



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1994 Volume III: Understanding the Ancient Americas: Foundation, Flourishing, and Survival

Aztec and Mayan Mythology

Curriculum Unit 94.03.04
by Diana Doyle

The beliefs, traditions and stories of ancient peoples have always been sources of fascination for students. I have taught a unit on Greek mythology incorporating the mythic hero stories, the tales of Troy and the wanderings of Odysseus. Although these stories are far removed from the everyday lives of New Haven students, the young people respond to them with enthusiasm and interest. I have used my unit as a springboard for further reading and research and as a motivator for creative writing.

I teach at the Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School, which has always tried to organize and focus its curriculum around a central theme. For the last three years our themes have centered on the Encounter of Columbus with the New World, and the native peoples of the Americas. Because this is an Arts Magnet School, we strive for integration of the arts and academics and have found many common areas within these themes.

Reading the myths and studying the culture, traditions and creations of the Mayan and Aztec peoples of Mesoamerica will be the focus of my unit. I hope that my students will discover for themselves the extraordinary achievements of these remarkable peoples and will enjoy the readings. Because some of these stories are both difficult to understand and somewhat gory and graphic in detail, I will select and use the most readable of the myths. My students are sixth graders and I have found that this age group responds well to the imaginative thrust of stories of ancient peoples. Older students will also respond to the historical significance of the ancient societies in relation to the development of modern culture. As an English teacher, I have three important goals for my students during the development and implementation of this curriculum:

- The encouragement of my students to read the myths.
- The development of written reports and stories related to the myths.
- The fostering of intellectual growth and understanding of my students.

First of all my students must read. I find it to be important to supplement the basal text we use with as much reading as possible. I want my students to read to see the variety of literature, to see the diversity and richness of the writing of other peoples, especially ancient peoples. Through the selection of a wide variety of readings from both the Aztec and Mayan eras, my students will be able to develop an understanding of the

similarities and differences of these two closely related cultures. I will use both text and periodical stories and writings. I will try to develop the readings to track the travels of the peoples through Central Mexico and Central America looking at the changes and transformations of the groups over time.

Next, I want my students to write. I feel it is very important for students to create stories, to react to stories, to write to give information and to explain ideas. Therefore my lesson plans will have as much writing as possible. I will encourage my students to review and evaluate the stories and histories presented in the readings, as well as to develop creative stories written as if chronicling life in earlier times. I will ask my students to travel back in time.

I also want my students to think and to understand, to ask questions, to answer questions, to learn on their own about how other people lived. At the completion of both units we will discuss and contrast the two cultures.

With both the Mayan and the Aztec sections, I will begin with the creation myths. Most religions want to claim complete ownership of all beliefs. I am impressed with the tolerance of the Mesoamericans for alternative creation beliefs among groups. I love the idea that tree people and rock people can get along so easily, that they can tolerate other kinds of creation and that ideally, a noble could have both in his or her family tree. The creation myths will develop the foundation for the presentation of the complete units. Significant differences are noted in the creation myths, and they will allow the students to get into the cultures from the start. The students will work from a common understanding as they develop their own particular interests within the units.

The unit will be divided into two sections, relating the Mayan and Aztec civilizations. Because the Mayans are the earlier civilization, I will begin with them.

Although I would like my students to read some passages from the Mayan Popol Vuh, the book is, for the most part, too difficult for a sixth grade reading level. I will select most of the reading of the Mayan creation myths from other sources. "Heart-of-the-Earth-and-Sky" is from a book called *Beginnings: Earth, Sky, Life, Death*.

Heart-of-the-Earth-and-Sky is a beautifully told myth, beginning as many creation myths do, with emptiness. The earth was hidden; there was nothing but sea and sky. Then the god Heart-of-the-Earth-and-Sky appeared and called on the earth to come forth and the land was there. He finished creating the world, but the first sunrise had not come (a recurring theme). He made all the creatures large and small and then assigned them places and ways to live. Heart-of-the-Earth-and-Sky wanted the animals to praise him and to thank him for giving him life. But, they could not, and so he told them they would not be the ones to rule the earth. And still the first sunrise had not come.

Then he made clay men. They were disappointing, so he melted them with rain into puddles, and the first race of men disappeared. He tried again with wooden men. They had life, but no minds. They were a terrible disappointment. He had to destroy them and had the help of others—the dogs, the millstones, the pots and dishes. All joined willingly in the attack on the wooden men—biting them, grinding them, beating them—until they were destroyed. Only a few managed to escape to the trees and remain as monkeys.

