



# Maya Everyday Life Information Sheet



**What would you like to find out about the everyday life of the ancient Maya?**

Suggested areas to focus on:

homes, clothes, food, jobs or industry, role of women, particular practices or traditions, children, farming, crafts.

Here are some questions to get you thinking.

- ♦ Did the Maya have special foods for special occasions?
- ♦ What tools did Maya farmers use?
- ♦ What kind of jewellery did ordinary people wear?
- ♦ Did Mayan children go to school?
- ♦ What kind of clothes did people wear?
- ♦ Did the Maya get married?

Ensure that your questions cover a range of everyday life themes and enable your answers to show your historical understanding of the civilisation. They should be full of detail.

For example, if your question was 'What kind of houses did people live in?' your answer could cover the size, the materials used, how they were decorated and what the Maya might have used for windows and doors.

## Research and Information Gathering:

**Start here:**

[BBC Teach—Introducing the Maya Civilisation](#)

**Then move on to these websites, ensuring that you take careful notes:**

[BBC Teach—Jobs in Maya Civilisation](#)—there are also a further 4 clips linked to this series: houses, fashion, food and inventions. They can be accessed towards the bottom of this webpage.

[Maya Daily Life](#)

[Maya Fashion and Clothing](#)

[Ancient Maya Clothing](#)

[Clothing, Material and Jewellery](#)

[Farming and Food](#)

[Murals that give evidence of daily life](#)

[Mayan Housing](#)

It would be a great idea to keep some notes, as you might need the information on later trails.

## A brief summary:

# What was everyday life like for the Maya?

The homes of ordinary Maya, unlike the grand palaces of the royals and nobles, were simple one-room houses. The walls were made from mud and timber and were painted red. The roofs were thatched and steep so that the rain fell off them easily. Most houses had just one door and no windows.



Mayan homes were workplaces as well as places to sleep and eat. Women had to work hard to prepare meals, fetch firewood and water, prepare food for the winter months by drying beans, corn and chillies in the sun, and making clothes for their families. They would spin plant fibres into thread and then weave the thread into cloth to make tunics, cloaks and blankets. Mayans knew how to dye cloth using dyes made from fruits, flowers and cochineal beetles but only the rich were allowed to wear brightly coloured fabrics.



Girls helped their mothers around the home. They learnt how to do all the chores their mothers did so that one day they could run their own household. Boys would learn the hunting and farming skills of their fathers. They would learn how to make weapons, how to hunt, fish and farm, and how to defend themselves in battle.

Mayan men were responsible for providing for their families. They farmed the land, hunted wild animals and fished. The Maya ate animals such as rabbits, turkeys, deer, a breed of hairless dog and wild boar, and they caught turtles, dolphins and shellfish. They grew crops such as squash, pumpkin, beans, papaya, avocados, chillies, limes, sunflowers for seeds and herbs for seasoning, but the staple of their diet was maize. Maize was so central to their lives that it was considered sacred.



The Maya also used the beans from cacao trees to make a chocolate drink. However, this was reserved for the ruling classes.



The Maya did not have metal tools or hunting weapons. They used wood, stone and obsidian (a type of volcanic glass) to make spears, axes, bows, arrows and knives. They also didn't have wheels either. There is evidence of wheels on Mayan toys but no evidence that they used wheels on carts.

### **Quick Facts:**

- Mayan merchants traded feathers of brightly coloured birds at markets.
- Snakes, jaguars and pumas were hunted for their furs.
- The Maya liked snacking on locusts!
- The Maya used plants as medicine.
- The Maya liked to keep themselves and their homes clean and tidy.
- Mayan men wore only a loincloth and cloak. Women wore knee-length tunics.
- Women traded pots, clothes and crops at markets.

A writing frame for Lewis Group, if required.

