

Ancient Maya: Rituals and Beliefs

Background information

This session focusses on rituals and beliefs of the ancient Maya, particularly the blood-letting ritual depicted on the carved stone lintel from a temple in the city of Yaxchilan, now in modern day Mexico.

The temple dates from 709AD and was built for Lady K'ab'al Xook (pronounced Ka-bal-Shook), by her husband King Shield Jaguar. The lintel formed part of a doorway and would only have been seen by a select few as they entered the temple.

The Blood-letting ritual

The image shows King Shield Jaguar standing over his wife Lady K'ab'al Xook holding a blazing torch. She is kneeling next to him and both are wearing impressive headdresses, fine robes and elaborate jewellery made of jade, obsidian, shells and feathers from the Quetzal bird. Their attire is a clear indicator of their wealth and status within ancient Mayan society.

***A discussion of what the queen wears on state occasions may reinforce the link between dress and identity.**

K'ab'al Xook is pulling a rope of thorns or obsidian blades through her tongue. The blood runs down the rope and soaks into bark paper placed inside a bowl. This paper would then be burnt and the rising smoke used to connect to Mayan gods, in this instance the sacred serpent.

Blood-letting was an ancient tradition for the Maya, and was used to mark all important aspects of Mayan life. The combination of pain and blood enable the King and Queen to connect directly with Mayan gods and ancestors, predict the future and reinforce their right to rule.

Ideas for discussion

Rituals are performed all over the world and often include particular actions, words, symbols and objects. From fasting to putting up a Christmas tree, rituals form an important part of many people's lives. *** Can the children think of any other rituals?**

Today, blood-letting rituals may appear gruesome and unnecessary, but we need to emphasise that the ancient Maya wouldn't necessarily have seen it this way. The pain involved in the ritual is likely to have been an important aspect of the ritual itself and the blood seen as a powerful substance used to connect with gods and ancestors.

Today, many people put themselves through some degree of discomfort and pain when having their ears pierced or getting a tattoo. Human societies have developed wide ranging practices to help them understand themselves and their place in the world, blood-letting is just one of these.