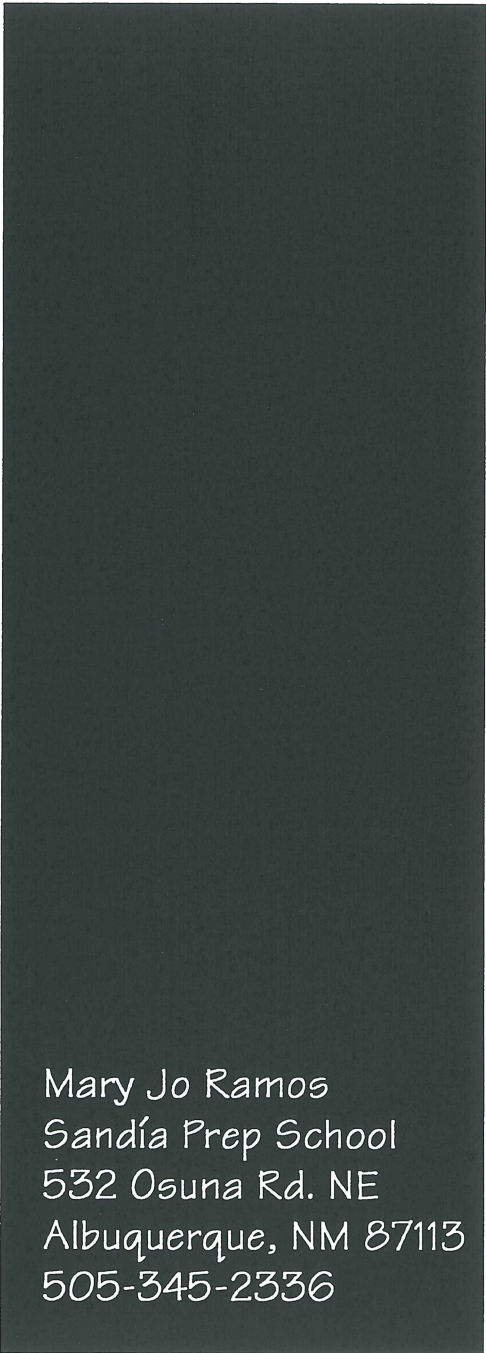




PRECOLUMBIAN MYTHS AND LEGENDS



Level: high school, grades 11 and 12
Course: Spanish 5,6, advanced placement
language, native speakers.

Rationale

The study of literature is one way to help students become better acquainted with the culture of other peoples. Since many contemporary Latin American short stories contain allusions to Middle America's ancient civilizations, students will benefit from having some knowledge of these civilizations through their myths and legends which provide insight into these people's history, values, perceptions, attitudes, ethics, tolerances, and religious beliefs.

In the Spanish classroom because of their brevity, clarity, and similarities with well-known western civilization legends and myths, a study of these stories and the people who created them, serve to improve the advanced level Spanish students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills while serving as a challenge and a rest from tedious grammar drills and lessons.

Objectives

The students will:

- * Develop Spanish language skills.
- * Become familiar with some of the precolumbian cultures, brief historical backgrounds of each one, and the conquest.

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- * Read and narrate legends and myths and compare with legends in our own culture.
- * Describe and compare the characters and gods.
- * 5. State the themes and lessons in the stories. Indicate how the characters and/or the situations project the themes and lessons.
- * Write summaries, descriptions of characters and gods, comparison papers, and original legends.
- * Explore a variety of sites on the Internet on the precolumbian civilizations especially the Maya.
- * Make codexes that illustrate and explain the students' favorite legends, myths and historical events.
- * Explain who is Rigoberta Menchú.

Unit Overview

The students explore precolumbian cultures, mainly the mayas and the aztecs, including the conquest, through history lectures, information from various videos, guest speakers, myths and legends.

Time Needed

10 weeks

Procedures

Week #1

1. Brainstorm to see what the students already know about the Maya and other precolumbian cultures. Have them formulate questions they would like to have answered. Begin lecturing for a few days on the timeline of the precolumbian cultures in Mesoamerica beginning with the Olmecs. Show slides and videos available. Use maps, articles from the National Geographic and other magazines, books with pictures, etc..

