jade bead.⁸ The common people were buried under the floors or behind their houses. The houses were then abandoned. The graves were usually filled with idols of clay, wood, and stone indicating the profession of the dead.⁹

Deities

The Maya had a large number of gods, at least 166 known named deities. This was due in large part to each god having many different functions. The gods had a variety of criteria from function, to sex, to direction, to age, to color and so on. For every god that represented the Upperworld, they had a different face in the Underworld when the god “died” in the evening.¹⁰

The principal deities represented in the codices will be discussed in the following paragraphs. These will be discussed in descending order as to their importance to the Maya.

The most important, and the deity which had the most influence over the Maya, was ITZAMNA, (God D) a reptilian deity. Itzamna means “reptile house”, referring to the fact both earth and sky were reptilian in Maya religion. Itzamna was Hunab Ku, which means “one god”, creator of the universe. In the codices, Itzamna is represented by an old man with toothless jaws and sunken cheeks. He was patron of the day Ahau, the last and most important of the Maya’s twenty days. Itzamna was considered lord of the heavens, lord of the day and night. Itzamna was credited with inventing books and writing and is said to have named places in the Yucatan and divided the lands.

In the drawings and sculptures, Itzamna was the celestial two-headed serpent. His body represented the sky; his front head faces east to the rising sun, Venus the morning “star” and life. The rear head faces west to the setting sun and death.

Another aspect of Itzamna, also reptilian, was the feathered serpent KuKulcan. In another culture in Mexico, Kukulcan was known as Quetzalcoatl, patron of rulers. In

ceremonies performed by the Maya, Itzamna was never connected with destruction or devastation and in the codices is never connected with death.

KINICH AHAU (AH KINCHIL), (God G), was the Sun deity and was the daytime aspect of Itzamna. Maya rulers closely associated themselves with Kinich Ahau because the sun was all life to them. Kinich Ahau was the patron deity of Meduc days and the number four.

CHAC, (God B) was the Maya rain deity. It was represented in the codices with a reptilian face, a long down-curling snout, and two fangs curving downward. Chac had four different associations, each representing a major direction and each having its own color. Those colors were red for the east, white for the north, black for the west, and yellow for the south. In the months of Chen and Yax, great festivals were held in honor of Chac. Four gods known as Bacabs were closely associated with Chac. Chac was associated with creation and life. For the Maya farmer Chac was the all -important deity for the maize fields.

BOLON TZACAB (God K) was the ruling-lineage deity. He had a reptilian face with a long snout more upturned than Chac's. He is portrayed on the manikin scepter, held as a symbol of office by rulers. He is usually depicted with an ax or a smoking cigar in his forehead. Bolor Tzacab was the patron deity of Kan days and a year patron.

YUM KAAX (God E) is associated with agriculture. Yum Kaax is the maize deity, always represented as a youth and having an ear of corn as a headdress. Yum Kaax had many enemies and his destiny was controlled by rain, wind, drought, famine and death. Yum Kaax represented life, prosperity and abundance.

YUM CIMIL (God A) appears the fourth most in the codices. Yum Cimil is the death deity, appearing as a skull for a head, bare ribs, and projections from the spine. His principal accessory was “bells” which appeared fastened to his hair or to a collar around his neck. Yum Cimil presided over the lowest of the Underworlds, Mitnal, and is associated with the god of war and human sacrifice. His closest companion appeared to be the Muan bird considered a creature of evil omen and death. Yum Cimil was the patron of the day Cimi, which means death, and the number 10.

AH CHICUMEK (God C) appears fifth most in the codices. He represents the North Star, “the guiding star”. His head, likened to that of the monkey, is also the heiroglyph for the direction north. He was the guide of merchants and is found in association with the rain god.

EK CHUAH (God M) was the merchant deity, appearing as the sixth most common deity. He has a large drooping underlip and is usually painted black. He appears with a bundle of merchandise on his back like an itinerant merchant. He was the patron of cacao, and festivals were held in the month of Muan to honor him.

