

Egyptian and Mayan Creation Myths in Context

Penelope Kyle

Abstract

The Ancient Mayan and Egyptian civilizations were extremely complex societies with highly developed systems of belief. Religion was very important to each society and affected every aspect of their people's lives. When comparing the Egyptian creation story of Atum with the Mayan creation story found in the Popol Vuh in addition to each civilization's beliefs, many interesting similarities and differences are found. Some of these similarities and differences are highlighted: the earth coming from water, the creation of man, the stability of the universe, and the importance of the Nile versus maize in each culture. These similarities and differences become understandable when viewed in the context of each society's social structure, everyday life, environment, and religion.

The Ancient Egyptian and Mayan Civilizations were extremely complex societies with highly developed systems of belief. Each civilization had a very different culture, social structure, and natural environment. Ancient Egypt was isolated, highly religious and ceremonial, had defined but flexible social classes, a wealthy society, and a predictable environment. Ancient Mayans, however, were heavily influenced by surrounding peoples. They were more ritualistic, had a rigid social structure, and a diverse unpredictable environment. Despite these differences, there are some very interesting similarities in each civilization's creation myth and beliefs. They were both polytheistic and in each creation story the Earth came out of the water. Many of their common beliefs correlated with universal themes that were present in many of the early civilizations. In addition to these similarities there are very important differences. Specifically, the Egyptian and Mayan stories for the creation of man and their religions focus on the Nile River and Maize, respectively. It is important to look at each culture and their individual creation myth in the context of environment and social structure to discover why these similarities and differences existed.

Ancient Egyptian Culture Brief

Social Structure

Egypt was a territorial state with many different cities and regions, called Nomes, all under the central rule of the Pharaoh. The social classes in Egypt were divided very neatly. At the top was the Pharaoh. Below the Pharaoh were various levels of nobles and at the bottom were the peasants who worked the land. (Casson 1975: 11).

The Egyptian priests were in charge of the study of science, progress of arts, religious ceremonies, administration of justice, raising taxes, and all branches of civilian administration (Champollion

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1971: 47) In Egyptian society there were many laws. It was every citizen's responsibility to make sure the laws were kept, and if someone knowingly allowed a crime to happen, the witness was also guilty of a crime. The Egyptians were very strict and many crimes were punishable by death (Champollion 1971: 11-12).

There were many professions available to Egyptians such as scribe, soldier, engineer, and doctor, and in the Egyptian society it was possible to move up or down the social classes. (Casson 1975: 53-67). The role of the soldier was very important in Egypt because the military was essential to protect and expand their already wealthy civilization, which was highly desirable to surrounding people and who often attacked their civilization (Casson 1975: 75). The queen, and women in general, were important as helpers of men. If there was no male heir the daughter of the Pharaoh could become Pharaoh. Women also shared domestic authority and had the right to one third of the land of their fathers and of their husbands (Casson 1975: 29; Champollion 1971: 25).

Everyday life

To Egyptians, marriage and family were very important. There were laws to insure there were rights and justice within marriage. Egyptian parents of all social classes valued their children and were active in their children's lives. An ancient papyrus that a father wrote to his children was found telling his sons to be good to their wives. The children carried their father's name, so having sons was highly desired (Casson 1975: 17).

As a whole, Egyptians were a healthy people (Champollion 1971: 77). They ate a variety of foods such as fruit, wine, bread, cakes, and meat from goats and cows (Champollion 1971: 84). If they did become sick they had various forms of medicines and doctors, and healing was performed by priests or magicians. Often if a person were to become sick they would go to the doctor, priest, magician, and take medicines to insure their recovery (Casson 1975: 24).

Environment

The Ancient Egyptian environment was very consistent and because of this, the Egyptians thought the world was "stable and benign" (Casson 1975: 5). In the Nile valley the sun was always shining and the Nile River had very predictable flood patterns. The Nile River was the basis for all things in the Egyptians view. They considered the Nile "most holy" and depended completely on the river and its regularity to give them the water and the fresh soil that made agriculture possible (Champollion 1971: 5). Their world revolved so much around the Nile that their seasons were determined by its flood pattern. They had three seasons: "inundation", when the flood waters came, "emergence", when the waters receded, "drought", when the river was low (Casson 1975: 35). When the flood was too high or too low it affected their crops and meant death and famine for the Egyptian people (Champollion 1971: 7-8).