Explore cool sites on the Internet with them. Use only Spanish. Keep it simple - when and where they lived, describe their pyramids, name their foods and main gods, what were they like, how were they organized, why did they have human sacrifices, why was the letting of blood important to them, what are glyphs and what information do these contain, what was their math like, what did they know about astronomy, why did they abandon their great cities at the end of the Classic Period. A lot of the resources are in English and the discussion can be in Spanish.

2. Discuss the precolumbian cultures up to the mayas leaving the aztecs and the conquest for the second part of the unit.

3. The students take notes throughout the historical and cultural presentations. After a while they will become familiar with a lot of vocabulary. A list can be given at the beginning, if necessary, for words like temple, pyramid, arqueology, tomb, artifacts, to bury, kings, priests, blood, sacrifices, codexes, etc... Most are cognates and easily recognized by students in these advanced levels.

4. The students should be able to:

- * describe what a regular day in the life of a common Maya, man or woman, a slave, a priest, a merchant, etc.. would be like.
- * list and explain the various theories for why the Mayas abandoned their fabulous cities at the end of their classic period.
- * name the dates and explain briefly what the three periods of the Maya civilization were like.
- * locate on a map the areas of the Olmecs, Teotihuacanos and the main cities of the Maya.
- * draw a timeline indicating the time periods of the Maya, Olmecs, Toltecs, Teotihuacanos, and Aztecs.
- * name their 2 most important gods and explain their importance.

Weeks #2, #3, #4

1. Have the students list 3 things they would take with them if they had to leave their homes tonight for good. Students will practice use of the conditional (I would take) and then explain why they would take these things. List these things on the board. Discuss what these objects tell us about our society.
2. Discuss the artifacts seen in the videos. Bring some artifacts to the classroom if available and brainstorm what they tell us about these societies. Discuss what is considered of value in their society and compare with the objects we value as discussed the day before.
3. Discuss differences between myths and legends. Indicate recurring motifs or elements in legends they already know such as the use of gods, heroes, animals, tests someone must pass, time periods, places, themes, morals, and magical resources.
4. Prepare vocabulary lists for each legend to be read. Assign stories to be read at home and discuss each one in 2 or 3 days. A vocab quiz, a written summary done in class or as homework is necessary after each story.
5. When discussing a story, the students need to talk in Spanish about the title, place and time, the conflict, the plot, the outcome, the characters, the theme(s), lessons, stylistic resources, and their personal opinions of each story. They compare recurring themes as they show up in the stories; compare characters and events; and, list the messages or lessons the stories offer. They indicate as they come up the motifs and elements that make them a legend or a myth.
6. We finish our discussions trying to indicate what we think these cultures were probably like, their worries, interests, beliefs, and everyday lives based on the stories we have read. We compare these societies with ours and others with which the students might be acquainted. Inevitably the discussions tend to compare legends the students already know with the ones we are reading. The precolumbian legends I like to use in class that are in Spanish are explained below.

Weeks #5, #6, #7, #8

1. A written and oral test can be given after reading the myths of the creation and lecturing on the Olmecs, Toltecs, Teotihuacanos, the 3 periods of the Maya, and the reasons for the abandonment of their great cities.

A second oral and written test can be given after studying the Aztecs, the Conquest, and reading more legends and myths. Guest speakers can add a lot at this point.

2. In the meantime the students write an original legend or myth. Some of my students wrote about the creation of a certain natural phenomena they have questioned themselves about, the creation of colors, the birth of baseball, how the bear lost its tail, how the nightingale received its voice, etc... The legends are at least 200 words long. The first paragraph contains the time, place and conflict (what is out of order?). They are graded on content and grammar. They write rough drafts and a final draft. They are allowed to rewrite the legend with my corrections to raise their final grade by 10 points. Some legends can be published on the Internet, others in the school literary review, and others in *Albricias*, a publication for members of the National Spanish Honor Society.

