

The Mayan Pantheon: Gods and The Goddesses

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With between 166 and 250 named gods, the Mayans had a complex and changeable pantheon. They had gods to oversee every human action and aspect of life: gods for birth and death, for the ball game and gambling, for travel and traders, for pregnant women and infants, for youth, age, health, and suicide, for wild nature and for agriculture, a god of maize and of thunder, creator gods and gods of destruction, death gods and gods of heaven. All of these gods were changeable as well. They could be one sex or both, young and old, good but sometimes evil, depending on the time and circumstance.

Mayans saw their gods act in every event. The late Robert Sharer, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote in his book "Daily Life in Maya Civilization" (Greenwood Press, 2009) that the ancient Maya believed that everything "was imbued in different degrees with an unseen power or sacred quality," call *k'uh*, which meant "divine or sacredness."

"The universe of the ancient Maya was composed of *kab*, or Earth (the visible domain of the Maya people), *kan*, or the sky above (the invisible realm of celestial deities), and *xibalba*, or the watery underworld below (the invisible realm of the underworld deities)," Sharer wrote. Because of the complexity, early European observers likely did not fully grasp the Mayan religion and pantheon. However, scholars have deciphered enough of the Mayan codices and hieroglyphics to cite the major Mayan gods. These gods are listed below, but the list is not comprehensive by any means.

Itzamna

Itzamna is a creator god, one of the gods involved in creating human beings and father of the Bacabs, who upheld the corners of the world. Itzamna taught humans the crafts of writing and medicine. Itzamna is sometimes identified with the high god Hunab Ku and the sun god Kinich Ahau.



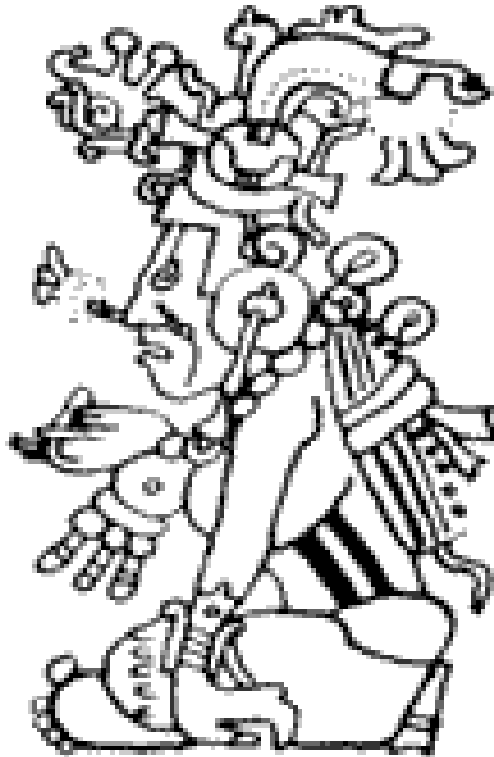
Yum Kaax

A nature god, Yum Kaax is the god of wild plants and animals, the god of the woods. He is the god venerated by hunters and by farmers, who hunt wild animals or carve their fields out of his forest.



Maize God

The Mayans had both a female and a male maize god and both a simple vegetative god and a more powerful, tonsured male maize god. The tonsured maize god personifies maize, cacao beans and jade. He is a patron god of the scribal arts, dancing and feasting. Mayan kings often dressed as the maize god during rituals of his life, death and regeneration.



Kukulcan

Kukulcan is the feathered serpent god of the Mayans. Kukulcan was worshipped by other Mesoamerican cultures such as the Aztecs, where the god was known as Quetzalcoatl. A Mayan cult grew up around Kukulcan, the priests of which helped peaceful trade and communications among the Mayans. Human sacrifices were offered to Kukulcan.

Kinich Ahau

Kinich Ahau is the sun god of the Mayans, sometimes associated with or an aspect of Itzamna. During the Classic period, Kinich Ahau was used as a royal title, carrying the idea of the divine king. He is also known in the Mayan codices as God G and is shown in many carvings on Mayan pyramids.



Ix Chel

Ix Chel is the goddess of medicine and midwifery, also known as the goddess of making children. She is represented as an aged woman.



Chaac

Chaac is the goggled-eyed rain god, of prime importance to the Mayans. Chaac has a four-fold aspect, with each aspect representing the cardinal directions and colors. Chaac brought clouds, thunder, lightning and most importantly, rain.



Mayan Religion and Cosmology

Much of the Mayan religion is not clearly understood today because of its complexity and rich pantheon of deities. Scholars have been able to decipher some of the major elements of Mayan religion, but other elements may never be known.

Cosmology

To the Mayans, the world was flat with four strong gods at each of the corners representing the cardinal directions. Above the earth was heaven with its 13 layers, each represented by a god. Below was Xibalba or the underworld, a cold, unhappy place divided into nine layers, each with its own Death Lord. When a Mayan died of natural causes, his spirit went to the underworld where it had to work its way up through the layers to get to the supreme heaven. Women who died in childbirth, those who died as a sacrifice and sacrificial victims of the ball court went to the supreme heaven immediately after death.

Spiritual World

The Mayans were animists in their beliefs, that is, they believed that everything was imbued with a spiritual essence or force, including inanimate objects such as rocks and water. These spiritual essences were to be honored and recognized. The gods were the supreme spiritual forces, but even the spiritual essence of a tree or a frog deserved respect. Every Mayan had a spiritual guide, a Wayob that could appear as an animal or in a dream in order to help that person through life. Thus, to the Mayans, the entire world they lived in was filled with spiritual forces. At times, the spirits required appeasement; at other times, they could be helpful.

Cyclical Nature of Time

The Mayan idea of time was cyclical, cycles of creation and destruction, of seasons, of rituals and events, of life and death. When Mayans died, it was believed they had moved on, not ended forever. Maize was of such central importance to the Mayans that the life-cycle of the maize plant is at the heart of their religion as is the Maize God himself. All of Mayan life was intimately bound up in cycles, which tied in to the centrality of the Mayan calendars.

Importance of Calendar/Astronomy

Mayan priests closely tracked all the cycles important to Mayan life. Priests kept the calendars, the solar cycle calendar with its 365 days, the sacred calendar of 260 days and the Long Count Calendar. They also interpreted the cycles, looking for clues to the future and prophetic inspiration. Priests determined the days propitious for religious rituals and ceremonies. The priests who kept track of cycles and calendars were expert mathematicians and astronomers. Planet cycles were tracked in order to recognize patterns, which they then relayed to the king of the city. Mayans believed that the gods imparted meaning to celestial patterns from which their priests could foretell the future.



