General Religion

Before Egypt became a large civilization there were many small tribes. Each of these tribes participated in animal worship and had their own animal god. As Egyptian society grew and the people began to have more understanding and control over their surroundings, animal worship moved to gods that took human form. Ancient Egyptian art shows evidence of the animals used to represent the gods. Many of the Egyptian gods had horns or animal heads. One example is Anubis, the guardian of the tombs who had the head of a jackal (Casson 1975:80). Religion was deeply ingrained in all aspects of Ancient Egyptian life because they did not see a difference between the natural, super-natural, and social worlds (Casson 1975: 87; Trigger 1993: 253). Egyptians also believed that everything happened as a calculated decision by the gods.

Inclusion was a central part of Egyptian religion. When Egypt began to grow and acquire new tribes of people they simply made a place for the new gods with the existing deities. Each Nome in Ancient Egypt had, and kept, their own deity. Regardless of how many gods were brought into their religion, however, the Pharaoh was always a god, and represented the Egyptian people in the council of the gods. As the Egyptian civilization progressed, their religion began to change. Different gods were viewed as most powerful at different times, often based on where the Egyptian capital was located at that time (Casson 1975: 83). Some of the gods were worshipped in a cult-like way and only their priests and select elites participated in ceremonies (Spalinger 2006: 258-260).

Creation Myth

The creation myth for the Egyptians changed over time as the empire acquired more Nomes. The creation story to be used in analysis for this paper is the tale of Atum. The location for Egyptian creation is credited to Heliopolis, known as the "City of the Sun" (Taylor 2001). According to this creation myth in the beginning there was only a vast area of swirling watery chaos called Nu. Out of these chaotic waters rose Atum, the sun god. It is said that Atum created himself through his own thoughts and will. In the watery chaos, there was no place for him to stand so the floods receded and the land appeared.

Atum was all alone so he chose to mate with his shadow to make more gods. Atum then gave birth to two children. First he spit out his son, Shu, and then he vomited his daughter, Tefnut. Shu symbolizes the air and the principles of life while Tefnut symbolizes the rain and principles of order. The three stayed in the watery chaos of Nu, but after a while Atum, Shu, and Tefnut were separated. When they found each other, Atum wept with tears of joy. Where his tears hit the ground men grew, so Atum began to create the world. After some time, Shu and Tefnut had a son, Geb, the god of the earth. Then they had a daughter, Nut, who was the goddess of the sky. Geb and Nut then had four children: Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys (Taylor 2001).

In one variation Isis and Osiris are given the task of civilizing man. Men were then taught to communicate with each other and the gods gave them the names of all the objects. The gods also

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invented art and writing, organized the government, religion and all the ceremonies. The gods then introduced man to astronomy, geometry, weights and measures, and gave them music (Champollion 1971: 64).

The story includes the myth of Osiris. It begins when Osiris started spreading law and order across the land and taught his people to farm. Osiris was a powerful Pharaoh and the people liked him. His brother Seth was jealous so he killed Osiris and cut him into pieces and scattered the pieces throughout Egypt.

Isis, the wife and sister to Osiris, found all of the pieces of his body and put him back together. Isis preserved his body with linen bandages and used her magic to breathe life back into Osiris. Isis and Osiris then had a son Horus and Osiris became the god-king of the underworld. Horus avenged his father by killing Seth. Then he became the Pharaoh and ruled over the people (Taylor 2001). Therefore, every Egyptian Pharaoh was the god Horus, and when the Pharaoh died he became Osiris. Horus is also the god of the sun when it is in the sky, and Osiris is the god of the sun when it is in the underworld.



(Osiris and Atum found in Nefertari's tomb)

<http://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/pschmid1/essays/Nefertari/osiris.atum.jpeg>

Ancient Mayan Culture Brief

Social structure

The Ancient Mayan Civilization was not united as a territorial state, but was a series of city states, or polities. These city states were in constant warfare, but never really took over other cities because they believed that would upset the order of the world. At the top of the Mayan social structure was the king, or *k'uhul ajaw*, who was theoretically divine and all-powerful. The social system was determined by tracing both sides of a person's lineage back to ancient ancestors. Those who could trace both sides of their lineage were the noble class, below them were the commoners and at the bottom were slaves. There was no movement among social classes aside from slaves who could be freed (Coe 1966: 146). Often the king of a defeated polity would be sacrificed, but the bloodline would remain in power to maintain the royal dynasty. The king had many different duties. He made policies for both his state and regarding surrounding peoples and made decisions with the assistance of a state council. In addition the king performed both public and private ceremonies, in which he would dance, give his own blood for a sacrifice, and go into trances to show that he was the mediator between the supernatural and the natural worlds. (Sharer 2006: 89-96).

