

College Guild  
PO Box 696, Brunswick, Maine 04011

# World Mythology

Unit 4 of 5

## Mayan Mythology

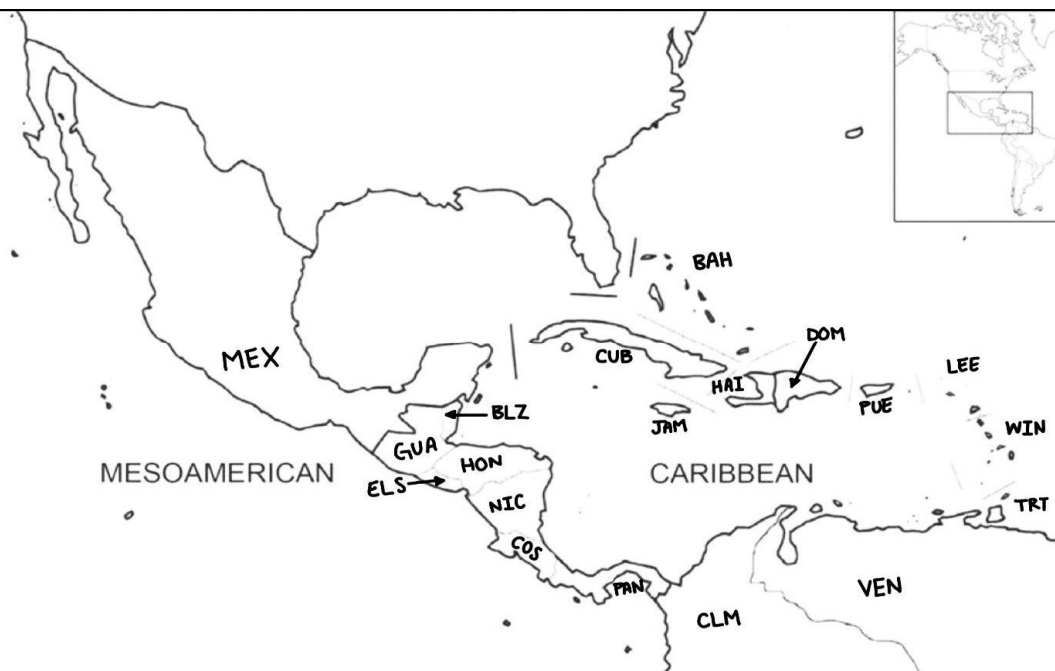
Similar to Africa, there isn't just one set of stories that all the indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America follow. Instead, there are various traditional tales connected to their religion, ethics, and beliefs. Native Americans in North America and the Maya civilization in Central America are two ancient cultures that existed long before any Europeans arrived in North America.

Mayan mythology includes ancient stories that pass on survival knowledge, traditions, cultural origins, and more from one generation to the next. Across the world, nearly every culture shares mythological beliefs, and the Mayans are no different—they also share these beliefs. Mythological systems serve two purposes: explaining natural or cultural facts and justifying, validating, or explaining the existence of social systems and traditional practices.



### Glossary of Terms

1. **Animism** - the belief that objects, places, and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence. Animism perceives all things — animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems, human handiwork, and even words — as animated and alive.
2. **Benevolent** - Intending or showing goodwill, kindness, or friendliness.
3. **Divination** - The communication with a deity for the purpose of determining the deity's knowledge, resulting in a clarification of a decision or discernment of the future.
4. **Humanoid** - A non-human entity with human form or characteristics
5. **Hieroglyphs** - A stylized picture of an object representing a word, syllable, or sound, as found in ancient Egyptian and other writing systems.
6. **Iconography** - The use of visual images that leverage symbols to represent specific actions or objects. This practice goes beyond one image to include a system of images that hold close connections with a group of people.
7. **Indigenous** - Originating, growing, or produced in a certain place or region.
8. **Logosyllabic** - A writing system in which symbols can represent a word or phrase.
9. **Mayan Codex** - Codex refers to an old type of book made with pages bound together (as opposed to a scroll).
10. **Maya script (Maya glyphs)** - Historically, the native writing system of the Maya civilization of Mesoamerica is the only Mesoamerican writing system that has been substantially deciphered.
11. **Mesoamerican (middle America)** - Refers to a region in the middle of the two Americas, which stretches from south-central Mexico in the north to northern Costa Rica in the south.
12. **Pantheism** - The belief that God consists of everyone and everything (pronounced PAN-thee-izm).
13. **Personified** - Represent (a quality or concept) by a figure in human form.
14. **Pre-Columbian era** - Any group of people that was present on the continents of North and South America prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492.
15. **Primeval Ocean** - A recurring idea found in the mythology of many cultures and civilizations, representing the world or cosmos as enveloped by primordial waters.
16. **Prominence** - The state of being important or famous.
17. **Ritual** - The prescribed procedure for conducting religious ceremonies; any customary observance or practice.



