

Blood and human  
sacrifice for  
mesoamerican  
indians theology  
religion essay



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While it may not have always been clear why blood was a necessity for humans to survive, it was always worshiped unlike anything else. Practically every tribe and civilization throughout Mesoamerican history has participated in some sort of blood or human sacrifice. Even though each group of people may have had very different beliefs and even different rituals, blood was central part in many ceremonies. Nevertheless, the extent to which blood had been used was extremely different. While some civilizations sacrificed thousands of humans, some only participated in animals sacrifices, and others had no sacrifices at all. Blood ceremonies happened for a number of various reasons, anything from a coming of age, to the induction of a new king, to the construction of a new temple. Most often sacrifices were made to appease the gods, as a sign of piety and could be performed by anyone from a lowly servant to a king. While the Aztec, the Maya, and the Kuna were all very different people living at different times in Mesoamerica with entirely different ceremonies and beliefs, all used blood as an integral part in many of their rituals.

The Aztecs, also known as the Mexicas, were a group of culturally united people that mostly spoke Nahuatl and lived and ruled in Central Mexico during the fourteen to sixteenth centuries. They ruled from a large city called Tenochtitlan, which is now the present-day location of Mexico City. Out of all of the Mesoamerican civilizations, the Aztecs had the most prolific blood rituals and human sacrifices. They especially thought it was important to sacrifice humans, at least once a month so that they could appease the gods and bring good luck to their land. However, researchers have found that human sacrifices in the Aztec empire were done much more often than once

a month. Even many of the Aztec myths surround human sacrifice. The “Legend of the Five Suns” attempts to explain the formation of all of the gods and why there is a need for human sacrifices all in a single story. It begins with the god Ometeotl creating four sons who would be the four cardinal directions and who would also create all other gods that the Aztecs worshipped. These four gods created people and when they did they had to create a god that would serve as the sun as well. Unfortunately the gods that would be created for the sun were not perfect and kept fighting and the sun god kept changing which kept killing all of the people on earth. Finally Quetzalcoatl decided that he would not let the people that he created be destroyed so he went to the underworld to steal their bones and resurrect them. At the same time created for them a new sun called Huitzilopochtli. This is the sun that the Aztecs believed was in the sky over their heads. They also thought that every time it turned dark Coyolxauhqui, the goddess of the moon, and the stars were fighting with Huitzilopochtli to try to take his spot. In *Tenochtitlan: Capital of the Aztec Empire* Jose Luis de Rojas emphasizes the conclusion of the myth: “The myth dramatizes the triumph of the sun over the moon and the stars when it rises each day” (pg. 16). Additionally, the human sacrifices performed by the Aztecs were supposed to help give Huitzilopochtli the strength to fight back and to rise again each morning. In *The Aztecs: New Perspectives* Dirk R. Van Turenhout explains the importance of sacrifices: “The Aztecs shared with other Mesoamerican peoples the belief that sacrifice to gods was necessary to ensure the continued existence of the universe” (pg 188). Without human sacrifices there could be no life sustained on earth.

Even the founding of Tenochtitlan is a legend based on the human sacrifice of a princess. It is said that when the Mexica, or the Aztecs, first came to Central Mexico they were forced to settle in Chapultepec, a region with very poor resources and living conditions. Here they fell under the rule of another city called Culhuacan whose rulers were said to be descendants of the Toltecs. After the Mexica city helped Culhuacan defeat an enemy the King of Culhuacan gave away his daughter for marriage to one the Mexica leaders. Unfortunately when he arrived for the marriage ceremony to Chapultepec, to his disbelief he saw one of the Mexica priests wearing his daughter's skin over his head. Upon being questioned the priest explained that their god, Huitzilopochtli asked for them to sacrifice the princess. Outraged the King forced all of the Mexica off of the land. They wandered aimlessly for weeks searching for a place to settle when Huitzilopochtli came down from the heavens and told them to settle down when they see an eagle perched on a cactus killing a snake. They came across this scene in the middle of a marshland and there founded their soon to be great capital of Tenochtitlan. Just like this one many of the Aztec myths are based on human sacrifice, or at least have human sacrifice, demonstrating how important of a ritual it was in their lives.

For the Aztecs most of the human sacrifices were performed by a set of five or six priests. The victim would be dragged up the stairs to the top of the temple where a few of the priests would hold him down on a stone slab and one priest would make an incision in the victim's abdomen with a flint knife. He would then reach in and quickly pull out the still beating heart for all to see. The heart would then be placed in a bowl which would be offered to the

gods and the body would be pushed down the stairs. Meanwhile all of the spectators were expected to perform some sort of bloodletting ritual themselves. While this was the most standard form of human sacrifice each god had a specific sacrificial ritual that had to have been followed. In the Handbook to Life in the Aztec World Manuel Aguilar-Moreno describes the different human sacrifice rituals of the Aztecs:

“ Types of sacrifices included extraction of the heart, decapitation, dismemberment, drowning, or piercing by arrows, to name some examples. Instruments of choice included, but were not limited to, a techcatl, which was a sacrificial stone; a cuaubxicalli, a container to hold hearts; a teepatl (flint knife), which was used to stab the subject” (pg. 154).