BULUC CHABTAN (God F) appears 33 times in the codices. He represents the deity of war and human sacrifice. He appears with a black line encircling one eye and extending down his cheek. He is shown as a war god burning houses and appearing at human sacrifices.

IX CHEL (Goddess I) is often associated with Buluc Chabtan, and is represented by serpents. She appears in the codices wearing a garment much like a dress and having a serpent coiled around her head. Oddly, she appears as the Rainbow deity implying a

gentler side healing childbirth, and divination. Ix Chel appears basically along the coast of the Yucatan, near Cozumel.

Other deities appeared in the codices although few appear to have a concise identity. GOD L appears as the black war and death deity. He appears as the third deity of a triad dedicated to warfare and the Underworld. GOD L is often confused with GOD M, the black deity of merchants. GOD N also is associated with the Underworld. He appears as an old man accompanied by young and beautiful women. GOD N has been identified as Mam, to the highland Maya, and as Pavahtun, to the lowland Maya. GODDESS O, whose name probably was Ix Chebel Yax, appears to have been the patroness of weaving. Another female deity, associated with the moon was IXTAB, the suicide deity. She appears in the Dresden Codex hanging from the sky by a halter looped around her neck. Her eyes are closed and a black circle, representing decomposition, appears on her cheek.

The Thirteen Gods of the Upperworld, the Oxlahuntiku, were regarded as one deity, as well as thirteen separate gods. The Nine Gods of the Underworld, the Bolontiku, were considered in the same manner. In the Book of Chilam Balam unite and composite character are clearly set forth. Each of the Bolontiku was a patron of a day of the Mayan calendar and these nine gods followed each through time in endless succession. If GOD X were patron deity of the first day, then he would also be the patron of day ten, day nineteen, etc. It has also been suggested that the numerals in the Maya arithmetical system represented the heads of the thirteen gods of the Upperworld.

Other deities were of great importance to the Maya as well. There were thirteen deities of the Katuns, or twenty-year periods, which have been found in the Paris Codex.

Another group of deities represented the nineteen months of the Maya year. Some of these are signs of heavenly bodies, birds, and heads of animals. In addition, each day was presided over by a particular deity. GOD D was deity of the days called Ahau, the last and most important day of the twenty-day uinal. GOD B represented the Ik days, GOD E the Kan days, GOD A the Cimi (“death”) days, GOD C of Chuen days, GOD F the Manik days, and Kinich Ahau the Muluc days.¹¹

Rituals

All Maya rituals were dictated by the Sacred Round calendar, and all rituals had symbolic meaning. To the Maya life, health, and sustenance was the main purpose of ritual. Maya rulers performed sacrifices by their own blood to symbolize the blood of the ruling lineage. Sexual abstinence was observed before and during events, and self-mutilation was encouraged to anoint religious articles. Bloodletting also was carried out to nourish and to appease the gods.¹²

Sacrifices were important to the Maya. These sacrifices ranged from such simple things as food to the practice of human sacrifice. The type of sacrifice depended upon the urgency in which something was needed.

Incense was a part of every ceremony. It was formed into small cake-like bricks and used to trade among other groups. Incense still plays a part in Maya religion today.

The Maya also used many different substances to alter an individual's state of consciousness. Alcohol made from maize was used in some rituals. In another ritual a wild tobacco was used to produce a trance-like state. In the highlands, mushrooms were used to produce a comatose state.¹³

Human sacrifice was performed in several different ways. Human sacrifices involved prisoners, slaves, and children, with orphans and illegitimate children, being purchased for the occasion. Women as well as men were also used in the ceremonies.¹⁴