Weeks #9, #10

While each student has a 15 minute interview with me, -the oral test on the aztecs, their legends, and the conquest-, the other students begin working on their codexes in class. These have 6 pages folded like an accordion full of information and colored drawings and/or illustrations. Long strips of 11 inches wide paper cut from a large roll of butcher paper are perfect. The front and back are made of construction papers decorated with sacred animal designs, the sun and the moon, corn, pyramids, etc... The activity book *Ancient Mexico* provides many ideas. A lot of writing in Spanish is involved here which needs to be turned in to me as assignments, checked, and rewritten. This can begin early in the unit. The pages may contain the following:

Page #1 - Explain the importance of 3 food products or objects in precolumbian cultures. Write 3 brief sentences per item and illustrate.

Page #2 - Explain briefly (5-6 sentences) and illustrate one major historical event.

Page #3 - Summarize (5-6 sentences) and illustrate an Aztec or Maya myth or legend.

Page #4 - Summarize (5-6 sentences) and illustrate another Aztec or Maya legend or myth.

Page #5 - Illustrate 3 gods and explain their significance in precolumbian civilizations.

Page #6 - Illustrate 3 sacred animals and explain their significance in precolumbian civilizations.

The codexes are graded on Presentation, Content, Vocabulary, and Grammar. They need to be in on time, very neat, roughdrafts of written explanations need to be checked ahead of time, and illustrations can be drawn or traced from coloring books. The codexes cannot be done on a computer unless a font with fancy old handwriting is used.

Legends and Myths

1. The creation of the sun and the moon according to the Maya is found in "El sol y la luna" in *Historias de México*, G. Barlow and W. Stivers, Passport Books, NTC Publishing Group, 1995, p.9. It is also found in *México, Civilizaciones y Cultura*, Luis Leal, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971, p. 47. According to this myth, the sun and the moon were two gods, one coward but strong and the other weak but brave, who offered themselves in sacrifice to provide light to the world.
2. "La creación del hombre" according to the Maya, in *Spanish for Mastery II*, Valette & Valette, DC Heath & Co. 1984, p. 237. It is also in *México, Civilizaciones y Cultura*, p. 21. This myth tells about the creation of man and woman from corn.
3. The story about how the rabbit got its long ears according to the Maya is in "Las orejas del conejo" in *Historias de México*, p.9.
4. "El enano de Uxmal", also in *Historias de México*, p.27, tells the story of the dwarf who would be king and about the overnight construction of the Pyramid of the Magician in Uxmal.
5. "The myth of Quetzalcóatl", the feathered serpent, is found in *México, Civilizaciones y Cultura*, p. 20. Quetzalcóatl, or Kukulkán for the Maya, is the good god in many ancient civilizations. He had left Mexico towards the east but promised to return. Moctezuma mistook Hernán Cortés for this god with tragic consequences. More about him can be found in *Warriors, Gods and Spirits from Central and South American Mythology*, Douglas Gifford, Peter Bedrick Books, NY, 1993.
6. "The birth of Huitzilopochtli" narrated in "Dora", by Roberto García in the Level 3 Reader *Viajes*, ScottForesman & Co., 1989. Huitzilopochtli is the sun and war god born of Coatlicue, goddess of the Earth. He is born fully dressed to do battle against his sister, Coyolxauqui, goddess of the Moon.
7. "The founding of Tenochtitlán" is in "El origen del nopal" in *Leyendas Latinoamericanas*, National Textbook Co., 1977. It is also found in "El águila y la serpiente México, Civilizaciones y Cultura, p. 26. This is the legend of the pilgrimage of the aztecs from Aztlán to the promised land which is now Mexico City.
8. "Popocatepetl e Iztaccíhuatl". This legend explains the formation of 2 volcanoes near Mexico City which resemble a woman in a sleeping position and a man kneeling by her. The students can read and compare 2 versions of this legend. One is called "Los novios" in *Historias de México*, p.21, and the other is in the Level 2 Reader *Fuentes*, Luz Nuncio Schick, ScottForesman & Co., 1989, pp.39-41. It is also in *México, Civilizaciones y Cultura*, p. 8.
9. The legend of Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor who was tortured by Cortés and is considered today a national hero, is found in "Un lecho de rosas", in *Historias de México*, p.35.
10. "La Llorona" is a legend with several versions. I like to tell the one where Marina Malinche is the main character who drowns her children when Cortés, their father, decides to send them to Spain to be educated. Information on Marina Malinche can be found *México, Civilizaciones y Cultura*, p. 31. A New Mexican version of this legend is in *La Llorona: The Weeping Woman*, Joe Hayes, Cinco Puntos Press, TX, 1989.

