

Mayan Religion: Study of Gender Roles Past and Present

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Abstract

Central America, home of the Mayan people, has a unique cultural and religious history. Being one of the first civilizations, Mayans have a culture rooted in long standing traditions and rituals. One of the large differences I found from modern society to ancient Mayan society is the difference in gender roles, specifically the role that women play. In modern times, women are largely marginalized throughout the world, but in ancient Mayan culture they had a much higher standing.

Quick Facts

- Mayan Civilization founded circa 250 AD
- In Mesoamerica
- Had approximately 2 million adherents pre-colonization
- Polytheist religion
- Religious texts: Popol Vuh, Chilam Balam



Mayan Calendar

Ancient Mayan Religion

- Time and creation of humans is cyclical
- 3 versions of humans thus far:
 - Built from Mud
 - Built from Wood
 - Built from Maize (Modern humans)
- Rulers said to be descendants of gods
- Multiple levels to the world, above and below Earth
- Soul goes to Underworld after death
- Many Goddesses:
 - Moon Goddess: associated with growth and fertility, sexuality and procreation. Local rulers claim descent from her
 - Ixchel: Jaguar Goddess of midwifery and medicine



Moon Goddess



Ixchel



Mayan Priestess

Gender in Mayan Society

- Women played central role in society
- Involved in governmental, economic and farming activities
- Women often ruled, including matrilineal cities
- Created art, including all textiles
- Maintained religious rituals, kept households shrines tidy
- Gender often ambiguous in art, sometimes explicitly to show harmony between the two
- Ability to give birth seen as powerful and integral to society
- Colonialism brings in patriarchy, begins destroying matrilineal history

Gender in Modern Society

- Patriarchal
- Hybrid of Catholicism and traditional Mayan beliefs and rituals
- Ancient gods replaced with depictions of Santos, stories not similar to Catholicism though
- Devout Maya worship at mountain and cave shrines, making sacrifices
- Men serve as religious and secular leaders
- Men mainly control finances
- Most families farm maize still, using same techniques as ancient Mayans



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