

Lessons From the Land of the Maya

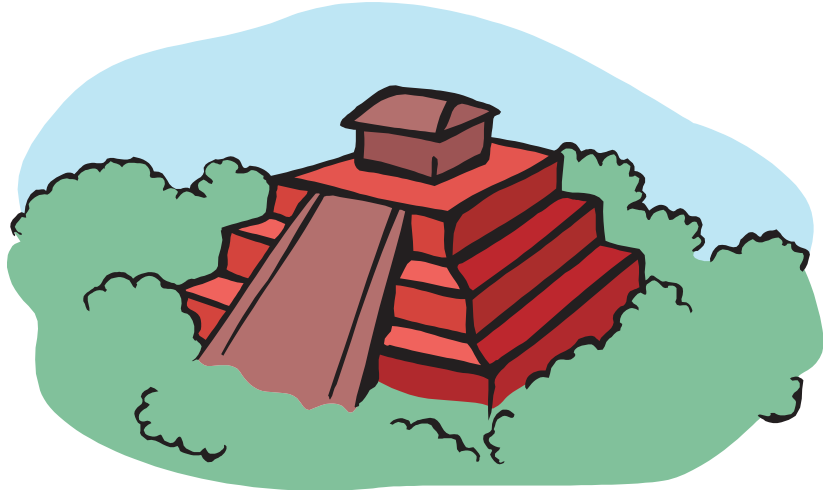
• **Keep 'em Reading** •

Grades
K-2, 3-5

by | Suzanne Driscoll

American Indian Heritage Month

No study of Native Americans would be complete without including the Maya of Mexico and Central America. While the Roman Empire was crumbling in Europe, a magnificent civilization and highly developed culture existed in the forests and jungles of what anthropologists now call The ancient Maya territory covered all of Guatemala and Belize, Western Honduras and El Salvador, and part or all of the Mexican states of Yucatan, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Chiapas and Tabasco.



Their great period of building incredible stone pyramids, wells, palaces, and observatories started as far back as A.D. 320. All were highly decorated and built without metal tools. The Maya also developed a very advanced mathematical system that included the concepts of place value and zero, which the Greeks and the Romans did not have. They were great astronomers, and calculated the time of the planet Venus to complete its orbit to be 584 days. Today's scientists have measured it to be 583.92 days. In addition, they developed a 365-day solar calendar and created lunar months to within 23 seconds of today's computation.

The Maya devised a system of writing similar to the hieroglyphs of Egypt, and produced quite a volume of literature. Unfortunately, one of the first bishops from Spain burned most of their books, and only three have survived. Their inscriptions found in the remaining stone buildings are complex and very hard to decipher, and so far only about a third of the characters have been interpreted.

Corn was the staple of their diet, just as it is for today's descendants. The Mayan civilization was based upon agriculture, and they also grew beans, sweet potatoes, and squash. Cotton and cacao were grown for trading, and their pottery and weaving were very advanced as well.

Many lessons can also be learned from theories of why the Mayan civilization collapsed by 1441. It was not due to the Spanish Conquest, as the decline occurred long before the explorers arrived. Some anthropologists believe it was caused by overpopulation and misuse of the environment, such as cutting down the rainforests. Others attribute it to infighting and constant civil war. But their descendants still live and work in the same general territory today—many of whom are impoverished and persecuted. Archaeologists addicted to the study of the ancient Maya call it “Mayamania.” Says Arthur Demarest of Vanderbilt University, “You’ve got lost cities in the jungle, secret inscriptions only a few people can read, tombs with treasures in them, and then the mystery of why it all collapsed.” With the following activities, it is hoped your students will learn new some new skills and develop a little Mayamania as well.

Language Arts

Read the poem, "Ahí Nomás" (Just Over There) by Americo Paredes that compares the height of the eagle nest to that of the Mayan searching for his dream. (See the poem on page 4.) Then write a class poem about keeping our eyes on our dreams for the future and obstacles that might get in our way. Older students can write their poem independently.

Read *Gods and Goddesses of the Ancient Maya* and have students choose one goddess or god to research and write about. Or they could make up their own god or goddess and describe why it would have been worshipped at the time of the Mayans.