MEX = Mexico    GUA = Guatemala    HON = Honduras    BLZ = Belize    NIC = Nicaragua    ELS = El Salvador    COS = Costa Rica    PAN = Panama  
 CLM = Columbia    VEN = Venezuela    JAM = Jamaica    DOM = Dominican Republic    HAI = Haiti    CUB = Cuba    BAH = Bahamas  
 PUE = Puerto Rico    LEE = Leeward Islands    WIN = Windward Islands    TRT = Trinidad and Tobago    \*\*\*LEE, WIN, & PUE are not countries\*\*\*

## The Mayan Civilization

The Maya peoples are an **ethnolinguistic** group of **indigenous** peoples of **Mesoamerica**. The ancient Maya civilization was formed by members of this group, and today's Maya are generally descendants of people who lived within that historical civilization. The Maya number about six million people today, making them the largest single block of **indigenous** peoples north of Peru. Some of the largest Maya groups are found in Mexico, the most important of these being the Yucatecs (300,000), the Tzotzil (120,000), and the Tzeltal (80,000).

The Maya civilization is one of the most well-known among the classical civilizations in Mesoamerica, which includes five countries: Guatemala, Belize, Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras. There are signs suggesting that the Maya people migrated from North America to the highlands of Guatemala, possibly around 2600 B.C. They became prominent around 250 A.D., leading an agricultural, village-based life.

The Maya civilization is noted for their development of **logosyllabic** scripts (the most sophisticated and highly developed writing system in the Pre-Columbian Era), mathematics, astronomy, and calendrical systems. They were recognized for their dedication to creating elaborate and highly decorated ceremonial architecture, such as palaces, temple-pyramids, and observatories. Remarkably, these structures were constructed without the use of metal tools.

The Mayan spiritual belief system is marked by **animism** and **pantheism**. In this system, a tree, a mountain, the entire universe, and every person are considered divine. This belief system **intertwines** every aspect of Mayan daily life, their surroundings, and the entire natural world into one unified understanding.

### 1. Why is it crucial to comprehend foundational cultural elements like animism and pantheism in Mayan culture, and how does this understanding contribute to our insights about people or diverse communities?

Mayan mythology, a part of **Mesoamerican** mythology, includes all of the Maya tales where **personified** forces of nature, deities, and heroes play the main roles. To understand the myths from the time before the Spanish arrived, we need to piece them together from **iconography**. In Mayan mythology, the gods and heroes had many names and forms, and their stories come in different versions. The scenes and figures can seem confusing, but beneath it all, there is a sense that the universe is organized and structured. Acting appropriately toward the gods was seen as crucial to keeping harmony and balance in this ordered cosmos.

### 2. Do you have practices to help you maintain balance? Is this important while in prison? If yes, please write a paragraph or two about your practices. If not, write a paragraph or two about why you have not developed practices that focus on balance in your life.

The Maya shared a common **Mesoamerican** culture. People in the region believed in the same gods and myths, built temples in the form of pyramids, practiced **divination**, and had an interest in astronomy. They also had a ball game where teams competed to pass a solid rubber ball through a stone ring or hoop. Only certain men and gods were allowed to play this game. Sometimes it was a simple sport, sometimes a sacred **ritual**. Scholars do not know the full meaning of the **Mesoamerican** ball game, but it may have represented the movement of the heavenly bodies or a symbolic kind of warfare that ended in human sacrifice.

### 3. Describe what you think the ball game meant or draw a picture of the game being played.

## Origin of Creation

The Maya believed that creation was related to **divination** and magic, often calling their heroes and creator gods “diviners.” Those who practiced **divination** claimed special powers to foresee the future. **Divination** was regarded as a form of creation similar to the divine miracle that produced the world and humankind.

Like the Aztecs and other **Mesoamericans**, the Maya believed our current world is just the latest in a series of creations. The earlier ones perished or were destroyed one after the other, just as this world will one day come to an end too.

### 4. Write a destruction story describing an earlier world that no longer exists or draw a picture of an earlier world showing its destruction.

The Popol Vuh is the story of creation according to the Quiche Maya of the region known today as Guatemala. According to this tale, the current creation began when the god Huracan blew a powerful wind over the **primeval ocean**, causing the earth to rise. Then Xpiacoc and Xmucane, referred to as “old man and old woman,” performed magical rites. This helped Huracan and other creator deities form plants, animals, and eventually the human race. The gods first created man out of clay, and he melted into the water. The second try involved making men out of wood, but these beings turned out dull, lifeless, and easily destroyed by fire. For their third attempt, the gods mixed yellow and white maize flour together and made the First Father, the ancestor of men, from the dough.