Question 1:	Answer:
Question 2:	Answer:
Question 3:	Answer:
Question 4:	Answer:
Question 5:	Answer:



# Maya Festivals

In the Maya Empire, every 20th day was a festival day. Priests would climb up the steps of a pyramid or a temple. On the steps, dressed in fierce masks and towering hats, they would dance and rattle things and make a lot of noise. Their huge hats had things sewn on them that jingled. This added to the noise. It was a show of power to let the demons know that the priests were fierce and powerful. The noise was also to attract the attention of the gods in the heavens so they knew the Maya were praying.

Bloodletting was part of every festival. But bloodletting was a personal sacrifice. The Maya cut themselves so that a drop or two of blood would appear. The nobles smeared their blood on a bit of bark and then burned it, to help their blood get to heaven, so the gods would know they had made a sacrifice in their honour.

The Maya did practice human sacrifice, but human sacrifice was not part of every festival. When captives were forced to play a game of ball (*pitz*) against a Maya team, they always lost. After the game, the captive team was sacrificed.



An illustration of pitz being played at a festival.

Early Spanish colonists wrote about the ancient Maya festivals. They involved dance, theatre and magical illusions.

Musical instruments included rattles, small bells, tinklers created from shells, drums, trumpets of wood, gourd, or conch shell. Clay flutes, reed pipes and whistles were also used





**The Great Plaza at Tikal,  
Peten, Guatemala.**

[This website](#) gives detailed information on Maya festivals.

Remember the strategies for carrying out research: read an article all the way through, pick out the key information that you need and then write it up in your own words or use it to inform your writing.



Some modern festivals are based on the ancient Maya calendar and may be very old.

This picture shows the Wajxaqib' B'atz' ceremony that happens every 260 days.

Further interesting information:

[Corn and calendar traditions](#)

[Ancient Mayan music](#)

[Mayan temples](#)





# Maya Religion and Beliefs



## An overview

# Mayan Religion

### **What did the Maya believe?**

The Maya believed in many different gods who each had control over a different aspect of life, such as the gods of rain, maize, childbirth, bees, wine, games and fire. These gods could control human events and change fates. As such, people consulted the gods on everything they did and prayed for help in their lives.



Chac, the rain god

### **How did the Maya worship?**

The Maya worshipped the gods in lots of different ways. They had special festivals run by the temple priests every twenty days where people would meet outside the temple to sing, dance and pray. The priests would wear large headdresses and scary masks to frighten any demons away. People also gave offerings and sacrifices of food, drink, flowers, precious objects and blood to the gods to keep them happy. They threw these offerings into a holy well called a cenote.



A Mayan temple

### **Why did the Maya offer blood to the gods?**

The Maya believed that unless they offered blood to the gods, the sun would stop rising every day and the world would end.

Sometimes this meant offering a human sacrifice. Humans sacrifices could be men, women or children. Slaves and captives often had their hearts cut out or their fingernails pulled off.

However, it was the richer Mayans who had more of a responsibility to give the gods blood. They would do this by pricking themselves with cactus thorns or by pulling a barbed rope through their tongues.



A human sacrifice



A Mayan funerary mask

### **What were Mayan temples like?**

Mayan temples were pyramids. They were tall so that the tops were closer to heaven. Temples were the domains of the priests who would perform ceremonies in small, dark rooms. However, temples were also tombs. Mayan leaders would often have temples built as their burial ground. They would be buried with precious objects and human or animal sacrifices. They also wore special masks and jewellery that was thought to help them become gods in the afterlife.

### **What did Maya believe happened when you died?**

The Maya believed that there was an underworld and a heaven. There were different levels of the underworld and different levels of heaven. The Maya believed that most people, including kings, nobles and priests, had to journey through the underworld to reach heaven and live with the gods. The underworld was a dark and terrifying place with frightening gods, scary demons and rivers of blood. The only people who went straight to heaven were those who had been sacrificed, those who died in childbirth or battle, and those who died playing a religious ball game called Pok-a-Tok.



