

## Mayan Religion

Religion was important to every part of Mayan life. The Mayas worshipped many different gods. Each day, month, city, and occupation had its own special god or goddess. The Mayas had a variety of religious festivals and celebrations. Most of these celebrations included human sacrifice.

### Halach Uinic: Ruler and Priest

The Mayan empire was divided into many city-states. Each city-state had its own ruler. His name was *halach uinic*. This meant "the true or real man." The Mayas believed halach uinic was a living god. He ruled until his death. At his death, his oldest son became the next halach uinic. If the halach uinic did not have a son, his brother would rule. If he did not have a brother, the ruler's council elected a member of his family to serve. Some historians believe that the halach uinic also served as the high priest during religious ceremonies.



Each Mayan city-state had a ruler called the halach uinic. He may have also served as the high priest during religious ceremonies.

The halach uinic dressed in elaborate and colorful clothes. He also wore a very large head-dress. Temple wall paintings show him with large ear decorations, crossed eyes, and many tattoos.

### Mayan Priests

Many other priests served with the halach uinic. These priests, named *ahkin*, performed many duties. They had the knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. Some of the ahkin were prophets. Some of them performed the religious sacrifices. Other ahkin performed medical rituals. The Mayas believed that only the priests could explain the mysteries of life and death. The Mayas believed that the earth was flat. They thought it was on the back of a crocodile that floated in a large pond. At another time they believed the earth was the floor of a lizard house.

### Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld

The Mayas' religion taught that there were 13 layers of heavens above the earth. They also believed nine underworlds were below. They thought that they lived in the fifth creation of the world. The previous four worlds had each been destroyed by a great flood. At the beginning of the fifth world, the gods created humans from corn.

### Sacrifices to the Gods

Many of the Mayan religious ceremonies included gifts and sacrifices to the various gods and goddesses. The Mayas believed the gods would give favors to them in return for prayers, offerings, and sacrifices. The sacrifices included valuable gifts, their own blood, and human sacrifices.

In many ceremonies, the priests cut themselves to get blood to present to the gods. The Mayas had three methods of giving the human sacrifices. Often, the priests took the victim to the

altar at the temple. Then the priests cut the heart out of the living victim and presented it to the god. In another method, the priests tied the victim to a wooden pole. Then they threw spears and arrows at the victim's chest in the area of the heart. In the third type of sacrifice, they threw the victim into a sacred well. The most famous of these wells is the Well of Sacrifice at Chichén Itzá. If victims survived the fall and did not drown, the priests pulled them back out of the well. The Mayas believed the gods had chosen to spare these victims. The priests then asked the victims what messages they brought back from the gods. The victims received special treatment from then on since the Mayas believed they had spoken to the gods.

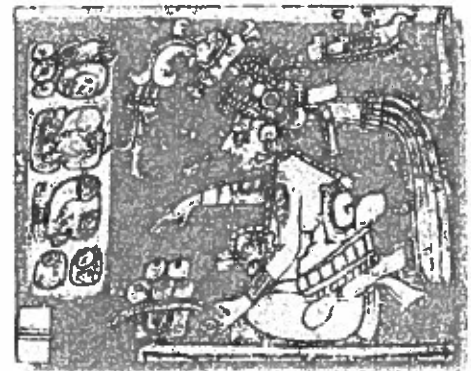
### Worshipping the Dead

The Mayas also worshipped the dead. They believed the dead became one with the gods. They worshipped their ancestors at many religious ceremonies. They also built pyramids over the sacred remains of their dead rulers.

## The Mayan Gods and Goddesses

The Mayas worshipped many gods. Here are some of the more important ones:

**Itzamná:** He was the head god, lord of the heavens and lord of night and day. His name meant lizard. Carved pictures show him as an old crossed-eyed man. He had a lizard's body. The Mayas believed he invented books and writing.



**Kinich Ahau:** He was the sun god. He was also the god of the rulers.

**Chac:** He was the rain god. Carvings show him as a reptile with a large nose pointing down and curling fangs. He had four aspects:

Chac Xib Chac  
Sac Xib Chac  
Ek Xib Chac  
Kan Xib Chac

Red Chac of the East  
White Chac of the North  
Black Chac of the West  
Yellow Chac of the South



## The Mayan Gods and Goddesses (cont.)

**Yun Kaax:** He is the god of maize (corn). He is also the god of all agriculture. Pictures always show him as a young man. He is either carrying a plant or has a plant as a headdress.



**Ah Puch:** He is the god of death. Carvings of him show a skull and skeleton.



**Ek Chaub:** He is the god of trade. Mayan artists painted his face black and he had a drooping lower lip.



**Ix Chel:** She is the moon and rainbow goddess. She is also the goddess of weaving and childbirth.



**Buluc Chabtan:** He is the god of war and human sacrifice. Carvings of him show a black line around his eye and down onto his cheek. He is at times shown with a torch or weapon in his hand.

## AZTEC RELIGION

Xochitl had a difficult time falling asleep. The excitement of tomorrow's festival kept her mind occupied until she finally became drowsy. Tomorrow, she would attend Ochpaniztli, the festival of the eleventh month. This celebration honored Tlazolteotl, the earth mother goddess. Each month of the calendar had a festival with music, dancing, processions, and sacrifices.

The Aztecs worshipped many gods and goddesses. Each village and each occupation had its own patron god. A different god also watched over each day and each division of the day. The people worshipped the various gods and goddesses to attract the good forces of nature and to repel harmful powers.