Again Heart-of-the-Earth-and-Sky tried to make men. This time he called upon four other gods to help him. They all said that man must be made of the greatest of all plants—corn. Messengers were sent to bring back the finest corn—both yellow and white—which were made into yellow and white meal. Half of the meal was mixed together with water and shaped into four men. The other half of the meal was mixed with water and

boiled until it became a rich broth and this was fed to the four corn men.

These men were wise, noble and could think. They thanked Heart-of-the-Earth-and-Sky for their gifts and for their lives. But he still was not pleased. These men were too wise. He realized that they saw all things and could grow too powerful. He breathed a veil before the eyes of these men, so that they saw only that which was before them. Then he caused them to sleep and while they slept, he created four women for them. When they awoke they did not even remember they had lost much knowledge and together the four first men and the four first women watched the first sunrise on earth.

This story, taken from the Popol Vuh, the creation story of the Mayans will be the beginning of the Mayan section. Although the translation of the Popol Vuh by Dennis Tedlock is too difficult for my students to read, I will find some passages for them to get a feeling for the poetry and language. The names of the Underworld gods are funny and I would like them to enjoy their reading.

To continue the study of Mayan myths, I would give my students some reading about the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, sons of Hun Hunahpu, a hero killed in the Underworld and Xquic, a goddess of the Underworld, who has escaped in order to have her children. The Hero Twins are quite different from the ideas of heroes in Greek mythology where strength is so important. These Hero Twins are clever, quick-witted and gain their advantages through trickery. They roam the forests shooting animals with their blow guns, while their half-brothers dance and sing, and then steal their food, leaving the Twins with only bones. The Twins must resort to trickery to get even. Cleverly they fool their brothers into climbing high into the trees to get more game. Then their brothers have no way of getting down, and are turned into forest monkeys. In another adventure the Twins get the better of Seven Macaw, a large monstrous bird who proclaims himself lord over all. Again the Twins use trickery to get the better of Seven Macaw.

The Twins, like their father and uncle before them, love to play ball at the ballcourt. The lords of the Underworld, Xibalba, angry at the noise, invite them to play, planning to have the Twins meet the same doom as their father and uncle. However, the Twins are clever and have a few tricks of their own. They send a mosquito ahead to spy and to learn the names of the gods. When they arrive at the palace, they ignore the traps and correctly greet each god. They are then given a series of tests and pass the House of Gloom, the House of Knives, the House of Cold, the House of Jaguars, and the House of Fire. Finally at the House of Bats, Hunahpu loses his head and it appears that the Twins are doomed. However, Xbalanque still has a few more tricks. He uses a squash to substitute for Hunahpu's head, distracts the Death Gods, and places Hunahpu's real head back on his body.

After a few more adventures and tricks in the Underworld, the Hero Twins rise into the heavens where they become the sun and the moon, ready to take care of the first people on earth.

An excellent film of the Popol Vuh with the adventures of the Hero Twins is available. I will read these stories with my students before they watch the film.

For the Aztec myths, I will probably begin with *The Hungry Woman-Myths and Legends of the Aztecs* by John Bierhorst which relates the stories of the spirits Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca and the creation of the five suns. The stories of the suns and the rivalries of the two powerful gods will fascinate students and should prompt them to think of the multiple creations and destructions of the Mayan creation myths. The students will read about the first sun when Tezcatlipoca became the sun and the people were giants. This sun, the Jaguar Sun, was too small and not bright enough for the big people. Not until thirteen times fifty two years did Quetzalcoatl come chasing after the sun (Tezcatlipoca) and knocked him out of the sky with a big stick.

Quetzalcoatl became the next sun, the Wind Sun, and he was no more successful. The people under this sun had nothing to eat but pine nuts. Eventually, Tezcatlipoca, as a Jaguar, kicked him out and most of the people were blown away. Those who hung on became monkeys.

The next sun was the Rain God Tlaloc and the people under this sun could find no food but river corn. Quetzalcoatl sent a shower of fire and hot stones that burned the earth and the sun itself went up in flames. Most of the people were burned. The few who escaped were changed into turkeys.

The fourth sun was the rain spirit's wife, Chalchiuhtlicue, She of the Jade Skirt. She was called the Water Sun. The people had nothing to eat but grass corn because there was no real corn. It rained all the time. Finally it rained so much that the water rose over the tops of the mountains and all the people were turned into fish and the sky itself fell down onto the earth.

