

MAYAN RELIGION

Religion was important to every part of Mayan life. The Mayas worshipped many different gods. Each day, month, city, and occupation had its own special god or goddess. The Mayas had a variety of religious festivals and celebrations. Most of these celebrations included human sacrifice.

The Mayan empire was divided into many city-states. Each city-state had its own ruler. His name was *halach uinic*. This meant "the true or real man." The Mayas believed *halach uinic* was a living god. He ruled until his death. At his death, his oldest son became the next *halach uinic*. If the *halach uinic* did not have a son, his brother would rule. If he did not have a brother, the ruler's council elected a member of his family to serve. Some historians believe that the *halach uinic* also served as the high priest during religious ceremonies.

The *halach uinic* dressed in elaborate and colorful clothes. He also wore a very large head-dress. Temple wall paintings show him with large ear decorations, crossed eyes, and many tattoos.

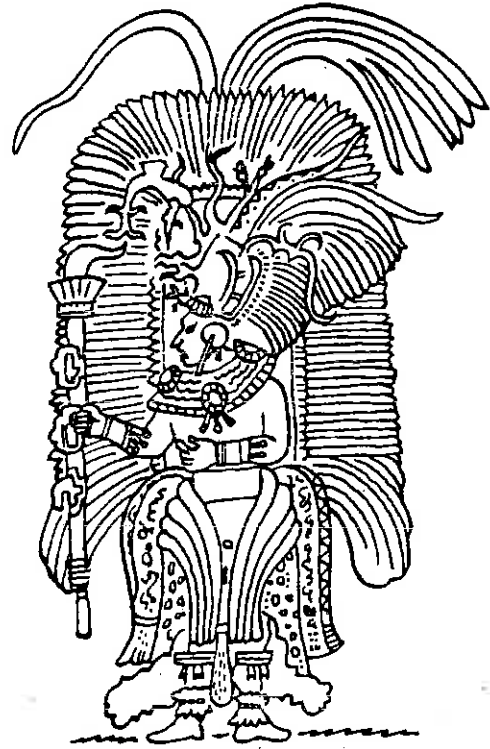
Many other priests served with the *halach uinic*. These priests, named *ahkin*, performed many duties. They had the knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. Some of the *ahkin* were prophets. Some of them performed the religious sacrifices. Other *ahkin* performed medical rituals. The Mayas believed that only the priests could explain the mysteries of life and death. The Mayas believed that the earth was flat. They thought it was on the back of a crocodile that floated in a large pond. At another time they believed the earth was the floor of a lizard house.

The Mayas' religion taught that there were 13 layers of heavens above the earth. They also believed nine underworlds were below. They thought that they lived in the fifth creation of the world. The previous four worlds had each been destroyed by a great flood. At the beginning of the fifth world, the gods created humans from corn.

Many of the Mayan religious ceremonies included gifts and sacrifices to the various gods and goddesses. The Mayas believed the gods would give favors to them in return for prayers, offerings, and sacrifices. The sacrifices included valuable gifts, their own blood, and human sacrifices.

In many ceremonies, the priests cut themselves to get blood to present to the gods. The Mayas had three methods of giving the human sacrifices. Often, the priests took the victim to the altar at the temple. Then the priests cut the heart out of the living victim and presented it to the god.

In another method, the priests tied the victim to a wooden pole. Then they threw spears and arrows at the victim's chest in the area of the heart.



Each Mayan city-state had a ruler called the *halach uinic*. He may have also served as the high priest during religious ceremonies.

In the third type of sacrifice, they threw the victim into a sacred well. The most famous of these wells is the Well of Sacrifice at Chichén Itzá. If victims survived the fall and did not drown, the priests pulled them back out of the well. The Mayas believed the gods had chosen to spare these victims. The priests then asked the victims what messages they brought back from the gods. The victims received special treatment from then on since the Mayas believed they had spoken to the gods.

The Mayas also worshipped the dead. They believed the dead became one with the gods. They worshipped their ancestors at many religious ceremonies. They also built pyramids over the sacred remains of their dead rulers.