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Guatemalan folklore comprises a range of traditional customs, tales, sayings, dances, and art forms that have been preserved by the Mayan people. The people use tales from their heritage to explain current circumstances.

Starting Points

1. To understand the following Guatemalan myth, it is important to know that in the K’ek’chi language, the word used for blessing is also the word used for cursing. This word is osobtesinquil (o sobte sin kil). For the K’ek’chi, there is both good and bad in the osobtesinquil that are given.

2. What is your favorite folklore tale? Is there an underlying message the story reveals about your culture?

3. What makes folklore intriguing?

Information

The Mayan King and the Vulture Myth

The following is a myth that was told by Roberto Choc, a K’ek’chi Indian from Teleman. It contains mythical elements typical of most folklore and describes the origins of the Indian and Latin people of Guatemala.

One day, the Mayan king was working on his plot of land tending corn. As he toiled under the heat, the sweat dripped down his body. During a short break, he glanced up and noticed a buzzard lazily flying around his head. The king called to the buzzard and asked him to land so they could talk. When the buzzard landed, the king accused him of having an easy life and being able to fly around all day while the king had to toil under the hot sun so his corn would grow properly.

The buzzard and the king agreed to change positions. The king removed his clothing and handed them to the buzzard, who removed his feathers and gave them to the king. The king took flight and circled about as the buzzard began toiling in the field. As noon approached, the king’s wife came to the buzzard with tortillas and beans for lunch. The wife noticed no difference in her husband, so the buzzard ate peacefully. After the buzzard finished with his work in the field, he returned home to the king’s wife and lived as the king had. Years passed by like this.

At first, the king enjoyed his life as a buzzard. He spent his time flying about, enjoying the landscape. However, in time, he grew bored with the idea of being a buzzard. Everyday was the same, flying around watching the scenery or searching for animals to feed on.
The king returned to his home and landed next to the buzzard who was busy weeding the soil. The king told the buzzard that he liked being a buzzard, but that he wanted to return to his old life. The buzzard removed his clothing and returned it to the king and the king removed his feathers and returned them to the buzzard. He began working in his field just as he had done before he wore the feathers of the vulture. At mid-day, his wife came to the field to bring him his tortillas and beans. She noticed no difference in how the king looked or acted. After the work in the field was done, the king returned to his home.

In his home, the king found many more children than had been there when he left. He knew that the vulture was their father and he grew enraged by this thought. He left his home and went to the cantina in town to drink as much beer as possible. After drinking for a long time, he left, but he was so drunk that he was unable to walk and fell in a ditch alongside the road.

After some time, his wife passed him in the street. She noticed him in the ditch but paid no attention to him. Later, the king’s own children passed by and noticed their drunken father had fallen in the ditch, yet they left him as he was. Finally, the vulture’s children passed by and noticed the king had fallen down in the ditch and could not get out. They took pity on the drunk Mayan king, helped him out of the ditch, and carried him home.

As the king grew older and nearer to death, he desired to give his children an osobtesinquil. He blessed and cursed his children that they would have the strength to work in the cornfields and perform the manual labor that was required of them. He blessed and cursed them that they would eat corn and beans under the hot sun forever. To the children of the vulture, he gave the blessing and cursing that they would work in offices and eat meat at their meals.

Today, the Latin people of Guatemala are believed to be the ancestors of the vulture’s children. They are the ones who work in the administrative positions. Work, for them, does not involve manual labor, but rather, analytical tasks. They are able to afford luxuries such as meat for their meals, just as the blessing and cursing by the Mayan king said. The blessing and cursing gave the Latin people a superior position to that of the Indians. The children of the vulture are a mix of Mayan and vulture descent.

The Mayan king’s children, on the other hand, are now the Indians of Guatemala. Their positions carry a lesser status than the Latin people. They work the fields, sweating underneath the hot sun to plant, care for, and reap the corn they eat. They are not able to afford meat, and beans are part of every meal. The pureness of their race is retained because they are descendants of a Mayan mother and father.

One important aspect of this myth involves the exchange of clothing. In the story, the Mayan wife was unable to detect any differences between the buzzard and the king when they wore each other’s clothes or feathers. This signifies that the difference between the people of Guatemala is not detectable by skin color. During the beginning of the twentieth century, the Indian people of Guatemala wore special clothing representative of their hometown and the Latin people wore clothing reflecting their culture. Based on skin color alone, it would have been impossible to distinguish between a Ladino and an Indian person.
Activities

1. Invent a myth about your heritage.

2. What are some stories we know from other cultures? Have the students relate some of these tales and then discuss meanings apparent in them.