The Aztecs used the most elaborate ways they could think of to kill their victims in order to show their obedience and respect to the gods. The Aztecs performed the most gruesome and grotesque human sacrifice rituals in Mesoamerica.

Out of all neighboring civilizations the Aztecs held the largest human sacrifices and in recent times researchers have speculated about the causes of these mass sacrifices. They have come up with a number of reasons, though the most important three seem to be religious, political, and ecological. The Aztecs seemed to believe that sacrificing humans to the specific gods would bring them anything that they wanted, from a season of good rain, to a well-built temple, to a victory against an enemy. If things were not going the way they were planned it was often thought that the particular god was not pleased with the sacrifice so more would have to be

made. For example when building the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan the Aztecs sacrificed more than eighty thousand prisoners, approximately ten per minute during the four day building process. Many of the sacrifices could have had more backing by political reasons though. In *The Aztecs: New Perspectives* Dirk R. Van Turenhout writes: “ Modern scholars of Aztec religion are convinced that the frequency with which these sacrifices occurred had the additional aspect of propaganda” (pg. 190). It is believed that the Kings would sacrifice as many people as possible to demonstrate their strength and influence as well as make sure that all of the servants obey. The Aztecs held a lot of land at their peak that was occupied by people who were not Aztec descendants so they had to be kept in line; the thousands of human sacrifices could have been the annual tributes that these villages each had to pay to stay protected by the Aztec empire. Not only did this have a strong effect on the people living in the civilization it could also have been an intimidation factor for the civilizations around. In his book, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization*, David Carrasco explains the role of the sacrifices in instilling fear in the surrounding populations;

“ The ritual extravaganza was carried out with maximum theatrical tension, paraphernalia, and terror in order to amaze and intimidate the visiting dignitaries who returned to their kingdoms trembling with fear and convinced that cooperation and not rebellion was the best response to Aztec imperialism” (pg. 75).

Some even think that the numbers of sacrificed could be much lower than is believed and reported by the Aztecs because the number of deaths were inflated to scare their enemies.

The Mayans were a very advanced civilization living on the Yucatan peninsula in Mesoamerica starting during the pre-classic period and reaching its peak between 250 and 900 AD. The Maya were a very progressive civilization for their time having creating a written language as well as mathematical and astrological systems. Unlike the Aztecs, the Mayan people were not as inclined to participate in human sacrifices, yet they often had blood rituals. The Mayans had a large number of religious festivals and rituals throughout their calendar year but as researchers have found none included the sacrifices of humans. The festivals based off of the calendar had a few animal sacrifices and most importantly all had some sort of bloodletting ceremony. These bloodletting rituals could be performed by practically anyone, such as a young boy or a servant male but for the large gatherings it would be the king or the priests performing public bloodletting. In *Handbook To Life In The Ancient Maya World* Lynn Vasco Foster explains the importance of bloodletting in Maya culture: “ Despite the pain, the Maya elite carried out bloodletting rituals for a variety of purposes. They believed they could traverse cosmic boundaries in bloodletting rituals, and Maya rulers could contact deities and ancestors” (pg 191). The bloodletting would be done by sticking a barbed rod through the tongue, ear, or foreskin and blood would be collected on a piece of parchment and then burned for the gods. The foreskin or the vagina was the most common places where blood would be taken from because of the great significance of these body parts.

For obvious reasons the blood from these locations was considered to have fertile qualities and was used in ceremonies concerned with the plant life and the growing of crops.

One of the most important reasons for bloodletting and any blood ritual was to see the Vision Serpent. The serpent was by far the most important social and religious symbol for the Mayans and the Vision Serpent was the most important of all serpents. Often the purpose of the bloodletting was to contact and communicate a deceased relative or a god. During a successful bloodletting the participants would see the Vision Serpent and out of its mouth would form the head of the god or ancestor they are contacting. The Vision Serpent was a direct link for the Mayan people from the physical world to the spiritual world. In *Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization* Arthur Andrew Demarest mentions the importance of bloodletting in art: “ The importance of bloodletting is confirmed by archeological evidence, as well as iconographic representations and carved texts” (pg 188). One of the most famous depictions of bloodletting from the Mayans is found on a limestone carving called Lintel 24 which was discovered in Yaxchilan by a British archeologist named Alfred Maudslay in 1882. This lintel depicts the ruler Shield Jaguar holding a torch while Lady Xoc pulls a rope with shards on it through her tongue to produce the vision serpent. The hieroglyphs state that the carving dates back to the 28th of October 709 and also give the names of the two represented. Depictions like these were popular in Mayan civilizations and adorned many tombs demonstrating the importance of these rituals.



