Maya Religion

By Vanderbilt Center for Latin American Studies

Native peoples are those who were the first people to live in a particular place. The Maya are native peoples who live in parts of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are countries located in the northern part of Central America. The Maya were the only people to live in these places until the Spanish conquerors arrived in the 1520s.

Religion was central to the Maya. Nature was seen as alive, with spirits and deities, and religious stories were used to explain how gods created and sustained the world. The Maya believed that reality was made up of an upper world and underworld. They were linked together by a giant tree, which had its branches in the heavens, and its roots in the underworld. Another Maya explanation was that the world was carried on the back of a giant turtle and that gods lived in the sky and heavens with a watery world below that eventually become the earth.

People communicated with the gods through prayers, sacrifices and visions. Maya gods were often seen as forces of nature, and since the people were farmers; many of their gods were agricultural. Chac was the god who would bring rain, a most important deity to an agricultural people. Chac was often represented in art with a reptile face and fangs and he carried a lightning ax.
Itzamna was the lord of both day and night. The Maya thought of him as their first priest, the inventor of writing, and the god of medicine. Yum Kaax (pronounced Yoom K’ash, in the image above) was the god of corn and one of the most important gods to the Maya farmers. He was the father of the Hero Twins whose story is told in the Popol Wuj (pronounced Po-pol Wooh), one of the most important religious Mayan texts. Ix Chel (Ish-Tshel) was a rainbow goddess, who was associated with healing, childbirth, and foretelling the future.

Many Maya would have an animal spirit guide. Powerful shamans could have more than one guide, and were believed to have the power to transform into an animal. Royalty was often accompanied by a jaguar. Kings were depicted in art as wearing jaguar helmets. The Maya made sacrifices to their gods, often offerings of food harvests or animals. On high religious holidays, however, people, often captives from war, might be sacrificed.

Because they believed that blood nourished the gods, and helped people to connect with animal spirits, the Maya practiced bloodletting. This practice involved cutting a person to make them bleed in a ceremony.

The Kings were not only the rulers of the people but also direct conduits who could communicate with the gods. The Kings would perform many of the rituals for the people so that the gods would be happy with them. The King was often seen as the embodiment of the world tree that connected the people to the gods.