

LATIN AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

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Overview Each civilization within Latin America had its own set of beliefs, although many possessed certain ideas and deities in common. Their narratives can be complex, many of which have been passed down in oral tradition. However, the narratives have been expressed in many other ways as well, including the written hieroglyphics painted on thin sheets of bark, and in the carvings and glyphs found on walls and in sculptures. In many cases, we know about the mythology and the local because of small ceramic statues, carved jade and intricately worked gold sculptures, and fabric art which were buried with illustrious persons of the societies.

Genres: Latin American mythology and folklore appears in many different forms. In Mesoamerica, some were in written form, as in the case of the Mayan codices, which contain hieroglyphics painted on bark paper. The Aztecs also had codices which consist of pictographs painted on stretched animal skins. Oral traditions were important as well, and throughout Mesoamerica and South America, mythology and folklore were transmitted through folk tales, songs, and poetry.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Mayas

PopolVuh The PopolVuh is a pre-conquest cultural narrative of the Quiche Maya people located in present-day northwest Guatemala. Based on oral narrative, the collection was compiled by anonymous authors for whom it could have been dangerous to preserve the creation myths and religious beliefs at a time when the Spanish conquistadores and priests were burning the Mayan hieroglyphic texts they could find. The PopolVuh has ambiguous passages due to degradation of the text over time. Nevertheless, it is a text that includes some of the most important myths, which include the primordial realm, the creation of the Earth, the creation of the animals, the fall of the animals, the creation of the mud person, the creation of the stick and reed people, and the story of the first leaders and the many events that took place. The importance of the PopolVuh cannot be overstated.

ChilamBalam The Books of ChilamBalam consist of nine separate books that cover migration legends, predictions, prophecies, riddles, calendars, and the Maya apocalypse, which describes the destruction and recreation of the world. Written in the Yucatec Maya language, they provide insight into the culture as well as the beliefs of the Maya. In addition to providing an understanding of the beliefs of the Yucatan Maya people, they also include incantations and ritualistic texts, so we can understand the Maya way of relating to the world and the kinds of beliefs about the nature of reality and their relationship to the divine.

Creation Myths In the PopolVuh, the earth was created by the forces of Huracan, the wind and sky god, who connected the sky and the earth. He planted a Ceiba tree, which provided a framework for plants, animals, and humans to live. Its roots went to the underworld, and the branches reached to the sky. The gods created animals first, then three different phases of humans: the mud, the wood, the maize. The first was destroyed for speaking without making sense, and thus annoying the gods. The second for acting without respect, and so they were destroyed. The third, made from a mixture of the blood of the gods and ground corn, are today's human beings. The PopolVuh does not indicate how the Maize people end.

The Maya Concept of Reality For the Maya, there is no such thing as something without a spirit. Even inanimate things such as trees, shoes, or tools have spirits. As such, they all contain "k'uh" or sacredness. Understanding the underlying quality that makes each thing we perceive to be sacred is a key to appreciating the Maya worldview.

Religious Practice: Bloodletting The Maya royals were expected to practice bloodletting at certain points in the Maya calendar in order to honor the gods and to demonstrate their worthiness to be part of the royalty. Bloodletting was done from different parts of the body, and also with different tools such as ones made of stingray spines. For

example, in one ceremony, Maya royal women used thorned ropes to pierce their tongues and to scatter blood over icons. Men used a thorned rope to draw blood from their penis, for blood to scatter on icons and to mix with maize.

Transformation Animals: The Jaguar The Jaguar played an important role, especially with the Olmec civilization, and also in the Maya, Toltec, and Aztec. Jaguars were, in the practices of shamans, a powerful transformational force, which meant that a person could move in and out of “jaguar nature” with the physical and psychological attributes, which allowed them to journey into fearsome spaces such as the nine levels of the underworld, or the most violent battlefields of the “middle world” (surface of the earth). The jaguar is a spirit guide and a transformer.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Aztecs

Codices The Aztec codices are books consisting on animal skin pages covered with vivid pictographs. They contain valuable information about Aztec culture, including their myths.