Though according to records the Mayan people rarely had human sacrifices during the calendar festivals, they may not have been as “innocent” as the Spanish conquistadors thought. During excavations of various pyramids and other influential sites bodies were found that told a very different story. The Mayans were a very aggressive civilization and often participated in war, even with other Mayan groups. When this would occur any prisoners that would be taken would usually be sacrificed in grandiose celebrations. In *The Ancient Maya* Sylvanus Griswold Morley explains the importance of these rituals: “These sacrifices were apparently essential to the sanctifying of important rituals, such as the inauguration of a new ruler, the designation of a new heir to the throne, or the dedication of a new building” (pg. 543). These sacrifices were a way to induct a new king or simply show how powerful and successful a current king was. Often after a king died, his son would not be allowed to rule until he brought back prisoners from an enemy tribe and sacrificed them. If during this escapade he would be murdered himself, that would be his fate and the next in line for the throne would have to do what he failed to accomplish. While both the Aztecs and the Maya had very elaborate blood rituals, both were very different. The Mayans only used human sacrifice as a way to demonstrate that a King was worthy of ruling the city, otherwise for the most part human sacrifices were shunned. While the Aztecs would sacrifice thousands to ask the gods to help them construct a great pyramid the Mayan people chose to sacrifice animals instead. In comparison with the neighboring civilizations of the same magnitude the Mayan people can be considered to have had very mild blood rituals.

Unlike the Mayan and Aztec decedents, the Kuna tribes of today still participate in the same, or at least very similar, blood rituals as they had before the Spanish invasion. The Kuna people live in villages in present day Panama and off of the coast on the San Blas Islands. A significant difference between the Kuna and most other Mesoamerican tribes and civilizations is the great emphasis that they put on women in their society. The Kuna are matriarchal and women are held as the ultimate symbol, participating in many tribal decisions and gatherings that would in most other cases be solely for males. Similarly, most ceremonies are centered around women and in a few of them blood plays a substantial role. The inna tunsikkalet ceremony is the second largest ceremony that revolves around Kuna women. This is a two day puberty ceremony which is this first in a series of coming of age rituals and is very similar to the inna suid rite, or the hair cutting ritual, that is held later once the girl is ready to be married. Unlike many other Kuna rituals, the inna tunsikkalet is a “ family and household event” (280, The Art of Being Kuna). During this time the young girls are isolated from the rest of the community and are not allowed to touch the ground with their feet and have to be carried if they need to leave their room for whatever reason. During this ceremony it is believed by the Kuna that the young girls are getting rid of all of the bad in their bodies through this blood. They are expelling any evil spirits from their bodies through the flow of blood. A few months after the Kuna girls have been secluded from all others and have finished their first menstruation the girl’s family sponsors a “ collective drinking bout” (280, The Art of Being Kuna) during which the girls are again isolated. This time they are put in a surba, or a small, rectangular, wooden enclosure where they are painted in a black dye from the genipa fruit.

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Alexander Moore writes that after they have completed their rite “ the pubescent girls, then, have emerged in this modern community as the paramount symbol of community life” (276, *The Art of Being Kuna*).

In comparison with the Maya and the Aztec the Kuna did not participate in any animal sacrifices nor did they see it necessary to sacrifice humans to appease the gods. The use of blood in their ceremonies was purely symbolic and was not forced out of the body in any way. Unlike the other people of Mesoamerica the Kuna did not see a need to feel pain or show penance during their blood rituals and in this way can be considered a more advanced and civilized tribe of their time. The differences between the Kuna and the other people of Mesoamerica can be attributed to the small communities that never fought, but also were never conquered. They never saw any gruesome battles or bloodshed and for the most part have been a peaceful tribe. For this reason many of their blood ceremonies and rituals are not as extreme as the Aztec or Mayan sacrifices. Yet blood was still an all important part of their lives, without it there would be no *inna tunsikkalet*, or puberty rite.

Blood played an integral part in just about every civilization and tribe throughout Mesoamerican history. Though, this doesn't come as a surprise; blood ceremonies, in some way, have been a part of practically every single culture from the beginning of time until the present. From the enormous, public gladiator battles and executions in the Coliseum during time of the Roman Empire in the 70 AD to the symbolic drinking of Christ's blood during the Eucharist under Christian theology in today's world, blood has and will always play an important role. While human sacrifices have long been gone <https://assignbuster.com/blood-and-human-sacrifice-for-mesoamerican-indians-theology-religion-essay/>

from our world, some religions, such as the Santeria, still participate in animal sacrifices as a way of healing. One of the possible explanations for the importance of blood in so many different cultures and societies over such a long period of time is that blood is practically the same in just about everyone. Whether one was a Mayan king or a humble servant he still had blood that flowed in exactly the same way. Anyone who wanted could participate in these blood rituals and show their piety to the gods, even if it did not mean a public ceremony. Blood is also universal, every single person who has ever walked this earth had blood flow through their veins. For this reason it is safe to assume that most people were aware of it and for most it was something of a mystery, something that could mean the difference between life and death, something that could be worshipped. Whether it is for religious, cultural, or medical reasons, blood will always play a significant role in our lives. Blood is as important as air, water, or food, without it we would not survive.