3. Color the picture of the Mayan king and the vulture (see Folklore & Language Visual 1), or draw your own picture.

4. Act out the parts of the myth of *The Mayan King and the Vulture*. Have half of the class play the children of the Mayan king and the other half play the children of the vulture and give the different blessings and cursings to each group.

Discussion Questions

1. How might the myth *The Mayan King and the Vulture* reflect and affect the Guatemalans’ perceptions of themselves? What myths do we have in our culture? How do they affect our self-perceptions?

2. Most American fairy tales end happily. Does the myth *The Mayan King and the Vulture* have a happy ending? Explain. Why do you think the myth ended the way it did?

3. Do you find it interesting that the word *osobtesinquil* means both a blessing and a cursing in the K’ek’chi language? How were the osobtesinquiles the king gave to each of his children both blessings and cursings?
### Number of Days/Term

| 1 = 1 Kin (or one day) | 20 Kins = 1 Uinal (or 20 days) | 18 Uinals = 1 Tun (or 360 days) | 20 Tuns = 1 Katun (or 7,200 days) | 20 Katuns = 1 Baktun (or 144,000 days) |

### Day Names of the Solar Calendar

Our calendar is based on the sun. Rotations of the earth around the sun are known as years. Many years ago, the cycles of the moon were known as months, but with the rise of Christianity, months and lunar cycles no longer coincided. The ritual Mayan calendar, on the other hand, combined several cycles to track the movements of the sun, the moon, and Venus. This ritual calendar, known as *Tzolkin*, had 260 days. This calendar included the numbers one through thirteen with twenty day names, similar to our matching of days and weeks. The Maya also had a solar calendar that was called the *Haah*. This calendar had eighteen months, each with twenty days. The days of the month were numbered from zero to nineteen. Having a day correlate with zero was unique to the Mayan calendar. It was believed that the Maya learned about the power of the number zero long before Europe or China. The names of the days are as follows:

|-------|----------|------|-------|

### Month Names of the Solar Calendar

To accommodate the five remaining days, a nineteenth month was created. This month, known as *Wayeb*, was considered to be a very dangerous time because the days had no names and were believed to have no souls. No fires would be lit during this time, and much mourning took place. The names of the months are as follows:

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<td>5. Tzec</td>
<td>10. Yax</td>
<td>15. Muan</td>
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Each day was identified by its day name and month name. Arranging days with months determined the luck of certain days. For example, if a lucky day occurred during a month of unluckiness, one could expect a normal day. If an unlucky day corresponded to an unlucky month, there would be cause to worry. Like modern horoscopes, the Mayan calendars were used to predict the future.

### Mayan Pyramids

Pyramids were an essential part of indigenous Mayan religion. There were two types of pyramids: climbable and unclimbable. Both types were constructed from stone blocks and lime mortar. The climbable pyramids were used to perform sacrifices and
spiritual rituals. They were especially steep, with tall, narrow staircases. Their height drew attention to the rituals performed in the temple chamber at the top. Crowds would gather at the base, but only priests, in an effort to draw closer to the gods, were allowed to climb the stairs. The unclimbable pyramids were untouched because of their sacred nature. They were even steeper than the sacrificial temples.

Aside from serving as religious buildings, Mayan pyramids served other purposes. Because of their height, they served as visual landmarks for the Mayans as they traveled. Some of the Mayan temples served as burial tombs for Mayan kings. Small burial chambers located within the pyramids housed the remains of the dead kings. Inside, murals were painted on the walls, and treasures were left for the dead.

Activities
1. Attempt to solve a few of the math problems using the Mayan Math Quiz (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 2).
2. Draw a picture of a Mayan temple. Describe what type of treasure might be found inside.
3. Learn to count as the ancient Maya did. Say the numbers aloud together (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 3).

Discussion Questions
1. The Mayan temples are similar in style and function to Egyptian temples. Brainstorm possible reasons for this similarity.
2. Discuss the benefits or problems with a number system that is based on the number twenty. How would multiplication and division work in a number system of twenty?
3. What would it be like to track time on three different calendars? Do you think the Mayan people have three different birthdays each year?