**Station / Document 2** -- Maya (Kulkulkan) or Aztecs/Nahua (Quetzalcoatl)

**Maya and Nahua Methods of Sacrifice**

The Mayas and the Aztecs were like the Mixtec, since all believed that the deities or divine forces had natures (“positive” and “negative” elements that needed to be kept in balance). This is evidence of cultural diffusion. So is the idea that the gods were not infallible: they made a creation, and then decided that they made a mistake. So, the deities destroyed the earth and started over again. The Mayas believed this had happened four times, and they were living in the fourth creation. The Aztecs thought of five creations, and believed they were living in the fifth one, which they called the “Fifth Sun”. Since the gods of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica realized they had made mistakes, they also believed that they needed to correct them by sacrificing themselves. Their blood was what created and animated the universe and everything that lived in it. Therefore, following this logic the people owed their allegiance to their deities by offering their life through the vitality of blood, which they saw as the basis of life. It was because of the people’s allegiance and gratefulness to the gods’ sacrifice in creating the universe by using their own blood that the Mesoamerican people—including the Mayas and Aztecs--believed they would only receive the gods’ blessings if they offered their own human blood to those same gods. [Source: from an interview with Robert Haskett.]

The following reading section is taken from a book. It graphically describes methods and types of sacrifices offered by Maya and Nahua (Aztec).

**Human Sacrifice**

The extraction of the heart was performed with great ceremony on a special sacrificial block known as a *quauhxicalli* (‘Stone of the Eagle’). The stone was pointed in the center so that a victim thrown down on it would be forced to arch his back and thrust up his chest ready for the sacrificial knife. Daily sacrifices were common in Nahua (Aztec) society. By the fifteenth century, the Nahuas believed blood was needed daily to ensure that the sun would rise the next day. The following is a brief description of types of sacrifices used by the Maya and Nahua, referred to as Aztecs in the reading below.

Post-Conquest Spanish accounts report that naked victims were grouped at the foot of the temple steps as a priest descended from the sacred heights of the temple with an image of the god in whose honor the sacrifice was to be made. He showed the divinity to each victim, saying, “this is your god,” before the victims were led up to the sacrificial stone. Six priests of the highest rank performed each sacrifice; four to hold the victims feet, one to hold his throat, and one to cut his chest. The foremost of these priests, dressed in a splendid red tunic, and his head adorned with a helmet of yellow and green feathers, sliced the victim’s chest with a flint knife known as a *tecpatl*. He tore the heart from his chest, held it up to the sun, and then cast it steaming before the image of the god. The six priests together pushed the corpse off the sacrificial stone, and down the bloodstained temple steps. Bodies gathered at the foot of the steps in a bloody pile. Later on they were collected, prepared and eaten in a respectful and devout ritual.

**Burning**

Sacrifice by burning was mainly reserved for ceremonies in honor of the fire god, Xiuhtecuhtli, who was sometimes worshipped as Huehueteotl (“The Elder God”). The rite represented the rebirth of the god, rising of new life from death, in the same way the sun was born when the god Nanahuatzin cast himself into the flames in an act of divine self-sacrifice. Other sacrificial methods were similarly associated with particular gods. Victims killed in honour of Xipe Totec, the god of planting and vegetation, were shot with arrows so that their blood flowed into the earth like life-giving water. Indeed, Aztecs called human blood chalchihuatl (“precious water”). The corpse was then flayed and a priest would wear the skin in honour of the god, who was known as “Our Lord the Flayed One”. The rite was a celebration of the splitting of seeds that makes possible the growth of new vegetation each spring.

The Maya also used the primary Aztec method of slicing the victim’s chest and extracting his dripping heart to offer to the gods. The Priest oversaw the rite. Four aged men, called “chacs” in honour of the Maya rain god, were positioned to hold the body of the victim on the sacrificial stone, while specialist named the *nacom* cut open the victim’s chest. In the Classic Period, however, many Maya sacrificers preferred to decapitate their victims. They also cast victims into the waters of their sacred wells, or *cenotes* so that they would drown. The American archaeologist Edward H. Thompson found the skeletons of many men, women, and children in the cenote at Chichen Itza.

**Auto Sacrifice and Animals**

Auto sacrifice, or offering one’s own blood to the deities, was also practiced. The Maya used a string threaded with thorns to cut their own cheeks, lower lips, ear, tongues, and genitals. They collected blood and then smeared it on images of the god or on their own body hair. Men also used sharp knives or the spines of stingrays to cut and drag blood from their penises for offering in the same way. Among the Maya, ritual bloodletting of this kind was considered a privilege and was performed by a member of the nobility. At important times, such as the passing from one calendar cycle to another, the king and his family would perform the ritual in honour of his ancestors, and on behalf of himself, the city-state, and his people. There are also illustrations in Maya codices, on door lintels, and on ceramics of the deities themselves letting their blood in these ways. A vase unearthed at Cahal Pech near Belize depicts a figure with the appearance of the sun god drawing blood from his penis.

Among the Aztecs, the offering of one’s own blood was reserved for the priests. They would perform the rite prior to important state events, and at both auspicious and inauspicious dates in the calendar. They used maguey spines or blades of volcanic glass (obsidian) to cut their earlobes and prick their legs and arms, or they would run a thorned cord across their tongue or penis. In the rites prior to his investiture as the tlahtoani, the new ruler would offer his own blood—which was drawn from his earlobes, calves, or arms—before the shrine of Huitizilopoctli atop the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan.

Animal sacrifices were also made. The Aztecs slaughtered many quails, ripping their heads off before the representations of their deities. Quails were associated with the myth of Quetzalcoatl, in which the plumed serpent descended to the underworld at the end of previous age of the world, in order to take the bones of a previous race of humans, and use them to create a new people to inhabit the current age. The underworld god Mictlantecuhtli was angry and ordered quails to chase him. Both the Aztecs and the Maya sacrificed turkeys, dogs and, on special religious or state events, jaguars. In the Maya city-state of Copan, the remains of sixteen jaguars were placed among the foundations of the great temple.

[Source for the above: adapted from Phillips, Charles. The Complete Illustrated History Aztec and Maya. New York: Metro Books. Pages 62-63.]





For a sharing a video, consider the clip, *Maya Apocalypto Sacrifice*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hA8Bjzj-aLs

This is a graphic four minute clip illustrating (in a Hollywood way) some of what is described in the reading above.

It will be important to follow up the reading and the video with a discussion about how the topic of human sacrifice is inflammatory and can lead to stereotyping. Also, for balance, one could discuss how young men with little knowledge of international relations and history have been sent to their deaths by the thousands in wars across time (e.g. the trenches of WWI). One could look at and discuss the “Deadliest Events in U.S. History,” <https://www.history.com/news/deadliest-events-united-states>, for a comparative perspective.