11. "La Virgen de Guadalupe" is found in México, *Civilizaciones y Cultura*, p. 14. Another version of "La Virgen de Guadalupe" for comparison and to give a more complete view of the forced conversion of the indigenous people, is in *Memoria del Fuego I: Los Nacimientos*, by Eduardo Galeano, 14a ed., Siglo XXI Editores, 1982. This legend is also found in *Historias de México*, p.47.

Bibliography, Resources and Internet addresses

Maps in textbooks of Mexico and ancient Maya sites in the Yucatán and Central America.

History books: Perspectivas culturales de Hispanoamérica, Juan Kattan-Ibarra, National Textbook Co., 1989; and, México, Civilizaciones y Cultura, Luis Leal, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971.

Legends and Myths from a variety of sources. I suggest the ones mentioned above.

National Geographic magazines Vol. 158, No. 6, Dec 80; Vol. 176, no. 4, Oct 89; Vol.184, no.5, Nov 93; and Vol. 187, no. 2, Feb 95. Their video *The Lost Kingdom of the Maya* is spectacular and very informative.

Long paper, markers, scissors, copies of artifacts, glue sticks, construction paper, etc...for making codexes. Figures from A Coloring Book of Incas, Aztecs and Mayas-and Other Precolumbian Peoples, Bellerophon Books, Santa Barbara, CA,1993.

"Los productos de la tierra", Spanish for Mastery II, DC Heath & Co.,1984, pp. 233-5.

Ancient Mexico, Mira Bartok & Christine Ronan, ScottForesman, 1993. This is an activity book with maps, timelines, information, stencils, myths, legends and illustrations of the sacred animals.

Mayaquest

For info through E-mail: Mayaquest@InforMNsk12.mn.us

World Wide Web: URL: <http://www.mecc.com/mayaquest.html>

Mexico: Arte, Cultura y Folkore: URL: <http://www.udg.mx/cultfolk/mexico.html>

"Aztec Warfare:Imperial Expansion and Political Control," Ross Hassig, Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1988. URL: http://www.msstate.edu/Archives/History/Latin_America/Mexico/mexico.html

Aztec History and Origins of Mexico

URL: http://kuhttp.cc.ukans.edu:80/~marc/geography/latinam/mexico/mex_main.html

Mayan Epigraphy, Rigoberta Menchú, Maya People (myths):

URL: http://ukanaix.cc.ukans.edu/~marc/native_spanish.html

URL: <http://ukanaix.cc.ukans.edu/~marc/geography/latinam/mexico/guate.html>

The Fall of the Maya, video from Films from the Humanities and Sciences, PO Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543-2053.

Teotihuacán, E. Matos Moctezuma, Carlo Demichelis, La aventura humana, Mex., 1990.

Los Olmecas, R. Piña Chan, Carlo Demichelis, La aventura humana, Mex., 1990.

Pictures can be found in Yucatán and the Maya Civilization, M. Wiesenthal, Geocolor, SA, Barcelona, Spain.

Chapter 6 "Traditional Literature," Children's Literature in the Elementary School, Charlotte Huck, S. Hepler, J. Hickman, Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1987, pp.250-318. This book offers invaluable information for the teachers about legends and myths which will help him/her guide the students through the components of these stories and their subsequent creative writing process.

For background on different cultural perspectives which will occur throughout the unit, see Understanding Cultural Differences, by Edward T. Hall and Midred Reed Hall, Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1989.

"Secrets of the Maya" in Time Magazine, Aug 9, 1993, pp.44-50.

"The Decipherment of the Ancient Maya", Atlantic Monthly, Sept 1991, p. 87.