Read *Hands of the Maya* and have students write a story that describes how our everyday lives are different from today's descendents of the Maya.

After reading *Secrets in Stone: All About Maya Hieroglyphics*, have the students choose about five hieroglyphs to copy and illustrate. Then ask them to write a letter to a friend using the glyphs and English words as well.

Foreign Language

Label objects in the classroom with Spanish words. Try to integrate Spanish phrases into daily classroom routines, such as "Buenos dias" (good morning), "Adios amigos" (good-bye friends) or "abren los libros" (open the books). Ask students to make their own Spanish language dictionary, and write down and illustrate all the Spanish words they come across in books they are reading.

Social Studies

Ask students to color in a map of Mesoamerica using a different color for each country. Label where the major ancient ruins are located.

Form teams of two-to-three students each and have an online scavenger hunt for facts about the

history and geography of Mesoamerica, including Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras, El Salvador, and parts of Mexico where the Maya originally lived. The first team to complete their list of questions wins a prize.

Keeping the same teams, ask each group to look up photos on the Internet of the ancient ruins at Chichen-Itza, Tulum, Coba, Palenque, Copan, Uxmal, etc. Each group should choose a building, download a photo, and prepare a presentation to the class on what the building was used for and other interesting facts. (temple, observatory, sacred well, ball court, etc.)

Math

The Mayan system of mathematics used a base number of twenty instead of ten like we have. They also used a system of bars and dots for counting, with a dot standing for one and a bar for five. Students can calculate math problems using our base-ten method and the Mayan base-twenty method. Examples of numbers include:

••	••••	—	••••
2	4	5	9

Go to www.michielb.nl/maya/math.html for complete examples.

The ruins in Chichen-Itza are still in very good condition, and after viewing pictures in *The Maya*, students can construct pyramids using sugar cubes. Older children can build them to scale from the originals.

Science

The Maya had quite an advanced knowledge of astronomy and built a spectacular observation tower at Chichen-Itza in Mexico as well as in other locations. The sun, moon, planet Venus, and the Milky Way were all observed and recorded, especially the sun during the summer solstice. Students can view photos of planets at Web sites such as

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www.kidsastronomy.com/solar_system.htm and then make their own solar system models using styro-foam balls or round pieces of paper hanging from a coat hanger.

There are a large variety of birds and animals common to Mesoamerica including the quetzal bird with tail streamers three feet long, jaguars, ocelots, deer, peccaries, wild pigs, tapirs, sloths, howler monkeys, agouti, and wild turkeys. Students can draw pictures or cut out photos printed off the Internet to make a booklet. For younger children, hang the pictures on a bulletin board with cutouts of trees and plants to set up their own zoo.

Art

The Maya used to make beautiful paintings of birds and flowers on tree bark using dyes from herbs. After reading a story or poem about the birds of Mexico such as *Cuckoo* by Lois Ehlert, students can make a painting of birds on crumpled brown wrapping paper to resemble tree bark.

Making corn husk dolls is an old Native American craft. After reading *The Corn Grows Ripe*, bring in corn husks either fresh or from a craft store. Easy directions with step-by-step drawings can be found at www.teachersfirst.com/summer/cornhusk.htm.

The Mayans were known for wearing very elaborate masks for special celebrations. Show pictures from *People of Corn* and then make masks using cardboard, recycled materials, feathers, paper flowers, jewels, etc.

The Maya developed a rather sophisticated calendar. Every day had a name; there were twenty day names, each represented by a symbol. Students could pick a day symbol such as dog, storm cloud, skull, frog, or snake, label with the Mayan word, and illustrate it. Each day they can take turns putting their symbol on a current calendar. A list of some of the calendar symbols with the Mayan name can be found at www.michielb.nl/maya/calendar.html.

Music

A good song called *1492* reminds children that many different cultures and civilizations were already established when Columbus “discovered” the Americas. You can listen to the song being performed by the woman who wrote it, Nancy Schimmel, at www.sisterschoice.com/activitysss.html#1492. Her Web Site includes suggestions for further reading. The song appears on her CD “Sun, Sun Shine: Songs for Curious Children.”

1492

by Nancy Schimmel

In fourteen hundred ninety-two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue,
It was a courageous thing to do
But someone was already here.