Then Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca—working together for once—changed themselves into trees, one on each side of the world and pushed the sky back to where it belonged. They travelled across the sky, met in the middle and called themselves the rulers of all. The path they left across the sky is called the White Road. We call it the Milky Way.

Now the rulers had to have some people on this earth and Quetzalcoatl went down to the Dead Lands below the earth and went to the Dead Land lord and his wife and asked to have their bones. He was given a task (students who have studied the Greek myths and hero myths will see a comparison) to blow a trumpet to call up the bones. But Quetzalcoatl saw that the trumpet was not hollow and called on the worms who live in the Dead Lands to hollow out the trumpet for him. Then Quetzalcoatl blew the trumpet and the bones were his. But the Dead Land lord said he had to return the bones. Quetzalcoatl said he would, but instead he ran with the bones. As he was chased, he fell into a grave built by the dead people and the bones were scattered and half eaten. He knew then that meant the people he made would die. The people would also be different sizes. But his people were created from the bones and given True Corn from the Food Mountain to eat.

The earth was still dark and now the people really needed a sun. The creation of the fifth sun, the Earthquake Sun, was the end of the creation story. The Aztecs felt this occurred at the ancient city of Teotihuacan. They felt this was the place where time began. (Taube 41) The gods gathered to build fires and to decide on the next sun. A proud god, Tecuciztecatl, offered himself, but the other gods preferred Nanahuatzin, who was humble and diseased. The two hills were made, the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, for the two to fast, pray and make themselves ready.

The gifts of Tecuciztecatl were rich and precious, while the offerings of Nanahuatzin were poor and humble like himself. The spirits built a huge fire for the one who would be chosen. The gods called on the proud Tecuciztecatl to leap into the flames, but he grew afraid and could not. Then they turned to Nanahuatzin and he immediately jumped into the fire. Seeing that, Tecuciztecatl was ashamed and leaped into the fire followed by the eagle and the jaguar. Because of their bravery, the eagle with the tips of his wings scorched black and the jaguar with his smudged coat, became the great military orders of Aztec warriors. The gods watched to see who would arise as the sun but saw two suns rising in the east. They were afraid the world would be too bright, so they threw a rabbit in the face of Tecuciztecatl, and the face became the moon.

I will also have the students read about Quetzalcoatl in Tula and the rivalry where he is finally chased away by Tezcatlipoca. The Aztecs believed in the eventual return of Quetzalcoatl, a god who would arrive by sea to rule their empire. This led to their ultimate demise, as they turned their City over to Cortes, a "god" from the sea.

The founding of the Aztec state begins with the story of their high god, Huitzilopochtli. Although the myths of the five suns and creation of man were Mesoamerican and known over much of central Mexico, these Aztec creation stories were found only in Aztec culture. The predictions and justifications for the Aztec state appear before the stories of the birth of Huitzilopochtli. The mother of Huitzilopochtli, Coatlicue, She of the Serpent Skirt, was doing holy work at Serpent Mountain, near Tula. She picked up a tuft of feathers and found out she was pregnant. Her four hundred sons and her daughter Coyolxauhqui were angry and decided to kill her. They collected into an army led by Coyolxauhqui and attacked.

In an instant Huitzilopochtli was born, fully grown, fully armed, with shield, spears and spear thrower the color of turquoise. He carried a burning snakehead scepter and with this he attacked his sister, cutting her body into pieces. He then attacked the rest of the army, killing and scattering his half brothers. The god Huitzilopochtli was now the leader of the Mexicans and they started their long journey looking for a place to build their city always looking for the signs that had been foretold.

The Mexicans had many hardships and adventures before they arrived at the place they called Tenochtitlan. Huitzilopochtli would appear to the leaders in dreams and tell them what to look for and what to do. When they arrived on a marshy land in the middle of a lake, they saw many of the signs. They saw the eagle on the prickly pear and they knew they were in the right place.

To understand how important the belief system was I want my students to study and research various aspects of Aztec life. This is, in a sense, a natural progression. I want the students to have some knowledge of the culture and traditions as well as the art and architecture of the period. I will show pictures and slides of temples and pyramids and will use art books to show as much detail as possible. Field trips to the Yale Art Gallery and to the Peabody Museum would certainly be an important part of this study and would bring much to life. As students learn more they should become more involved, which could foster additional studies of the foundations of these cultures.

