



INTERCULTURAL OUTREACH
CULTUREGUIDE

Guatemala

Series 2
Elementary (K-6)



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HISTORY

ANCIENT MAYAN RELIGION

Thousands of years ago, a group of people called the *Maya* [my-ah] lived in the land now known as Guatemala. Ruins of their ancient cities and religious structures can still be found scattered throughout the country. Today there is a mixture of the Mayan religion and Catholicism.



Starting Points

1. Play the audio of a Guatemalan processional (see **Music in Additional Resources**). What sounds do you hear? What do you think the people are doing? For special events and holidays in Guatemala, the people often march in a processional, a religious parade-like ceremony.
2. Look at the picture of a Guatemalan processional (see **History Visual 1**). What are these people doing? Have you seen anything like this before? These processions can be seen during religious holidays.
3. Think of something ancient that you have seen in books, in museums, or elsewhere. What was it? What was it used for? In Guatemala, traditions and artifacts are very important to the people and their culture.



Information

Ancient Maya

Guatemala was first inhabited by a group of people called the Maya. This civilization began almost four thousand years ago in 1800 B.C.E. The Maya are still famous today for their advancements in architecture and science. They built many large temples out of stone without using any type of mortar to hold the stones together (see **History Visual 2**). These temples reached heights of over two hundred feet—nearly the length of a football field. The Maya were also advanced in their study of astronomy. Their highly accurate solar and lunar calendars were historically some of the first calendars and, in some ways, they were superior to those of Asia and Europe.

Not only were the Maya skilled architects and astronomers, they were also devoted historians. The Maya recorded their history by carving pictures called hieroglyphics into the sides of their temples. These pictures tell of war, peace, trade, and ancient religious ceremonies.

Religious Ceremonies

The ancient Mayan rituals and ceremonies have rich symbolism. The Maya used directions according to astronomy to determine when specific rituals should be performed. They also used colors to represent specific directions: white meant north, yellow meant south, red meant east, and black meant west. An ancient priest, called an *itz'at* [eet-saht] (sage) or *k'uhun* [koon] (keeper of holy books), conducted the ceremonies on behalf of the common people.

Fire also played an important role in religious ceremonies. The presence of fire symbolized humility and strength; the Maya would show humility by sacrificing animals as burnt offerings to please their gods.

Contemporary Religious Traditions

Today, there is a hybrid version of the Mayan religion and Catholicism. Catholicism came to Guatemala when Guatemala was conquered by Spain.

The ancient use of color and fire continues to influence modern-day Mayan practices and remains an important aspect of Guatemalan life. Houses and clothing are brightly colored to represent the life and energy of the Guatemalan people. Elements of fire have now been added to the traditional Catholic mass, and patrons worship by burning candles and incense on the front steps of cathedrals. Some Mayan priests hold private prayer meetings where burnt sacrifices are offered as gifts to the gods.

Worship through music is very important in the Guatemalan culture. Early in the morning, priests retreat to the mountaintops to sing and play music on behalf of the people in the village.

Processionals also add to people's worship. Once a year, Catholics parade through the streets to worship God. The procession begins with mass at a church, after which the priest leads the congregation out into the streets. The congregation walks the streets of the town singing, chanting prayers, and stopping at every corner to worship the Catholic and ancient Mayan saints. Processionals can last for many hours. The Easter procession of Christ's coffin, which travels a single block, lasts from three o'clock in the afternoon until the next morning.



Activities

1. Play the hieroglyphics translation game (see **History Visual 3**).
2. Color a picture of a Guatemalan house using bright colors (see **History Visual 4**). Discuss the meaning of colors in the picture and in Mayan culture.
3. Listen to the audio of the Guatemalan priests singing (see **Music in Additional Resources**). Write about what it sounds like and what music means to Guatemalans.
4. Give a TV news report to your class on the ancient religion of the Maya and how it affects Guatemalan culture today.
5. Complete the word search "Ancient Mayan Religion" (see **History Visual 5**).
6. Using salt dough (see **Lifestyle Visual 4**), clay, or blocks, build your own Mayan temple.



Discussion Questions

1. Do you or your parents keep a journal? What do you record? Why? How are Mayan records that are written in hieroglyphics comparable to someone's journal?
2. What is your favorite type of music? Where do you go to sing or play music? Why do you listen to music? Compare your favorite type of music with the music the ancient Mayans used to listen to.
3. What is your favorite color? If you could paint your bedroom a bright color, which one would you choose? Why would you choose that color?
4. What are some traditions that you and your family do every year (for Christmas, Halloween, Easter, or other holidays)? Why do you do them? Are they mostly for fun or for religious reasons?
5. What do you think fire symbolizes for the Guatemalans? What do you think of when you think of fire?
6. What would it be like to depend on the sun and the moon to tell time? What do you think it would be like to follow solar and lunar calendars like the Mayans created? (We follow the Julian calendar.) How would it affect your perception of time?

FACTS ABOUT GUATEMALA

Official Name: Republic of Guatemala

Capital: Guatemala City

Government Type: constitutional democratic republic

Area: 108,890 sq km

Land Boundaries: Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico

Climate: tropical; hot, humid in lowlands; cooler in highlands

Lowest Point: Pacific Ocean 0 m

Highest Point: Volcan Tajumulco 4,211 m

Natural Resources: petroleum, nickel, rare woods, fish, chicle, hydropower

Natural Hazards: numerous volcanoes in mountains, with occasional violent earthquakes; Caribbean coast subject to hurricanes and other tropical storms

Population: 12,293,545 (July 2006 est.)

Ethnic Groups: Mestizo (mixed Amerindian-Spanish or assimilated Amerindian—in local Spanish called *Ladino*) and Spanish approximately 60%, Amerindian or predominantly Amerindian approximately 39%, other 1%.

Religions: Roman Catholic, Protestant, indigenous Mayan beliefs

Languages: Spanish 60%, Amerindian languages 40% (23 officially recognized Amerindian languages, including Quiche, Cakchiquel, Kekchi, Mam, Garifuna, and Xinca)

GDP: \$56.86 billion (2005 est.)

GDP Per Capita: \$4,700 (2005 est.)

GDP Composition By Sector: agriculture 22.8%, industry 19.1%, services 58.1% (2005 est.)

Labor Force: 3.76 million (2005 est.)

Unemployment Rate: 7.5% (2003 est.)

Industries: sugar, textiles and clothing, furniture, chemicals, petroleum, metals, rubber, tourism

Agricultural Products: sugarcane, corn, bananas, coffee, beans, cardamom; cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens

Exports: \$3.94 billion (f.o.b., 2005) coffee, sugar, bananas, fruits and vegetables, cardamom, apparel, petroleum

Imports: \$7.744 billion (f.o.b., 2005) fuels, machinery and transport equipment, construction materials, grain, fertilizers, electricity

Trade Partners: U.S., Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, South Korea, China, Japan

Currency: quetzal (GTQ), U.S. dollar (USD), others allowed

Exchange Rate: 7.6339 quetzales = \$1 U.S. (2005)

History Visual 1: Guatemalan Processional



Name: _____

Hieroglyphics Translation Game

The ancient Maya recorded their history by carving pictures called hieroglyphics on their stone temples. Each is a symbol representing a word, idea, or event. It has taken archaeologists (people who study ancient civilizations) many years to learn to read these hieroglyphics. This game lets you be the archaeologist and translate what these symbols say!

Instructions: Fill in each blank according to the key to see what the message says.

A		H		O		V	
B		I		P		W	
C		J		Q		X	
D		K		R		Y	
E		L		S		Z	
F		M		T			
G		N		U			

Ready? Here's the message:

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