To begin the sacrifice, the victim was stripped, painted blue, and adorned with a special headdress. They were then led to the place of sacrifice, either the temple courtyard

or to the top of the pyramid. After the evil spirits were expelled, the alter was covered in blue paint. The priests were assisted by four chacs, also painted blue and named in honor of the Rain God, who grasped the victim by the arms and legs and stretched them on their back over the alter. The chest was then opened with a flint or obsidian knife by a nacom. He thrust his hand into the chest and tore the beating heart from the victim. The nacom then passed the heart to the chilan, the officiating priest, who smeared blood from the victim on the respective idol. If the victim was sacrificed on the temple, the chacs would throw the body to the court below. There the lower ranking priest skinned the body, except for the hands and feet. The chilan would then drape himself in the skin of the victim and dance with the spectators. If the victim was a warrior or soldier, his body may be divided and eaten by the nobles and spectators. The hands and feet were saved for the chilan and, if the victim was a prisoner, their bones may have been worn by the chilans.

Another form of human sacrifice occurred at the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichen Itza. In times of famine, drought, or epidemic, victims were thrown into this cenote. The cenote was about 130 feet deep and half filled with water. The walls were either vertical or undercut. The spectators threw treasures into the cenote in hopes of appeasing the gods. Children were thrown into the cenote and at the middle of the day, if still alive, were pulled from the cenote to tell the lords what the year had in store for them, the Maya. If the child failed to survive, great sorrow was passed along to the child's family.¹⁵

The Maya performed many other ritual ceremonies throughout their existence. One of the most important was the erection of a stone to celebrate the end of a Katum, a twenty-year stone. The Maya also celebrated New Year in a ritual ceremony. Unlike the celebration of Times Square today, the Maya celebrated in different ways. Each

celebration depended upon the ending year, not on the coming year. Every four years had a different name and ritualistic approach. The four years were Kan, Muluc, Ix, and Cavue. Each ceremony began in the last five days of the year. A turkey was offered as a sacrifice to an idol. Drink and food were offered to the provider of the fowl and then they were required to draw blood from their ear, smearing it over the idol for a prosperous New Year. In Muluc years, women were required to dance on long stilts and offer food served from pottery on their backs. One oddity of these four year rituals was that each was performed at a different direction (north, south, east, west) yearly.

The Maya also celebrated a monthly ritual. Celebration for the month of POP, the beginning of the New Year, involved cleaning house and replacing everything anew. Four chacs were also elected in POP. The month of UO and ZIP were a celebration of vocation. ZOTZ and TZEC were the celebration of bees and honey. The month of XUL was one of the most important in honor of Kukulcan. This celebration ended in a great feast. Each month had special celebrations and services to offer to different deities and for different reasons.¹⁶

As previously mentioned, the letting of blood was involved in some of the rituals of the Maya. Undoubtedly the most bizarre ritual involved the piercing of the penis, from side to side, then passing a cord through the hole. This cord was passed from man to man and when all had been fastened together, they anointed the statue of the idol with the collected blood. The one able to endure the most pain was considered to be the most valiant and their sons began this custom at an early age.¹⁷

Priests

The role of priests was closely connected to the calendar and astronomy. Priests controlled learning and ritual, and were in charge of calculating time, festivals, and ceremonies. The priests based their ritual acts on the Sacred Round calendar.¹⁸

The respect given to the priests by the common Maya was so great that they did not leave their homes, except to be carried on litters, on the shoulders of several men.¹⁹ Priests were not celibate and their sons often succeeded their fathers into the priesthood.

It was the office of the priest which taught the sciences, to avert or bring to a timely end famine, drought, epidemics, and plagues. The priest was expected to offer food and drink to the gods and to impersonate and invoke the deity. Priests were expected to read weather and other omens in the clouds and to study the night sky and interpret the appearance of celestial bodies. The priests were expected to work miracles, predict the future, determine the lucky and unlucky days and concoct medicinal herbs into ceremonial drinks. And as if that were not enough, the priests were in charge of baptisms, divination, writings, and genealogies. They were also in charge of designing stone monuments, constructing temples, planting and harvesting.²⁰

When a priest died he was buried under his house or in the vicinity of the house. His body was shrouded and books were placed in the grave with him. After his death the house was usually abandoned, unless there was a large number living there. The slaves of the priest were also slain, and buried near the priest to help him into the afterlife.²¹

Temples - Pyramids

Maya priests looked to the heavens for guidance. In Maya cities, ceremonial buildings were precisely aligned with compass direction. The Maya, it is believed, aligned their buildings as such to venerate the gods.