The nobles held high political offices, were high ranking warriors, and were the craftsmen, merchants, and rich farmers. The noble class also included the priests. The priests were in charge of rituals, sacrifices, astronomical observation, chronological calculations, hieroglyphic writings, religious instruction, and more. Below the noble class were the commoners who were mostly the farmers, low ranking warriors, and other workers (Coe 1999: 133; Sharer 2006: 8, 90-94). The warrior role was very important in Mayan culture because the ancient Mayans were fanatical about war. They were constantly battling with other polities over land boundaries and lineage honor (Coe 1999: 134). In Mayan society the wife of the king was very important. Women could even become the *k'uhul ajaw* when there was no male heir (Sharer 2006: 89). Women also participated in duties of the home, in addition to weaving and making pottery (Sharer 2006: 10).

Everyday Life

In Mayan civilization the family group was important and the higher nobles had a more extended family unit due to the importance of lineage. The noble classes had arranged marriages to insure good lineage for their children, but had an incest taboo for marrying patrilineal relatives. They had a patrilineal society for property, but children carried both parents' surnames in the noble class (Coe 1966: 143-145).

Where the Egyptians had the Nile, the Ancient Mayan had maize. Their diet consisted mainly of maize, in addition to beans, squash, sweet potatoes, cacao beans, turkeys, wild game, and fish. The majority of the population's lives revolved around the clearing of land, planting and harvesting of

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maize in addition to the rituals associated with each. In their households they had kitchens and gardens in which they grew fruits and vegetables (Coe 1966: 140; Thompson 1954: 20-24).

The Ancient Mayans were not a secluded civilization. They had strong influences from surrounding peoples and traded with them. Even the Mayan civilization itself was not united. They not only lacked political unity, but also they spoke different dialects of Mayan (Coe 1966: 47; Thompson 1954: 28)

Environment

The Mayan Civilization was located completely in the tropical region of Central America. Although they were in the tropics their territory had a variety of weather due to changes in elevation and ocean currents. The Mayan territory is divided into three main regions: southern, central, and northern (Coe 1966: 26-27). The southern region is highlands and mountains, with the soil of volcanic rock. The central region is in lowlands and is now a vast tropical forest, and the northern region is also lowlands, but considerably dryer due to the highly permeable limestone soil and less rain fall. The central region gets a great deal of rain, as much as ten feet per year in some places, but these rains are somewhat unpredictable (Thompson 1954: 19-26).

There is evidence that the Mayans farmed in all three regions, but the methods and crops in each were appropriately different. In the southern highlands they practiced the slash and burn method of agriculture with the length of approximately ten years farming, ten years re-growth (Coe 1966: 20). In the central region they practiced three different types of farming: slash and burn, terracing, and artificially raised fields (Adams 1981: 1457-1460; Willey 1982: 263-264). The main crop in the southern and central regions was maize; the northern region primarily grew cotton (Coe 1966: 27).

The heart of the Mayan Civilization was located in the central lowlands in the area that is currently thought to be uninhabitable because of its lack of usable natural resources and difficulty of the natural environment (Coe 1966: 26; Thompson 1954: 25). New evidence shows, however, that the wetland composition of the Mayan lowlands changed between 400 BC and 250 AD, which affected some of the cities built early in Ancient Mayan history and caused them to be abandoned even in the time of the Mayan civilization (Dunning 2002: 268-270).

General Religion

Mayan religion like many aspects of their culture was influenced by the peoples surrounding them (Coe 1966: 148). It is thought that Mayan religious beliefs stayed fairly constant throughout their history. This thought is supported by a recent finding by an archaeologist, Dr. William Saturno, which showed a depiction of the Mayan creation story dating from 100 BC (Saturno 2006: 1281-1283).

The Mayans believed that the world was in a cycle; everything has happened and will happen again to some extent. They believed there were multiple creations and destructions of the world and we are currently in the fifth age (Thompson 1954: 226; Coe 1966: 149; Trigger 1993: 91-92). Mayans did not separate the natural, super-natural, and social worlds, therefore their kings spoke with the gods and were put in place by the gods, and the cycles of the earth were at the will of the gods (Trigger 1993: 87).

Religion was very important to the Mayans and they were very ritualistic. They had specific calendar days to perform the various rituals and every observation had to be done in a very specific way regarding the color, direction, and numbers associated with each ritual. In addition, human and animal sacrifices and bloodletting were a part of most rituals (Coe 1966: 153-154).

