

Native American Roots of Day of the Dead



Mesoamerica

Mesoamerica includes Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador. By 1200 BC, a series of major civilizations arose. They were centered in city states that were based on intensive agriculture and had large stone temple and pyramid complexes. They included the Olmec in Veracruz; the Maya in Yucatan, Chiapas, Guatemala, and Belize; the Teotihuacan, near Mexico City; the Zapotec in Oaxaca; the Toltec in southern Mexico; and the Mixtec in Oaxaca. The great empire of the Aztecs was centered in Mexico City and extended from the Pacific to the Atlantic coasts. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (today's Mexico City) had a population of 200,000 and was among the largest cities in the world at its peak.

Writing, medicine, astronomy, painting, stone sculpture, and mathematics were all developed and advanced in Mesoamerica. Theocratic leaders ruled states through a complex religious system. Animal and human sacrifices were often demanded to sustain the gods and ensure that the earth would remain fruitful, that the sun would continue to rise and fall, and that all the forces of nature would go on. The period of these great Native American empires came to an end in 1521 with the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire and surrounding areas.

The Maya

Early Mayan Culture

Mayan culture first developed in Guatemala about 2500 BC. It was influenced by the Olmec to the west and by the Teotihuacan in the vicinity of Mexico City. The Maya developed an extensive agricultural and trade system and grew beans, corn, squash, and other produce—all the ancient basis of what we think of today as key ingredients in Mexican cuisine. They also grew cotton and prepared foods such as tortillas, tamales, and various chili dishes.

Tikal was a Mayan city that developed between AD 300 and 900. Its inhabitants made important achievements in the arts and sciences, including an advanced hieroglyph writing system (that included syllable symbols and ideographs, or complete idea symbols) and a mathematical system based on the number 20 instead of 10. This system incorporated the zero, one of the most significant of all mathematical concepts ever developed. The Mayans also had a detailed knowledge of astronomy and created two calendars: a 365 day calendar and a 260-day religious calendar. These were used to predict eclipses as well as the orbit of the planet Venus.

Mayan Religion and Gods

Mayan religion, with scores of gods, was so important that every day had religious significance. Religious festivals were celebrated throughout the year. Major festivals were held at the temples located on top of pyramids in urban centers. The pyramids themselves held the tombs of rulers and other important members of the community. They might contain jewelry, things to be used in the afterlife, and even servants. Commoners, in contrast, were buried in the floor of their houses or nearby the house.

The ritual sacrifice of dogs, deer, and domesticated turkeys to the gods was common, and the gods might also require human blood or even a human sacrifice. Such sacrifices were

required to ensure that the world itself could be kept in balance. Related ritual ingredients included copal (a tree resin incense), jade, flowers, feathers, and meat cooked in sauces.

Mayan gods had both good and bad aspects. They could change sex, form, or age. They were also associated with specific colors, directions, and numbers. The god Kulkulcan, for example (known as the feathered serpent), was a creator, a god of learning, a god of agriculture, and the source of the arts. He was also a symbol of death and rebirth. The jaguar god, Kinich Ahua, was a symbol of life and death and represented the daytime sun and nighttime sun as it journeyed through the underworld. Ah Puch, the god of death, was portrayed with a death's head, bare ribs, and as a chief demon who ruled over the fifth and lowest Mayan underworld.

Beliefs About Death

Death was feared by the Maya, and illness was thought to be caused by wrongdoing. It was treated by religious means as well as by the extensive medical knowledge the Maya had. The Maya believed in the soul's immortality and an afterlife. The Mayan vision of paradise after AD 800 may have been influenced by Mexican culture and was conceived to be a place of delight, abundance, rest, happiness, and health. But only those who died by hanging, in war, in childbirth, or as a sacrifice could go directly to this paradise. Hell (Xibal) was a place where the souls of the wicked were tortured with hunger, cold, grief, and weariness.

Lasting Contributions

The Mayan states eventually became divided by civil wars and fell to the Spanish invasion in the early 1500s. Today, 20 Mayan languages and dialects are spoken in the Yucatan and Guatemala. Many ancient customs merged with European customs, such as the Day of the Dead, and can trace their roots back to a Mayan source.