Columbus knew the world was round
So he looked for the East while westward
bound,
But he didn't find what he thought he found,
And someone was already here.

Chorus:
The Inuit and Cherokee*,
The Aztec and Menominee,
The Onandaga and the Cree;
Columbus sailed across the sea,
But someone was already here.

It isn't like it was empty space,
Caribs met him face to face.
Could anyone discover the place
When someone was already here?

Chorus

So tell me, who discovered what?
He thought he was in a different spot.
Columbus was lost, the Caribs were not;
They were already here.

Chorus

* substitute local tribe names if you wish

From the song *1492*. Words and music by Nancy Schimmel.
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1492 Lyric Pronunciations

Carib: kah-REEB

Onandaga: on-on-DAH-ga

Cooking

Corn was a staple of the Mayan diet and today corn dishes are prepared in a very similar manner in Mexico. After reading *The Corn Grows Ripe*, make tortillas with the class. You may want to try the recipe at Rockin' Robin's Cooking Mexican Recipes Web site:
www.cooking-mexican-recipes.com/corn-tortilla-recipe.html.

Physical Education

Show pictures of the Mayan ball courts that were long rectangular enclosures with a stone ring set twenty-to-thirty feet above the court. A game called "pok-a-tok" was popular where players had to use their fists, hips, or elbows to get a rubber ball through the ring. A similar court in a gymnasium could be set up with an inner tube or tire to throw a ball through.

Fiesta!

At the end of the unit, the class could have a fiesta with Mexican foods, games and music. A museum could also be set up in the school library where the students could display all of their artwork, poems, and stories.

Poem

Ahí Nomás "Just Over There" from *Between Two Worlds* by Americo Paredes

Indian, dark brother from whose ancestors
 Half of my father's fathers sprang,
 You who know all of these ragged mountains,
 Up to the nests that the eagles hang,

Where do your weary footsteps take you?
 In what strange place will you spend the night?
 Indian, bronze Indian, sad beast of burden
 Traveling on through the crumbling light.

Long was the road that he had to travel,
 Difficult, rocky his journey was,
 But with a shrug and a smile he answered,
 "Just over there. *Sí ahí nomás.*"

For so the ages have taught the Indian
 To mask his bitterness and despair;
 His way is long but he bravely travels,
 And all his goals are "just over there."

I too must travel among the mountains,
 Searching the peaks for a distant dream,
 Walking alone, with my eyes raised upward,
 Up to the heights, where the eagles scream.

Should I encounter along my journey
 A sister soul that is drawn to me,
 Who rhymes with me in a perfect couplet,
 Whose voice is pitched on my selfsame key,

Touching my arm, she will stop me, ask me,
 "Where are you going? *A donde vas?*"
 And with a shrug and a smile I'll answer,
 I too shall answer, "*Ahí nomás.*"

"Ahi Nomas" is reprinted with permission from the publisher of *Between Two Worlds* by Americo Paredes (©1990 Arte Público Press—University of Houston).

Bibliography

Books

Abuela's Weave by Omar Castaneda. Lee & Low Books, 1993. 2–4. Esperanza learns to weave on the backstrap loom from her grandmother to make and sell tapestries at the fiesta. Color pictures on each page authentically re-create images of rural Guatemala.

The Ancient Maya by Irene Flum Galvin. Benchmark Books, 1997. 6–8. Galvin presents a colorful portrait of Mayan art, poetry, religion, language, and way of life. Even reluctant readers can follow the fascinating narrative and color photographs with interest.

Between Two Worlds by Americo Paredes. Arte Público Press, 1991. 6–9. A collection of poetry from the folklorist, novelist, and mentor of two generations of Chicano scholars and writers.

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The Boy Who Wouldn't Obey: A Mayan Legend by Anne Rockwell. Greenwillow Books, 2000. 1–5. A mischievous mortal boy tests the patience of the god Chac who controls rain, wind, thunder, and lightening.

Children of the Yucatán by Frank Staub. Carolrhoda Books, 1996. 2–5. Nice photographs show the daily life of children in the Mexican state of Yucatan.

The Corn Grows Ripe by Dorothy Rhoads. Puffin, 1993. 4–6. Readers learn about the customs and family life of the Ancient Maya, and some of the Spanish language as well.