Creation Myth

The Mayan's creation myth is taken from the Popol Vuh. The Popol Vuh may have been directly translated from the written hieroglyphic creation myth into the Roman alphabet, but it is possible that all the original writings were destroyed prior to the translation. It is estimated to have been written in alphabetic form between 1554-1558, but the only surviving copy of the Quiche text is with a Spanish translation by Francisco Ximenez dating to the early 1700's (Tedlock 1996: 27, 56).

In the beginning, there was nothing but the sky. Under the sky was only a calm sea. In the sea was the god named Plumed Serpent. In the sky was the god named Heart of the Sky. In the early dawn the gods of the sea and the gods of the sky talked. They came up with the idea of earth and plants. There was to be 'sowing' when the seeds are sown and 'dawning' when they sprout. They sowed the sun, moon, and stars, which dawn after their travels through the underworld. Humans are sown in the womb and dawn at birth. They are then sown in the earth at death and dawn as stars in the night sky.

The thought of humans was as old as the earth, but humans were difficult to make. The gods wanted humans that would walk, work, multiply, talk, and worship them according to the calendar. The gods' first attempt at man failed. They created animals of all kinds and told them where to live and how to act, but the animals could not talk, they could only squawk, chatter, and howl. They could not call the names of the gods and praise them, so the gods made the animals to serve, be killed, and eaten. In the gods second attempt they made people out of mud, but that also failed. Those beings could not walk or reproduce, or even hold their shape, so they dissolved into nothing.

After talking again the gods decided to get some help before trying to create humans the third time. They asked an elderly husband and wife, Xpiyacoc, the divine match maker and Xmucane, the divine midwife, for help. The gods asked if they should use wood to make humans, and Xpiyacoc and Xmucane approved. The result of the wooden creations was a being that looked, talked, and multiplied similar to humans. But those creatures' hearts and minds were empty. They did not follow the calendar and did not call to the gods. Heart of Sky flooded those creatures and brought

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torrential rains and sent monsters to harass them. The dogs, turkeys, and even their tools came to life and attacked the wood creatures for the horrible treatment they had received. The ones that survived became the monkeys of the forest which, they believed, is why monkeys are so similar to man (Tedlock 1996: 30-32, 63-73).

At this time the sun had not yet appeared. The gods found out about some yellow and white maize that was in a mountain. Xmucane, the divine midwife, ground the maize very fine and mixed in some water. This created the human flesh. From this four men were made: Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and Dark Jaguar. These humans were everything the gods wanted and more. The humans were too powerful though, so the gods fogged their vision so they were not as intelligent as the gods. Then they made wives for each of the men. These are the first ancestors of the Mayan people. They multiplied, but wanted to be lords over the earth, so they went to the city. In this city they each got a patron deity. Then they left the city to find a place to make their own. When they were on the mountain called Place of Advice the morning star came, and then the sun himself finally rose. The sun turned the patron deities into stone along with some of the animals. The people were happy to see the sun, but they remembered their 'brothers' still in the city and were sad. Therefore the sun serves to unite all the people, because they all shared the same calendar. The myth continues and the population continues to grow and eventually rises to splendor (Tedlock 1996: 43-55, 145- 175).



(Detail of San Bartolo depiction of Mayan creation story dating from 150 B.C.)

<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2005/12.15/03-maya.html>

Comparison of Mayan and Egyptian Creation Stories and Core Beliefs

Many early civilizations have very similar themes in their beliefs and creation myths. The Mayans and Egyptians fit in with many of universal religious themes. Both had a form of polytheistic belief, they believed that the four cardinal directions had important meaning to the flow of life, their world was flat and they were the center of it, they depended on the gods and the gods depended on them. Although they had these common themes, there were differences in some aspects of the themes and they had additional beliefs that were not similar. Some examples of their uncommon beliefs are how the gods made man, the stability of their cosmos, and the importance of particular gods. The differences in their beliefs may be explained by the differences in their environments and social structures, while their similarities may be explained by how simply they were able to make sense of the natural happenings of their worlds.

One similarity in their creation myths is that before creation there was water and out of the water came the earth. This similarity is probably due to the fact that water is very important to all civilizations. Without water there cannot be life; therefore it makes a great deal of sense that before there was anything else there was water. In Egypt the Nile River is the source of water, and the creation of the earth is thought to have risen out of the water at the city Heliopolis, which is located on the Nile River (Taylor 2001). For the Mayans, water came in the form of rain, in addition to many lakes, rivers, and wetlands. One interesting difference is that in the Egyptians' creation myth the water is chaotic, while in the Mayan creation myth the water is calm. This is interesting because in Egypt the Nile River has a predictable flood pattern while the Mayans had to contend with hurricanes and torrential rains.