### First Fathers

The First Fathers were worshipful, handsome, and wise — maybe too wise according to the gods. Fearing their creations would become too powerful, the gods blew fog into the First Fathers' eyes, taking away some of their knowledge. The gods then made the First Mothers. Finally, they created the sun to bring light to the world.



← Creator deities crafting man

### 5. Why could it be dangerous for one person to possess a lot of power?

One section of the Popol Vuh narrates the myth of the Hero Twins, sons of the maize god Hun-Hunahpú, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué. Seeing the maize god and his twin brother play the ball game constantly, the lords of death grew annoyed and summoned the two to Xibalba, the underworld.

### 6. Do you believe gods can become jealous of humans? Why or why not?

However, the twins had tricks of their own. They played the ball game every day, and each night they passed some tests. Eventually, they decided to set a trap for the lords. In the final part of their trick, the twins cut themselves into pieces and then restored themselves to wholeness. The underworld gods wanted to try the same trick. However, after the twins cut up

the gods and simply left them in pieces. The twins then restored their father and uncle to life before passing into the sky to become the sun and moon.

In ancient Maya mythology, the belief held that humans existed on Earth to provide nourishment to the gods—human sacrifices were seen as a means to fulfill this purpose. The **ritual** involved priests or nobles piercing parts of their bodies and offering the blood to the gods or ancestors in exchange for guidance. Clouds of smoke from burning blood offerings were thought to summon the Vision Serpents, images of snakes with Mayan gods and ancestors coming from their mouths. These visions likely symbolized renewal and rebirth facilitated by sacrifice.

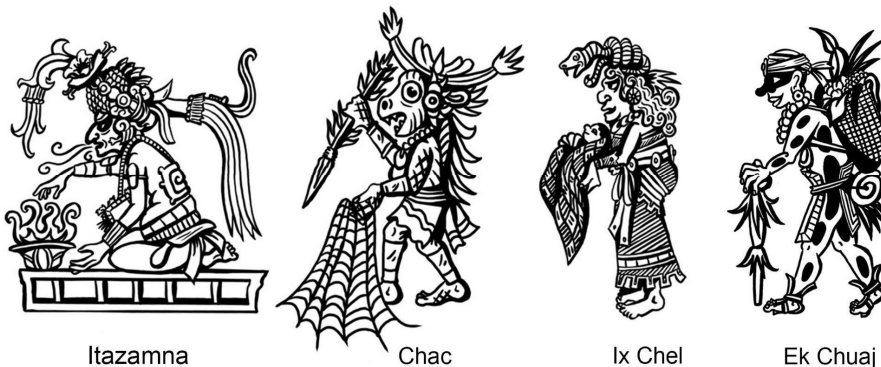
### 7. Why do you believe the gods wanted these bloodletting rituals?

## Powerful Worshipped Deities

### Itzamná - Principle Mayan deity, ruler of heaven, day, and night

The chief god of the Maya was Itzamná—ruler of heaven, day and night, and the other deities. Itzamná was not just a god but also a cultural hero credited with giving people basic tools of civilization, such as language and fire. He often appeared as an elderly **humanoid** seated, without teeth and with a large curved nose. Itzamná was the first priest and the inventor of writing, and was also associated with healing and medicine.

*Mayan Powerful Deities*



Itzamna

Chac

Ix Chel

Ek Chuaj

### 8. Fire has been mentioned in all previous units. List five ways fire can be used by civilizations.

Itzamná was also responsible for protecting and guiding science, including astrology. Mayans stand out in history as a civilization that used astrology, and their writings have revealed significant advancements that we have recently managed to understand and decode. Itzamná is also known as the god of wisdom, god of the sky, night and day. He is considered a universal spirit of life that encourages chaos so that there is creation.

### 9. Can science and belief in God coexist without conflict?

Itzamná, in addition to being the chief deity, was the creator of the Mayan calendar system. This calendar was based on the movements of stars and solar cycles. Medicine was another significant field associated with Itzamná in Mayan culture. He was also recognized as the sun god, Kinich Ahau, with connections to jaguars.



### **Ix Chel - Mayan goddess of the moon, water, weaving, and procreation**

According to Mayan mythology, Itzamná married the goddess Ixchel, who was the Mayan goddess of the moon, water, and weaving and ancient deity connected to fertility and procreation. They had thirteen children, with two of them acting as creator gods. Itzamná's physical form is reflected in various **Mayan Codex**. Legend has it that Itzamná fell in love with Ix Chel while weaving on a back-strap loom, an invention which she created.

#### **10. What are some ways you think people could worship Ix Chel?**

Ix Chel was viewed as the goddess of the moon, because of her feminine character. She symbolized fertility connected to the Earth, as the moon's cycles dictated planting and harvest times. As a fertility goddess, she was thought to hold the power to cause significant floods. Whether she had the ability to bring about catastrophes or was responsible for changing seasons remains unclear. Regardless of how her waters were used, it was believed she controlled them with an upside-down jar.