Just before the Sun rose, distant sounds of the temple drums woke Xochitl. She dressed quickly, and as she went into the main room of the house, she saw that the rest of the family was already awake and making preparations to go to the temple for the festival of Ochpaniztli. Her mother gave her a basket of corn to place on the temple altar as a tribute to the goddess Tlazolteotl.

Xochitl was glad that her family arrived as soon as they did. Even though it was still early, hundreds of people had arrived and were lining the road leading to the temple. Xochitl's family was still able to find a location that would give them a good view of the procession.

The crowd quieted down as the beat of the drums stopped. Though they were too far away from the temple to hear what was said, Xochitl knew that the priests were now presenting the sacred chants. The chants provided magic to avoid rains at harvest and to celebrate the refreshment of Earth Mother Tlazolteotl. Xochitl knew that the next part of the ceremony would be a human sacrifice to appease the gods.

In this ceremony, a young woman impersonating the goddess of ripe corn would be the sacrifice. This was one of the few Aztec ceremonies that sacrificed a young woman. Usually the victims of the sacrifices were men who were either captives of wars or slaves. Many of the Aztec religious festivals included human sacrifices. The priest cut open the victim's chest and tore out the heart. He then placed the victim's heart on the altar of the god or goddess. In one ceremony to the god Tlaloc, sacrifices even included children. Xochitl's mother had explained the Aztec belief that the blood given in sacrifice gave the gods new strength and energy.

When Xochitl heard the drums and other music begin, she knew it was time for the grand procession. First came the young men of each clan, dressed in their finest ceremonial outfits. Xochitl enjoyed the colorful display of brightly painted clothing and fancy feather work that decorated the clothes. Each clan member also carried a military weapon and shield decorated with the insignia of the clan.



Huitzilopochtli was the Aztec Sun god and god of war. He was also the chief god of Tenochtitlan.

Xochitl watched closely until she recognized her clan's group. Pride filled Xochitl's heart as they passed. She especially enjoyed seeing her uncles and cousins in the procession. She knew that when he was older, her brother would also march with them.

After the last clan passed, groups of warriors with special rank and privileges passed by. Two of the special groups, The Knights of the Eagle and the Knights of the Jaguar, wore animal skins to represent their mascot. These two groups then staged a mock battle to entertain the crowd.

The rest of the festival day was spent visiting friends and feasting. Occasionally other special events provided entertainment and excitement. Other contests and games filled the afternoon. The most important of the games was tlachtli. This was a fast-moving game using a rubber ball. Each team tried to score points by putting the ball through rings on the sides of the playing field.

The festival was over by sunset. Xochitl and her family returned home. After the evening meal, Xochitl went to bed early. She had had a busy and tiring day, but in 20 days she would be ready to celebrate the next festival.

## AZTEC GODS AND GODDESSES

The ancient Aztecs worshipped over 60 gods and goddesses. This is a list of the more important ones.

NAME	DESCRIPTION
TEZCATLIPOCA	Sun god, most powerful of all gods, chief god of the town of Texcoco
HUITZILOPOCHTLI	Sun god and god of war, chief god of the town of Tenochtitlan
TLAZOLTEOTL	Mother of gods, earth goddess
TLALOC	Rain god, most important to the farmers
QUETZALCOATL	God of learning and the priesthood, also god of arts and crafts
CHICOMECOATL	Goddess of crops
CENETEOTL	God of corn
XIPE TOTEC	God of spring, planting, and re-growth
TONATIUH	A Sun god
MICTLANTECUHLI	God of the dead
XIUHTECUHTLI	Ancient fire god
CHALCHIHUITLICUE	Our Lady of the Turquoise skirt, lakes and rivers

## INCAN RELIGION

Like the other Indian tribes, the Incas worshipped many gods and goddesses. The major Incan god was the god of nature, Viracocha, the creator.

Another Incan god was Inti, the sun god. Gold was the symbol of Inti. The sun god temple is the most important structure in Cuzco, the major city of the Incas. The Incas believed Inti was the father of Incan rulers. They worshipped the ruler as a living god.

Major Incan goddesses included those of the earth and the sea. The Incas also worshipped many lesser gods and goddesses. These included gods of thunder, the Moon, stars, rainbows, and others.

The Incas believed they could learn the will of the gods by divining. Divining is studying objects to find magic signs. Priests would look at things such as animal organs, flames of a fire, or movements of animals, and from these they would try to discover if it was a good day for planting crops, going to war, or making other important decisions.

In addition to the gods and goddesses, the Incas worshipped *huacas*. A *huaca* was a sacred place or thing. *Huacas* included mummies of the dead, temples, holy places, and things of nature such as mountains, springs, and stones. Each Incan family had small statues in their homes of *huacas*. The statues were sacred to that family.

Religious ceremonies were an important part of Incan life. Each family had daily prayers to their *huacas*. The priests performed daily ceremonies at the various temples. The high priest was a favorite relative of the ruler.

The Incas held a major religious festival during each of the 12 months of their calendar. The Incan year began in December with the *Capac Raimi*. This means "the magnificent festival." This was the most important and elaborate of all celebrations. *Pauca Huaray*, in March, celebrated the ripening of the earth. The June ceremony of *Inti Raimi* was the festival of the Sun. *Uma Raimi*, the festival of the water, occurred in October.

Some rituals happened inside the temples. The great monthly festivals occurred outdoors. All of the people could take part in them. The celebrations included dancing, feasts, games, songs, and parades. The ceremonies also included sacrifices and offerings. Incas sacrificed animals such as the llama and guinea pigs. At times human sacrifices, including child sacrifices, were part of the rituals.



Winged attendants of the thunder god are shown in profile rather than full face. The figures have rayed headdresses and carry staffs.