Another obvious similarity is that the gods created man, but the creation of man in each story is quite different. There was obviously a need in all civilizations to explain how man came into being. In the Egyptian creation myth man is somewhat of a byproduct. Once people are there the gods figure they better create a world for them to live in and teach them how to be civilized, but it does not really seem like an intentional act. In the Mayan creation myth a great deal of attention is paid to the creation of man. First they created the world for them to live in, and then they made several attempts to create man. The gods knew what they wanted men to do: walk, work, multiply, talk, and worship them according to the calendar, and they were not satisfied until they had the kind of men that would do this. Perhaps a reason for this difference is that the Egyptians did not know of any other people for a very long time. They thought they were the only people in the world so they did not need a grand story of how great they are as people. In contrast the Mayans knew and were heavily influenced by other people such as the Olmec (Coe 1966: 47). Their creation story is specifically the creation of the Quiche people. They mention other people and even cities early in their creation story, but these were not the people created by their gods.

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These differing myths on human creation are important to the social structure of each civilization. In the Egyptian social structure the Pharaohs are descendents of the gods, and their creation story explains how that happened. In the Mayan social structure the kings and nobility could all trace their lineage back to the first four men and women that were created by the gods.

One of the major differences in the Egyptian's and Mayan's beliefs was their view on the stability of the universe. The Mayans believed that the universe was cyclical and the world had been created and destroyed four times (Coe 1966:149). They also believed that this current cycle would end and the world would be destroyed again. The Egyptian's beliefs were rather different. They believed in *maat*, the eternal and unchanging order of the universe (Casson 1975: 83). They knew bad things happened, such as floods, droughts, and the death of the Pharaoh, but they believed that once *maat* had been restored everything would be right again. The environment and political structure may be the reason behind this differing view on the universe. The Mayan civilization consisted of many city states constantly warring with one another over boundaries and resources, and their environment varied from mountains to tropical forests to desert with unpredictable storms. The Egyptian civilization was a territorial state, and while there were invaders, Egypt usually won. In addition to their political structure, the Nile Valley's environment was extremely consistent. The sun was always shining and the Nile's flood cycle was predictable and appreciated.

Another difference between Egyptian and Mayan belief was their deities. While they both had many similar gods such as the sun god, and other nature gods, they also had important differences. One of the main differences is the Egyptian Civilization's focus on the Nile River verses the Mayans' focus on maize. They referred to the Nile River as "most holy," and they thought of it as the gift of the gods (Champollion 1971: 5). In addition, it was considered a god itself and had its own priests. Everything in their lives revolved around the Nile River and its flood pattern, not only in their daily activities, but also in their religious ceremonies. They had special ceremonies that were based on the inundation of the Nile and the following emergence and planting of their crops. The same is true of the Mayans and maize. There was a Maize god and the maize crop was the gift of the gods. In addition the gods used maize to make the flesh of man. Their lives revolved around maize: clearing/building fields, planting, constant caring for, and harvest of the crop. In addition, their major ceremonies and ritualistic sacrifices took place at land clearing, planting and harvest times.

It is clear that the Ancient Egyptian and Mayan Civilizations were extremely complex societies with very different cultures, social structures, and natural environments. While Egyptians were isolated, Mayans were heavily influenced by surrounding peoples. The Egyptians were more flexible both socially and religiously, and the Egyptian environment was much more stable and predictable.

Perhaps because of these vast distinctions there are notable differences in each civilization's beliefs and creation stories. Specifically, the Egyptians' emphasis on the Nile River and Mayans' focus on Maize, both religiously and socially. In addition to these differences each civilization's religious beliefs and creation stories had some very interesting similarities. As discussed, they were both polytheistic and believed the earth came out of the water. It is true that many of their common beliefs follow the universal themes that were present in many of the early civilizations. Yet it is also clear that by looking at each culture and their individual creation myth in the context of the environment and social structure it can be revealed why these more specific similarities and differences may have existed. It is clear that many aspects of each civilization's creation myths and beliefs become understandable in the context of their environment and culture.

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Penny is a senior, majoring in General Studies. She wrote this paper for ANTH-P398 with Dr. VanderVeen.