As a weaver, Ix Chel crafted a special spindle considered to be the center of the universe. Although her role in this cosmic area isn't clear, she possessed considerable power. Moreover, she was frequently called upon during and after childbirth, particularly in her role as a midwife.

#### **11. Some describe Ix Chel as mother nature. What qualities does Ix Chel possess to make her one with nature?**

### **Chac - Mayan god of rain**

Chac was the rain god. Depicted as a fisherman or with features of a fish or reptile, Chac held **prominence** for the Maya who had a strong agricultural base. Similar to other Mayan deities, Chac could manifest in four forms, each linked to a specific color and cardinal directions. The Chac of the east was known as Chac Xib Chaac, and was associated with the color red. Sak Xib Chac was the White Chac of the North; Ex Xib Chac was the Black Caac of the West, and Kan Xib Chac was the Yellow Chac of the South.

#### **12. If you were a god what physical form would you appear as and why? Or, draw an image of what physical form you would want to appear as if you were a god.**

One story says that he carried an ax in one hand with which he struck the clouds to make it rain. Another legend tells that Chaac was the sun god's brother, and they defeated their adoptive parents. In this legend, it is also said that Chac betrayed his brother, for which he was punished, and when he cries in repentance, the sky becomes cloudy, and it rains. In the Yucatán Peninsula, he was considered the protector of agriculture, so even today, **rituals** are offered for a good harvest. He is often depicted with a huge nose, bulging eyes, and a body full of reptile-like scales. This representation can be found in different archaeological sites of the Maya world, such as Uxmal and Chichén Itzá.

#### **13. Create a story that explains the first rainfall using Mayan mythology.**

### **Ek Chuaj - Merchant deity and god of cacao**

Many Mayan gods had a dual nature reflecting very different aspects of society, and Ek Chuaj is the best example of this. He was the god of merchants and cacao, which was once used for currency, while also being the god of war, chaos, and destruction. His **benevolent** side was represented by a man with a large cane that worked as a lance, carrying various

items on his back. On the flip side, his warrior side always appeared to be in battle, either defeating enemies or being defeated by other warrior gods.

**14. Is there a time where you have encountered someone that was a walking contradiction? (i.e they looked very mean but were actually the sweetest person you've met) What happened for you to realize this?**

### The Underworld in Mayan Mythology

#### *Au Puch of the Mayan Underworld*



There are several Mayan gods associated with death and the Underworld, with different sources giving them different names.

Ah Puch, also called the Flatulent (Kisin) and the Lord of Death (Yum Kimil), was the god of death in the Maya Pantheon. He ruled over the lowest of nine underground worlds of the Maya.

Xibalba, the underworld, was a truly fearsome place, strongly associated with water. It had its own landscape, gods, and bloodthirsty predators. Xibalba was also the setting of many adventures by the heroes of Maya mythology, particularly the Hero Twins, which we mentioned earlier in the unit.

**16. What do you imagine the 9 layers of the underworld are like? Describe the 9 layers of the underworld by drawing a picture, writing a poem or writing 2-3 paragraphs.**

Ah Puch is considered the opposite of the god Itzamná, the god of life. The name of this fleshless god uses two **Maya Glyphs**; the first illustrates the head of a corpse with its eyes closed, and the second shows the head of the god himself with a truncated nose and gaunt jaws, accompanied by a flint knife. His early representations were owls, dogs, and bats—animals the Maya considered a bad omen.

According to legend, this god would go out at night to visit the houses of the sick to feed on them or take them to Xibalbá. The living had the advantage of hearing his bells and necklaces that moved with every step the god took to hide from him. One of the most distinctive features of this god is a unique hat decorated with owl feathers of the horned species. His back is covered by a huge jaguar skin, and he often appears naked, showing off his stomach. He is also linked with earthquakes, which often strike Mesoamerica with devastating force. The ancient Maya depicted him as a dancing skeleton with dangling eyeballs.

**17. Draw an image of Yum Cimil as a dancing skeleton, then explain why he is dancing.**

**Self-Reflection Exercise**

- 1) Choose a god of Mayan Mythology that you feel similar to or relatable to, then explain why.
- 2) What have you learned about Mayan Mythology that makes you think differently?
- 3) How does Mayan Mythology apply to your own life?

\*\*\*\*\*

*Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes*

**Appendix  
Mayan Mythology: Unit 4 of 5**

Sources:

<https://www.spanishacademyantigua.com/blog/2021/06/19/itzamná-mayan-god>

<http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Le-Me/Mayan-Mythology.html#ixzz7Zzl56W3O>