# Evidence about religious ceremonies and Maya kings

Maya kings wanted to control the people they ruled over. They also wanted people to do what they asked and bring them gifts. The best way the kings found to do this was to make the people believe that they were like the gods.

The king often dressed like one of the gods, usually the Maize God, with a headdress decorated with jade and feathers of the quetzal bird, which were both green like the leaves of the maize plant. He sat on the skin of a jaguar, just like one of the gods of the underworld. Sometimes the kings dressed up as other gods. In this painting from a pottery cup two kings are dressed as Xbalanque, one of the Hero Twins whose name means Jaguar Deer.



The king would also dance. In this standing stone the king is carved with one foot up and his hands to one side of him as if he is just about to move and carry on with the dance. The dances would re-enact parts of the stories and myths of the Maya, like the Popul Vuh, and would change the king into a god.



Sometimes the kings had to spill some of their own blood as a sacrifice to the gods, though, and so did queens. This carving shows King Shield Jaguar and Lady Xok (pronounced shoke) in this kind of sacrifice. The queen is pulling a rope with stingray barbs on it through her tongue and the blood is dripping into the bowl lined with paper underneath her. The king is holding a huge flaming torch over her, suggesting that this sacrifice was done at night.



When the king went away to war and when he came back (if he won) there would also be ceremonies. In this carving, the queen is giving her husband, Bird Jaguar VI, a spear that he will take to war with him.



## Creation according to the Maya

The gods made animals, but the animals didn't speak to them.

The gods tried to make humans out of clay but they were limp, and melted in the rains.

They made humans out of wood but the rains drowned them.

## The Underworld

The underworld was called Xibalba, which means 'place of fear'.

It was reached through caves and tunnels.

Maya gods of death, who looked like jaguars, lived in the underworld.

The Maya believed that



## The Universe according to the Maya

The earth (Middleworld) is square and flat

The earth rests on the back of a huge creature (like a turtle or crocodile).

A giant tree grows at the centre of the earth (Middleworld), its roots reach down to the underworld and its branches reach to the Upperworld.

The four compass directions are all linked with a colour:

North = WHITE – associated with ancestors who have died

East = RED – where the sun rises

## The Gods

The Ancient Maya had many, many gods (over 150!), only a few of which are mentioned by the same name in different sources.

Many of them had overlapping roles and names.

Some had human form, some took the form of an

### **Itzamna**

One of the creator gods.

Inventor of writing.

Patron of learning.

Portrayed in human form as an old man with no teeth and a large nose.

### **Kukulcan**

Supreme god.

God of the four elements with the following items associated with each one:

maize-ear (earth)  
a fish (water)  
lizard (fire)  
vulture (air)

One of the creator gods.

God of resurrection and reincarnation.

His name means 'feathered serpent'.

### **Ix Chel**

Wife of Itzamnaaj.

Goddess of childbirth, healing, weaving and the moon.

Portrayed in human form wearing a headdress of snakes entangled in her hair, and toes and fingers that looked like jaguar claws.

Capable of causing floods and destruction.

The mother of many other gods.

### **Kinich Ahau - Sun God**

Travelled across the sky during the day.

Sunk below the earth and entered the underworld every night, where he became a jaguar god.

### **Hun Ixim-Maize God**

From his head sprouted an ear of maize.

Was important because the diet of the Maya was 80% maize and they relied on the harvest being successful.

Also important because humans were created from maize dough by the gods.

### **Ah Puch**

Death god.

Portrayed as a human with a skeletal nose, jaw and spine and a body covered in hideous spots.



### **Chac - Rain God**

Brought the rain needed to make crops grow.

Created storms, thunder and lightning.

Caused wars and human sacrifice

Portrayed as a human with a curling snout and reptile fangs.



# Notes sheet



Find out as much information as you can about each of these aspects of Mayan religion and make notes in the boxes.

**Gods**

**Temples**

**Priests**

**Sacrifices and Offerings**

**Ceremonies**

**Afterlife**