The ceremonial complexes were designed to reflect the landscape at its beginning by the creation of the gods. The pyramids represented mountains, and the temples atop them represented caves leading into the mountains. A Maya innovation was the addition of sculptured and painted facades that expressed religious methods.

At the Temple of the Inscription at Palenque, during winter solstice, the sun sets and the rays appear to descend the stairway to Pacal's tomb. It is therefore thought Pacal's death and entry into the Underworld are equated with the Sun's death and entry into the Underworld. The Maya believed the mountains that surrounded the temples were the homes of ancestral deities. The Maya also believed the jungles were inhabited by ancestral family members.

Maya murals and carvings show rulers and priests wearing symbols of the heavens, including a sky-band made of symbols relating to the Moon, the Sun, Venus, and other celestial bodies. Sometimes they are seated, surrounded by the sky-band, which gives a halo approach. Maya rulers and priests often clothed themselves in the pelt of a jaguar, whose spots represented stars.²²

As more Maya cities are uncovered, the world will continue to learn more about the Maya. Temples built over other temples, pyramids with winding passageways and interweaving stairways will create mysteries which may never be answered.

Maya Religious Books

The Maya were considered by many to have one of the most sophisticated forms of writing in Mesoamerica. The Maya had over 800 glyphs that were used in writing to read from left to right and top to bottom. The Maya considered writing to be a sacred gift from the gods. The knowledge of reading and writing was guarded by an elite class who believed that they could interact directly with the gods and that they could mediate with the common people and the gods.

Maya glyphs were painted on codices, books which were made from the bark of trees, then covered with a thin layer of plaster and folded accordion style. Most of the Maya codices were destroyed by the Spanish when they tried to convert the Maya to Christianity. The few that have survived, however, offer a valuable source of information about the religious beliefs of the Maya and their rituals. The codices also offered information about the gods associated with each day of the Maya calendar as well as astronomical tables outlining Venus and other celestial bodies. The four known codices deal exclusively with religious and astronomical matters. Most are written in archaic Yucatec, one of the 31 Maya languages.

The Dresden Codex is 78 pages long and was probably written around 1200 A.D. at Chichen Itza. This codex contains almanacs, predictions, accounting of days, tables of eclipses of both the sun and the moon, movements of the planet Venus, as well as prophecies. It is over 3.5 meters long.

The Madrid Codex is composed to two parts. Both figures and glyphs, are poorly drawn. The codex is 112 pages in length and contains religious writings and predictions.

The Madrid Codex is sometimes called the Tro-Cortesano Codex.

The Paris Codex was rediscovered in 1859 in a basket of old papers. This codex is only a fragment of its original size and in much worse condition than the Dresden and Madrid Codices. The lime coating eroded the pages until all that remains is the middle of the pages. The Paris Codex contains predictions and also contains calendars for astronomical sightings.

The fourth and most recently discovered codex was found in the early 1970's. Although in very poor condition, the Grolier Codex is about half of a 20-page table concerned with the movements of the planet Venus.

Other important Maya books have survived the ages of time. The Popol Vuh is the great epic story of the Quiché Maya and preserves both sacred and secular history. The Chilam Balam are books of songs, prophecies and calendars, preserved by oral tradition and transcribed over and over. These are observations and prophecies of a seer named Balam and their origin is unknown.

An Account of Things in the Yucatan was written by Father Diego de Landa, who was responsible for the destruction of Maya documents, codices, and text. Many consider this book an explanation of why he destroyed all these articles, while others consider it as a restitution for what he did.²³

Maya Today

The Maya today total about six million people. Some of the largest Maya groups are found in Mexico with the largest being the Yucatecs at nearly 300,000 people. The Yucatecs live on the Yucatan Peninsula. The Tzotzil and the Tzeltal live in the highlands of Chiapas. Other Maya groups include the Quiché of Guatemala, the Chontal and Chol Maya of Mexico and the Kehchi Mays of Belize. Each of the 31 Mayan groups speak a different language, yet all belong to the Mayan family. Many of the Maya communities have preserved their identity by being confined to a single area from southern Mexico to El Salvador.

