

Mayan religion and their kings influence upon it religion essay



The Mayans of Mesoamerica have been known for their mysterious culture but mostly for their kings and religious practices/beliefs. The exact beliefs or actions of the Mayans may never fully be discovered or understood. As time passes we have learned more and more from the ruins they have left behind. Due to the mysteriousness of the religion many people take advantage of this and make up stories to benefit themselves but luckily we have archaeologists and anthropologists to debunk these ridiculous claims. Many people believe that the Mayans were a bloodthirsty race due to their religious practices and explanations of them by outsiders, such as colonialists. The Mayans seem to be very violent due to these stories by the colonialists and propagandists but people don't realize it's just the Mayan's strong devotion to religion and faith within their kings that make them willing to sacrifice themselves or loved ones to their gods but were never to be considered blood thirsty.

This is the first account, the first narrative. There was neither man, nor animal, birds, fishes, crabs, trees, stones, caves, ravines, grasses, nor forests; there was only the sky. The surface of the earth had not appeared. There was only the calm sea and the great expanse of the sky. There was nothing brought together, nothing which could make a noise, nor anything which might move, or tremble, or could make noise in the sky. There was nothing standing; only the calm water, the placid sea, alone and tranquil. Nothing existed. There was only immobility and silence in the darkness, in the night. Only the creator, the Maker, Tepeu, Gucumatz, the Forefathers, were in the water surrounded with light. [...] Then Tepeu and Gucumatz came together; then they conferred about life and light, what they would do

so that there would be light and dawn, who it would be who would provide food and sustenance. Thus let it be done! Let the emptiness be filled! Let the water recede and make a void, let the earth appear and become solid; let it be done. Thus they spoke. Let there be light, let there be dawn in the sky and on the earth! There shall be neither glory nor grandeur in our creation and formation until the human being is made, man is formed. [...] First the earth was formed, the mountains and the valleys; the currents of water were divided, the rivulets were running freely between the hills, and the water was separated when the high mountains appeared. Thus was the earth created, when it was formed by the Heart of Heaven, the Heart of Earth, as they are called who first made it fruitful, when the sky was in suspense, and the earth was submerged in the water. (Thompson 1970)

After the creation of the earth, together these gods tried to create man so that they would be praised for their creation. They attempted to make man but made animals and quickly realized they weren't man yet. Then they try to make a man out of mud but the mud just soaked up the water and dissolved. Next they try to make man out of wood but these lacked souls and minds. Then came the true creation of man as such

This the Forefathers did, Tepeu and Gucumatz, as they were called. After that they began to talk about the creation and the making of our first mother and father; of yellow corn and of white corn they made their flesh; of cornmeal dough they made the arms and the legs of man. Only dough of corn meal went into the flesh of our first fathers, the four men, who were created. [...] And as they had the appearance of men, they were men; they talked, conversed, saw and heard, walked, grasped things; they were good

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and handsome men, and their figure was the figure of a man. (Thompson 1970)

From this women were created while the men were sleeping. This starts the understanding we have of Mayan cosmology allowing us to shape their culture and religion around it.

Mayan religion can be looked at as a contract between man and his gods. The gods would help man with all of his work and provide him with the essentials of food and water. In return for this the Gods would expect payments typically in advance. The Mayans flourished thanks to a deep understanding of their geographic setting, and surprising adaptations to the environmental conditions that surrounded them. They conceived the world as a flat and four cornered space that was ordered and measured at the time of creation. Each corner was held up by four old deities. The sky was held up by four Bacabs of the correct color for each direction supporting the skies with upraised arms. These Bacabs were also sometimes represented as trees. The Mayans also believed in the idea that life and death are cyclical like their seasons, calendars, and astronomical cycles they predicted (Karen Bassie-Sweet 2008: 4). They also believe that the physical world is tied to the supernatural world by the Gods who live within the other/supernatural world. These cycles spiral through time without beginning or ending because when one of these would end another would begin again creating the cyclic pattern. The Mayan's believed that when people died they would enter the Underworld through a cave or most likely a cenote. Although that was the belief of the path of death for most Mayans when the kings passed away they followed a path connected to the cosmic movement of the sun and fell

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into the Underworld. Then because they possessed the supernatural powers they attained from while being king they were reborn into the Sky World and became gods themselves. Mayans usually dreaded death by natural causes because the dead did not automatically go to "paradise". Usually they buried people beneath the floors of their houses with their mouths filled with food and a jade bead while being accompanied by religious items and objects they used when they were alive. Most of the graves of priests were believed to have contained religious books.

The Mayans were known by archaeologists and anthropologists for their immense knowledge in astronomy, astrology, and mathematics. To the Mayans religion and science were one in the same. Many of their discoveries in these areas of intelligence tied in with religious rituals closely. They were also very closely associated with time which is why they are known by archaeologists and anthropologists for their calendar. Within Mayan cosmology the world has been created 5 times and destroyed 4 times. This tied into the idea that has been created by propagandists stating that the long count ending date is the supposed day of destruction but this assumption is untrue due to the cyclic pattern of the calendar. Mostly the calendar was used for religious purposes. The calendar showed specific dates in which rituals were to occur and also the Uayeb (Sharer and Traxler 2006: 102) otherwise known as the unlucky days or days without souls.