One problem that will arise, of course, is that of human sacrifice. I do not plan to discuss the details, the methods or the numbers of sacrifices, but it is a part of Aztec life that cannot be ignored. The Aztecs believed that they had to nourish the gods, especially the sun, to hold back the darkness. Human blood, human sacrifice was the primary source for this appeasement of the gods. This was not a personal act, an act of hatred or anger, but one necessary to keep the world order going. The students can understand that sacrifice was part of the religion, but there was more to Aztec culture and daily life.

I will not be using a text book on Aztec life but rather, I will be encouraging forms of project development through research, note taking/outlining, and reporting. Aztec society was divided into distinct social classes, with major divisions, between the noblemen who served as judges, warriors, administrators, and the commoners, with traders, merchants and crafts people in between. There was some movement between the classes. Position could be gained by great achievement and merit, especially in war. However the noble families held onto their privileged life.

The trader class included peasants who sold vegetables in markets, fishermen who brought their catch for sale and small merchants who sold cloth, shoes, skins, pots, ropes and pipes in the markets. (Soustelle 59) One area of great interest could be the enormous market of Tlatelolco where as many as sixty thousand people could gather in one day.

There were even more powerful traders, however, than these smaller people. These were the pochtecas who organized large caravans to remote areas either on the Gulf or the Pacific. Sold were manufactured goods:

cloth, embroidered clothes, gold jewels, obsidian knives and cochineal dye. Imported were luxury goods: green jade, emeralds, sea shells, tortoise shells, jaguar and puma skins and amber. Students should learn that the raw materials for the manufactured goods were brought into Tenochtitlan as tribute and not trade. The pochtecas were a rising class and many were very wealthy. (Soustelle 63)

The craftsmen were important, especially the goldsmiths and the feather-workers. They belonged to organizations that protected and regulated them. They had their own quarters in a section of the city and whole families worked at the trade. Each was considered a distinctive worker. The common people were the workers. As citizens, they had a right to some land. They were subject to military service and could rise with great bravery. (Soustelle 70)

The children were also part of this class system. Both boys and girls learned at home for their early years, boys from their fathers, girls from their mothers. Young girls, by the age of six were spinning yarn, and soon were grinding maize, and weaving. Boys carried wood and followed their fathers to market. At about fifteen the boys were sent off to school. The sons of noble families entered the temple or Calmecac, a harsh rigorous school, which turned out leaders and administrators. However sons of merchants, traders and even the common people were allowed to attend. The other boys attended the Telpochcalli, run by experienced warriors. These were the ordinary citizens. Students can see immediately a great contrast between the two schools. (Soustelle 168)

Students can research a particular part of society such as researching the lives of children, comparing the challenges faced by Aztec children to their own lives, their schooling, their training, their occupations. I would hope I could work with the visual arts department on developing some three-dimensional models of the temples of Tenochtitlan. I will have a number of National Geographic Magazines, art books and pictures for the students, as well as documentaries I have taped. I will encourage visual or artistic products, although I will expect note-taking as the students research.

There are so many areas of Mayan and Aztec life that students can research from clothing to food to music to art. I think they will have fun and will enjoy reading, writing and learning about both the Mayans and the Aztecs.

Lesson 1

1. Nature of Mythology

Before I start reading myths with my students, I ask them: What are myths? Who wrote myths? Why were myths written? Why were they important? Who were the myths about?

I want to establish that myths were the result of beliefs. We may read them as stories, as literature, but that they were believed by the people who told them.

I want to establish the universality of myths, that many groups of ancient and not so ancient people had mythology. We don't know all of them because they were not all written down and a lot were destroyed. These myths that we do know give us clues to ancient civilizations. We learn more about who they were and what they were like. The beliefs of these peoples were often reflected in their art, architecture and behavior.

Then the students would read the Mayan Myth, *Heart-of-Earth-and Sky* . I would read the myth with the class until the destruction of the wooden men. I would discuss the actions of the gods. What are they looking for? What do they want from their creations? What do they expect from their people?

Next I would either tell or read to the students about the exploits and adventures of the Hero Twins and I would show the film of the Popol Vuh to the students.

I would finish with the creation of the corn people, the creation of the first women, and the rising of the Hero Twins as the first sun and moon. Discussion would also focus on the dissatisfaction of the gods. They were never satisfied. Why is that? What could this lead to?