Most Maya today observe a religion composed of ancient Maya ideas, animism, and Catholicism. Some Maya still believe that their village is at the center of the world and is supported at its four corners by gods. When one god shifts his burden it causes the Earth to tremble and shake. The sky above is the domain of the Sun which to the Maya is God the Father and the Moon is associated with the Virgin Mary.²⁴

Among the most fragile of Maya groups today is the Lacandon of the Chiapos rain forest. Numbering about 200 people, the Lacandon were never Christianized, and are believed to practice a form of ancient Maya religion. Since the 1950's the Lacandon have ventured outside their own world only to sell their handicrafts to tourists.

The Lacandon still use copal incense and practice rituals in sacred caves throughout the region. Most of these rituals and observances are still practiced by the Lacandon today.²⁵

The Maya face as great a challenge today as they did 500 years ago. Political upheaval in recent decades has caused significant loss of life. Over 100,000 Maya have been killed. This has created economic devastation throughout the Maya “empire”.

The Maya were the most advanced indigenous tribe of Mesoamerica. For almost 1500 years the Maya controlled the Eastern coast of Latin America. As the jungles give up further evidence to the Maya, the 21st century will learn more about our ancient ancestors.

Notes

¹ Takeo Fukazawa, “Periods of Maya Civilization,” <http://www.muse.or.jp/maya/maya1/gallery.html>

² Nancy Ruddle, “Maya Civilization,” <http://www.cmcc.muse.digital.ca/cmcceng/mmc01eng.html>

³ Sylvanus G. Morley and George W. Brainard, The Ancient Maya. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1983.

⁴ Nancy Ruddle, “Cosmology and Religion,” <http://www.cmcc.muse.digital.ca/cmcceng/mmc03eng.html>

⁵ Morley, 467.

⁶ “Cosmology,” 1.

⁷ Morley, 467-468.

⁸ “Cosmology,” 2.

⁹ Morley, 244.

¹⁰ “Cosmology,” 1-2.

¹¹ Morley, 469-478.

¹² “Cosmology,” 2.

¹³ Morley, 481.

¹⁴ “Cosmology,” 2.

¹⁵ Morley, 484-487.

¹⁶ Morley, 481-483.

¹⁷ Diego de Landa, An Account of Things in the Yucatan, Millwood, New York, Kraus. 1978.

¹⁸ “Cosmology,” 2.

¹⁹ Landa, 45.

²⁰ M.W. Makemson, “Jobs of the Priest”, <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~captain/job.description.html>

²¹ Morley, 244-245.

²² Nancy Ruddle, “Cities of the Ancient Maya,” <http://www.cmcc.muse.digital.ca/cmcc/cmcceng/mmc02eng.html>

²³ Nancy Ruddle, “Writings and Hieroglyphics,” <http://www.cmcc.muse.digital.ca/cmcc/cmcceng/mmc04eng.html>

²⁴ Michael D. Lemonick, “Mysteries of the Mayans”, <http://www.indians.org/welker/maya.html>

²⁵ Nancy Ruddle, “The Maya Today,” <http://www.cmcc.muse.digital.ca/cmcc/cmcceng/mmc08eng.html>

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Takeo Fukazawa, “Chichen Itza,” <http://www.muse.or.jp/maya/maya1/c-photo.html>

Pictures page 20

Takeo Fukazawa, “Uxmal,” <http://www.muse.or.jp/maya/maya1/u-photo.html>

Pictures pages 21, 22, 23

Nancy McNelley, “Maya Gods,” <http://www.he.tdl.com/~nmcnelly/.cal/days.gif>