Since their religion was centered on their extensive calendar the priests had a very close connection with astronomy and the calendar. A lot of the times the Mayan kings were priests as well. Priests were expected to know the lucky and unlucky days of the calendar. They were also expected to know <https://assignbuster.com/mayan-religion-and-their-kings-influence-upon-it-religion-essay/>

the days of the year to advise the people and kings what days were good for harvest, warfare, sacrificial days, and much more. Scholars initially believed that the Mayans were of a peaceful civilization due to its advancements in astronomy, astrology, and mathematics. After further investigation they discovered through hieroglyphics that the Mayans waged war on many other civilizations and took their kings hostage debunking the initial belief that they were peaceful. The Mayan kings were very connected to the planet Venus (Coe 2005: 96) and only waged wars on certain days of its cycle. After taken hostage some of these rulers were sacrificed to the Gods. This is where the idea of the Mayans being bloodthirsty derived. Bloodthirsty by definition is considered murderous, cruel, taking pleasure in bloodshed, or eager to shed blood (Merriam-Webster 2011). The Mayans believed that the Gods were nourished by human blood and the only way of pleasing them or contacting them was through human sacrifice or bloodletting. This shows that they weren't doing it for fun or pure enjoyment but because their religious practices called for the bloodshed. These rituals were believed to strengthen fertility, show faithfulness, and propitiate the Gods. Sacrifice seems to be tied in with mainly ball games, festivals, and the taking of power by a new king. Within their beliefs it states that if these rituals and the bloodletting were neglected or forgotten then cosmic disorder and chaos would take place.

The rituals of high importance had the sacrifice of a victim that was held down by four helpers called Chacs on the top of a pyramid or raised place while the priest made an incision below the ribs and took out the heart with his hands. At this point the heart was then burned to please the Gods. This

was believed that the smoke would reach the Gods as a sacrifice.(Sharer and Traxler 2006: 602) Not only did they make captives suffer but the Mayan aristocracy also was expected to undergo ritual bloodletting and self torture as mediators between the people and the gods to please the gods. If a person was of a higher power than another person they were expected to spill more blood. So the higher the position the more blood and more self torture you were expected to inflict upon yourself. Some such examples of self torture to draw blood were to jab spines through the ear, penis, or by pulling a thorn-studded cord through the tongue to draw blood that was collected as an offering to the gods. Another way of sacrifice practiced was the priests tied the victim to a wooden pole and threw spears and arrows at the victim's chest in the area of the heart. A third type of sacrifice was that they threw the victim into a sacred well known as a Cenote. These are typically defined as limestone sinkholes. One of the most famous of these was a cenote at Chichén Itzá. It has been discovered that if the victims survived the fall and did not drown within the cenote, the priests would pull them up out of the well. This is because the Mayans believed that if this occurred it would be because the gods had chosen to spare these victims. In these cases the priests would then asked the victims what messages they had brought back from the gods. From that point on the victims received special treatment because the Mayans believed that they had spoken to the gods and deserved to be treated this way. Other human sacrifices consisted by flaying, decapitation, or hurling bodies from a precipice. It is also thought that the losers of a ball game played by the Mayans may have been sacrificed to please the gods. These may seem very violent and direct

thoughts towards the Mayans being bloodthirsty. Yet again people must
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remember these were rituals for religious purposes rather than enjoyment and were not done all the time but rather saved for those very important rituals and situations. For lesser rituals other objects were sacrificed such as animals like manatees, jaguars, opossums, parrots, turtles, pumas, crocodiles, squirrels, insects, feathers, deer, or rubber, cacao, maize, squash seeds, flowers, bark, honey, wax, jade, obsidian, virgin water from caves, shells, and more. Other rituals also took place to please the gods such as dancing, competitions, performances, and prayers to the gods. Major sacrificial rituals were not done every day but are one of the only things you hear about when you discuss or learn about the Maya. Knowing all of this it shows that although the Mayans are displayed as bloodthirsty monsters in books and classes today they really weren't that way and that is just a westernized idea of a small part of their culture that is dramatized and blown out of proportion.

The Mayans were dominated by an elite group that governed them in a divine kingship style. Divine kingship is known as a religio-political concept that views a ruler as a manifestation, mediator, or agent to the deities in a culture. In other societies, members view their rulers or chiefs as inheritors of the community's own magical power. The kings were typically men and were referred to as k'uhul ajaw meaning divine or holy lord. The kings obtained a lot of power from a lot of areas but it is definite that religion was fundamental to royal power. All of the Mayan kings controlled rituals that were considered by the Mayans to be responsible for resources such as water, food, and security. This gave them extra power over the Mayan people. Within ancient Mayan societies, the crown typically symbolized

maize leaves, symbolizing the rulers with the Maize God and showing a similarity between the authority of the king and the sacred power of the God. The Mayan kings were known to dress as deities for rituals and performances. When the kings dressed as the deities or other spiritual beings during ritual performances, they were assuming the identities of them and wielded their divine powers. There were three vertical levels that the Mayan kings reigned over. The cosmological levels were the celestial upper world, the middle world otherwise known as earth, and the watery underworld. There was a great world tree that linked all three of these together represented by a maize plant, ceiba tree, or sometimes in the form of the king. Mayan kings used architecture to replicate the topography of the universe. It is believed that a pyramid represented a sacred mountain while the bordering plazas symbolically represented bodies of water. Beliefs are also that a prosperous collection of small objects were there expressing celestial principles through iconography.

Although the Mayans have been studied for many years they are still mysterious to the world. From this we can conclude that the Mayans were not bloodthirsty monsters but were rather just fearful of their gods or faithful to their kings and only did major sacrifices once in a while when need be to please their gods. Many of the beliefs about the Mayan kings display that they controlled almost everything the Mayans did due to the divine kingship they held. This allowed the Mayans to do what the king wanted and what the king said the God's wanted done. In conclusion the Mayans were a regular civilization with advanced abilities in astrology, astronomy, and mathematics that tied that intelligence into its religion creating an advanced calendar

predicting special religious days and sacrificial days that they followed with persuasion by their divine rulers and fear of their Gods.