Myths The Aztecs believed that the earth has had at least five suns. The first was the Jaguar Sun, which was eventually destroyed because it was inadequate. The second sun was a wind sun, and was managed by Quetzalcoatl. The third and fourth were Rain Sun and the Water Sun. Finally, the fifth sun is the Earthquake Sun. The Aztecs believed that the end of this world will come about through massive earthquakes.

Gods: Quetzalcoatl Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, was an important god not only for the Aztecs, but also for the Maya, Toltecs, and Aztecs. He is associated with the East, the most important cardinal direction, and has great powers to create and destroy. Interestingly, his appearance is very different from that of others, since he is considered to have light, shining skin, as well as feathers. Many temples and sculptures were made in his honor and to appease him.

Incas

Creation Myth The Inca Civilization, which extended along the Andean Cordillera from Colombia to Chile, was the largest of the world. The Inca believed that the first Inca person was created by Viracocha, the sun god. After creating the first man, Manco Capac, Viracocha then created a woman, so he could have a wife and not be lonely. They established the first sacred city, Cuzco, at Lake Titicaca to be close to the sun, and in fact, the Inca people thought of themselves as the Children of the Sun.

Concept of Reality: Dualism The Inca believed that all of nature consists of oppositional complementarity. That is to say that everything has two aspects: male and female; left and right; sun and moon; animal and human. One example in mythology was the Pachamama, the earth mother and wife of Pachacamac. She personified the earth as was considered to have human qualities, but to also to shape-shift into a dragon and cause earthquakes. To appease her, Incas offered coca leaf and chichi beer.

Great flood myth

The Inca believed that during the time of Pachamaa, humanity was cruel and barbaric. As a result, the gods decided to flood the world to rid them of the evil. Only the creatures in the mountaintops would survive. At that time, two brothers of exceptional virtue were minding their llamas when they noted odd behavior. The llamas then communicated to the two brothers that a great flood was coming. The flood did occur and flooded all the lowlands, so that all the people drowned. The mountains where the llamas and the brothers were started rising. At the end, all of the people of the world were drowned with the exception of the two good brothers and the llamas.

The Guaranís of Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay

Myths The Guaranis lived in the humid marsh and lowlands of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil. Their myths and beliefs are passed down in an oral tradition. The Guarani creator god is known as Tupa, and is associated with the sun and with thunder. His wife, Arasy, is associated with the moon. Together, they had seven “monster children”

(seven is a sacred number for the Tupi Guarani). The seventh was Kurupi, also known as Pombero. He is a shape-shifter who can enter locked doors during the siesta and impregnate women.

Iguazu Falls The enormous Iguazu Falls (from “Igua” or water, and “su” meaning “large”) were created from when the underground serpent god, M’Boi, was thwarted in his desire to take the beautiful betrothed virgin he saw. M’Boi was enraged and split the earth, causing an enormous waterfall. In the meantime, he turned Naipi, the beautiful girl into a rock, and Taruba, her beloved, into a palm tree. They were destined to be separated forever, but able to see each other, across the falls.

Discussion/Questions

1. The way that ancient peoples described their origins lets us know how they believed how and why they were created, and what their destiny would (or should) be. Their creation myths described their gods, the forces for good, and for evil in their world. Compare the creation myths of the Aztecs, Maya, and Inca.
2. The gods of the Maya, Tiwanaku, the Aztecs, and the Inca were not always pleased with their creations. And, when they were displeased, they were likely to punish humans, to the point of eliminated them. So, it was necessary to show loyalty and obedience, and the mythology described the gods, what they controlled, and their behaviors when both happy and displeased.. Describe the myths associated with keeping the gods happy in the various cultures.
3. In the tropical rainforests, savannahs, and river wetlands of what are now Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay, the Tupi-Guarani Indians developed a mythology rich in characters that had the ability to change shape, and to interfere in humans’ lives. In addition they reflected human characteristics and psychology. Discuss the Guarani mythological figures that were able to shape-shift and what their shape-shifting represented.

Reading

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