Cuckoo/Cucu: A Mexican Folktale by Lois Ehlert. Harcourt, 2000. K–3. Lovely illustrations and Spanish translations on each page provide a story about a beautiful but lazy bird that saves the season's seed crop from a fire.

The Eagle and the Rainbow: Timeless Tales from Mexico by Antonio Hernandez Madrigal. Fulcrum Publishing, 1997. 4–6. With Tomie dePaola's richly colored illustrations, this is a treasure of hard-to-find Mexican folktales. Includes five legends from the indigenous cultures of Mexico. At the conclusion of each legend, Madrigal provides a brief description of the culture and customs of the people to whom the legend is attributed.

Gods and Goddesses of the Ancient Maya by Leonard Everett Fisher. Holiday House, 1999. 3–6. An introduction to Mayan mythology, Fisher describes twelve of its most important deities. For each god or goddess, a clear, one-page account discusses his or her nature, physical characteristics, function in the society, and symbols.

Hands of the Maya: Villagers at Work and Play by Rachel Crandell. Henry Holt & Company, 2002. K–3. Beautiful photographs showing the daily life of the descendents of the Maya in Belize and Guatemala.

Mario's Mayan Journey by Michelle McCunney. Mondo Publishing, 1997. K–3. A young Mexican boy is fascinated by stories of the Mayan people and dreams himself into a jungle setting with a boy and girl who take him on a journey into the past.

The Maya by Patricia C. McKissack. Children's Press, 1985. K–3. Lovely color photos and large print describe the everyday life of the ancient Maya.

Mayan and Aztec Mythology by Michael Shuman. Enslow Publishers, 2001. 6–8. Introduces the myths and gods of these two great civilizations.

Me Oh Maya! by Jon Scieszka. Viking, 2003. 2–5. Part of the Time Warp Trio series, three boys find themselves playing the ancient Mayan game of ringball before they discover the true meaning of sudden death.

The Most Beautiful Place in the World by Ann Cameron. Knopf, 1988. 2–5. Seven-year-old Juan lives in Guatemala and tells his own story about living with his grandmother and shining shoes. He is surprised when she not only agrees to send him to school, but also chides him about the importance of standing up for himself.

People of Corn: A Mayan Story by Mary-Joan Gerson. Little, Brown and Company, 1995. K–3. With a blend of myth and imagination, the author tells a story of two gods that create the first people on earth out of corn.

Rain Player by David Wisniewski. Clarion Books, 1991. K–4. A boy named Pik challenges Chac, the god of rain, to a game of "pok-a-tok" in order to avert a foretold drought that would devastate his people.

Secrets in Stone: All About Maya Hieroglyphics by Laurie Coulter. Little, Brown and Company, 2001. 3–6. Describes how the meanings were unraveled, while the colorful photographs and drawings show Mayan art. Includes ideas for crafts, activities, and even a party. Also includes a "Glyphmaster," a spread that provides common signs in relief so that children can make rubbings.

Secrets of Ancient Cultures. The Maya: Activities and Crafts from a Mysterious Land by Arlette M. Braman. John Wiley & Sons, 2004. 3–6. Full of great activities and projects that will show how the Mayan people lived and played. Includes constructing a war shield, learning how to read ancient Mayan hieroglyphs, solving math problems, and cooking.

The Well of Sacrifice by Chris Eboch. Clarion Books, 1999. 5–8. Set in a large Mayan city during the ninth century, this story follows the exploits of Eveningstar Macaw, who prefers to become a healer like her mother rather than pursue the traditional custom of learning domestic arts and managing a household.

Video

Mayan: a History of the Mayas. (VHS) Educational Distributors of America, 1994. An in-depth look at ancient Mayan artifacts and temples reveals the rituals and traditions that have puzzled archeologist for years. The mysteries behind the artwork and masks that decorate the massive structures are uncovered, showing how the wealthiest culture in pre-Columbian history lived and continues to thrive today.

Suzanne Driscoll has taught at all levels, from pre-school through high school. In addition to freelance writing, she currently works with special education students at Pittsford Mendon High School in Pittsford, New York. Suzanne can be reached at suzan.javanet@rcn.com.