Writing: Students could try a myth at this point. I would suggest a further adventure of the Hero Twins. Before they arose to the heavens, what else could they do? They could have an adventure on earth or in the underworld. I would encourage my student to illustrate their stories with pictures of what they thought the Hero Twins looked like.

Lesson 2

2. Drama of Mythology

This could carry on from the last lesson. Because I teach in an Arts School, this is easier for me to accomplish, but students in all classrooms could do this. Students like to act out what they write. They can use a combination narrative/dialogue form and present their stories as plays.

In connection with our theater department, I would also try to include some of the adventures in the Underworld, especially the tests in the Houses, and use the great ugly gods with their wonderful ugly names as characters. Students would have fun creating the masks to go along with the names of the gods and have a good time understanding the Popol Vuh.

Lesson 3

3. Creation Myths

Creation myths : Writing Goal—to have students write myths to show tolerance in creation.

Divide class into groups of about 4 or 5 students. Explain that they are all part of the same group but live in slightly different locales. Each group will have a picture of a Mesoamerican god. I have a number of small clay figurines which are quasi-replicas which I would use for my groups. The students would use these picture or statues as inspiration to create a creation myth centering around that god. They would give him/her a name, a significance, a function. After the myths are completed, the groups present them to each other. The students should look for links-can they all work together? Can they all belong to the same group?

The myths should be illustrated with drawings of the gods and their activities and used for either a book or a

mural.

STUDENT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bierhorst, John. *The Hungry Woman-Myths and Legends of the Aztecs* . New York: William Morrow, 1984. Well-written and accessible myths for young people. This will be my basic text for Aztec stories.

Fah, Sophia Lyon and Dorothy T. Spoerl. "Heart-of-the-Earth-and-Sky." in *Beginnings: Earth, Sky, Life, Death* . Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1958. A well told account of the Mayan creation story taken from the Popol Vuh. Unfortunately, this is the only story in this volume which could be used in this unit.

Foss, Flora. *World Myths and Legends II—Mexico* . Belmont, CA: Simon & Schuster Education Group, 1993. A very readable retelling of many of the creation stories along with other myths and legends. Students should enjoy this.

Green, John. *Life in Ancient Mexico Coloring Book* . New York: Dover Publications, 1991. Pictures with some information. This will be helpful for simple research and for students to get some visual ideas.

Incas, Aztecs & Mayas: *a coloring book* . Santa Barbara: Bellerophon Books, 1988. Great pictures, helps students to get a clear idea of what they are looking at. Also includes an offer for posters including the Calendar Stone (at an extra fee).

TEACHER BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carrasco, David. *Religions of Mesoamerica* . San Francisco: Harper Books, 1990. Concise and clear account of beliefs of Aztecs and Mayan. Glossary at the end is very helpful.

Coe, Michael D. *The Maya*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1980. Very scholarly and informative. Organization of time periods is clear and helpful, as well as containing photographs and drawings, especially of Mayan glyphs.

Grey, Michael. *Pre-Columbian Art* . New York: W.H. Smith Publishers Inc., 1978. Forty color plates about 8" x 11" with brief commentary. Great!

Miller, Mary Ellen. *The Art of Mesoamerica from Olmec to Aztec* . New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986. Very informative, very readable. This book covers every period in a logical orderly way. Good pictures, diagrams and explanations.

Nicholson, Irene. *Mexican and Central American Mythology* . New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1985. Very useful and informative books. Lots of photographs.

Stuart, Gene S. *The Mighty Aztecs* . Washington, D. C.: National Geographic Society, 1981. This book actually can be used by students and teachers alike. Readable texts, and of course, lots and lots of great photographs. Soustelle, Jacques. *The Daily life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* . London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961. Interesting and informative. Some detailed accounts of society and lives of children that will be useful.

Tedlock, Dennis, tr. *Popol Vuh—The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* . New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985. Although this book is too difficult for younger readers, they can read selected passages. Well worth reading for teachers.

Taube, Karl. *Aztec and Maya Myths* . Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993. Excellent discussion of the mythology and the background of research. Includes a good general map.

PERIODICALS

LaFay, Howard et al. "The Maya." *National Geographic*. 148 (December 1975), 729-811. Terrific edition. Pictures, paintings and text.

McDowell, Bart et al. "The Aztecs." *National Geographic*. 158 (December 1980), 704-775. Wonderful pictures, readable text.

Stuart, George E. "Maya Art Treasures Discovered in Cave." *National Geographic*. 160 (August 1981), 220-235. Interesting account with some great pictures.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>