

RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES AND HUMAN SACRIFICE

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The priesthood among the Mayas was divided into at least four important divisions known as Ah Kin Mai, Chilan, Nacon, and Chac. Ah Kin Mai, known also as Ahau Kan Mai, was the high priest par excellence of the Mayas. He was held in very high esteem, and the whole community, both priests and laymen, contributed to his support. He officiated only at the most important religious ceremonies, and seems to have been more concerned with the scientific and astronomical side of religion. He was consulted by the nobility on important matters and tendered his advice. He was in charge of the education of candidates for the priesthood, to which as a rule the second sons of the nobility were dedicated. The education consisted of instruction in the calendar, the feasts and ceremonies, the administration of the sacraments, the occurrence and significance of lucky and ill-omened days, history, methods of divination, cures for illness, and finally reading and writing.

Under him were the Chilans, who constituted the regular priesthood. They fulfilled the regular functions of priests. They officiated at the feasts and sacrifices, administered the sacraments, preached and served as mouth-pieces for the oracles of the gods. In addition to their duties as priests and soothsayers, they also acted as medical advisers to the populace. The chief method employed was bleeding, though doubtless evil spirits were also exorcised.

A grade lower were the Nacons, whose sole function was to open the breasts of the sacrificial victims, tear out their hearts and pass them on a plate to the Chilan. The Nacons held their office permanently, but

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there was also a post of great importance which was held for a period of three years, and the holder of which was also known as Nacon. This position was, however, pre-eminently a military one, combined to a certain extent with priestly duties and abstinence. Good generalship was useless without the aid of heaven, and for that reason the functions of priest and general were blended, thus insuring, to paraphrase Napoleon's remark, that the gods were on the side of the well-led battalions.

The Chacs were old men, four in number, who were chosen afresh each time to aid the priests in their duties on the occasions of feasts and public sacrifices. Among their manifold activities was the duty of holding down victims on the altar as the Chilan plunged his knife into their breasts.

Human sacrifice, it would appear, was not a general custom in the cities of the Old Empire. Among all the scenes depicted on the monuments, only one would seem to refer to this practice. This is found at Piedras Negras, which owing to its proximity to Campeche and Tabasco may have been influenced by the customs of the Mexican immigrants. Surely human sacrifice, which must have been the culmination of the religious rites of any nation who indulged in it, would have been the theme of many sculptures if it was in fact practised. Scenes showing richly garbed priests are numerous on the monuments of Central America, and there are several representations of the practice of blood-letting by piercing the tongue and ears.

It would seem, therefore, that human sacrifice was introduced by the Nahua mercenaries who settled at Chichén Itzá. However, the practice never reached the enormous proportions it achieved in Mexico under the Aztecs.

Prisoners of war were sacrificed, and when these were not forthcoming, the community often subscribed

to buy slaves. In times of dire distress the more devoted members of the community even offered their own sons. Until the day appointed for the sacrifice the victims were well treated, although strictly guarded, and were taken through the land in triumphal procession from town to town with much feasting and dancing. Meanwhile the Chilan and all others who were to take part in the coming festival had to undergo a period of rigorous abstinence and fasting. There were various methods of sacrifice employed, of which the arrow sacrifice must have been the most awe-inspiring.

On the fatal day all gathered in the courtyard of the temple where the victim was stripped naked and his body smeared all over with a blue unguent, his only clothing consisting of a special pent-shaped head-dress. Then, armed with bows and arrows, the whole congregation danced with the victim, revolving round a large stake. Whereupon the unhappy man was raised to the stake and tied to it, while the people continued to dance round and round. The priest then approached him and with a sharp stone knife made a wound in the victim's loins, and with the blood that gushed out the priest next anointed the features of the god. At a given signal the crowd, who had never ceased to dance, raised their bows and arrows, and as each man whirled by the victim in the mad dance he discharged an arrow into his heart which had been previously marked with white, so that the arrows stood out like the stamens of some gigantic sunflower.

A more usual method of sacrifice was by removing the heart. In their first part the proceedings were similar to those of the arrow sacrifice. The victim was stripped, painted blue, crowned with the peculiar head-dress, and brought to the temple courtyard. The evil spirits were driven away, and the round sacrificial altar was also smeared with the blue ointment. Then

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the four Chacs seized the victim, placing him on his shoulders on the stone, each Chac holding one limb. The Nacon then approached with a stone knife and plunged it into the ribs just below the left breast. Quickly thrusting his hand into the aperture, he wrenched out the still palpitating heart which he placed on a plate and handed over to the Chilan. Passing swiftly to the idol near-by, the priest smeared its face with the fresh blood. This account is taken from Bishop Landa; such an operation would, on physical grounds, have been extremely difficult. Sometimes this sacrifice was made on the top platform of the temple. In this case the body of the dead man was thrown down to the junior priests below, who quickly removed the skin, save that of the hands and feet. The Chilan thereupon exchanged his robes for the skin and, clad in it, danced solemnly with the congregation.

Sometimes the bodies of the victims were buried in the courtyard of the temple, or sometimes the body was divided among the nobility and those who were near at hand, and was solemnly eaten. The Chilan reserved for himself the head, hands, and feet. In any case the victim by his method of dying became very holy. When a prisoner of war had been sacrificed, his captor retained the bones and wore them on state occasions as a mark of prowess. The sacrifices were not confined to one sex, women were equally eligible, and were in fact often sacrificed.

All these rites described above were practised by the Aztecs and other Mexican peoples at the time of the Conquest.

At Chichén Itzá a peculiar form of sacrifice was practised. Victims were thrown alive into the deep natural wells of that locality. People seem to have come from great distances to attend these ceremonies, and used to hurl their valuables into the water. Recent dredging operations have brought to light great quan-

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tities of human bones, jade, and gold, including objects which are of Costa Rican technique.

Individuals practised various forms of sacrifice by blood-letting. The most common form consisted of passing a cord into which were knotted a number of thorns, across the surface of the tongue. The blood which flowed as a result of this was smeared on the gods' faces. Cheeks too were often pierced, and ears were cut round and left hanging.

Women, although very religious, did not apparently practise these forms of sacrifice.