

Year 4 Unit 4 History *Maya Civilization* Teacher Subject Knowledge Guide**Maya or Mayan: which is correct?**

Many sources use the word 'Mayan' to describe the people who we know once inhabited the lands of Central America but the correct word to use is 'Maya'. The only time we should ever use the word 'Mayan' is when we are referring to their languages. We would say 'Mayan languages' but would refer to the people as 'Maya people', their cities as 'Maya cities', their art as 'Maya art', their pyramids as 'Maya pyramids' and their calendars as 'Maya calendars'.

Any sources which use the word Mayan in any way other than to describe the languages spoken are likely to be unreliable.

**What is the difference between the Maya, the Aztecs and the Incas?**

The people known as the Maya, the Aztecs and the Incas are often confused but they were in fact very different. The table below outlines some of the key differences between the peoples:

	Maya	Aztec	Inca
Location	They were mainly settled on and around the Yucatan peninsula in central America.	They lived in the Valley of Mexico in Central Mexico.	The empire was in the Andes mountains of South America.
Dates	c. 1800 BC to 1500 AD	c.1200 to 1520 AD	c. 1200 to 1530 AD
Capital	Multiple including Tikal, Chichen Itza, Copan and Palenque	Tenochtitlan	Cuzco
Politics	They lived in separate city-states and were not united politically. Each city-state had an independent ruler.	They were ruled by a single emperor whose main purpose was to conquer lands and lead in wars.	They were ruled by Sapa Inca, the emperor who had absolute power over the civilization.
Religion	They had many different gods but did not worship one more than the others.	They had different gods but worshipped Huitzilopochtli as their main god.	They had different gods but worshipped Inti as their main god.
Farming	Cleared land for farms, created terraces, drained marshlands.	Created 'floating gardens' made of mats topped with soil on the swamplands.	Terrace farming in hillsides, constructed irrigation canals.
Decline	Many theories about abandonment of cities in 900AD. Spanish invasion in 1500s. Maya people still live today.	Defeated by Spanish invaders led by Hernan Cortes in 1500s.	Defeated by Spanish invaders led by Francisco Pizarro in 1500s. Smallpox spread to people.

Do the Maya people still live today?

The Maya today number around six million people. Some of the largest Maya groups are found in Mexico and include the Yucatecs (300,00), the Tzotzil (120,000) and the Tzeltal (80,000). The Yucatecs live on the warm and tropical Yucatan Peninsula and the Tzotzil and the Tzeltal live in the highlands of Chiapas. Other large Maya groups include the Quiche and Cakchiquel of Guatemala, the Chontal and Chol Maya of Mexico and the Kekchi Maya of Belize. Each of the 31 Maya groups throughout Central America speaks a different language although all belong to the Mayan language family.



Many Maya communities have succeeded in preserving their identity and their ways. This is partly because, throughout their history, the Maya have been confined to a single unbroken area including parts of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and the western edges of Honduras and El Salvador. The Maya have managed to maintain many of the old ways in agriculture and trade. Like their ancestors, most Maya households engage in corn farming and many produce crafts, such as woven textiles, for sale in markets. Unlike their pre-Conquest ancestors, however, many of the men must also leave their villages for the lowlands where they work part of the year on coffee and cotton plantations.

The Maya are presented with modern-day challenges due to tourism. In addition to this, Maya regions have also been subjected to intense political upheaval in recent decades, with significant loss of life and economic devastation being consequences. While many Maya have been killed during civil wars, others from countries such as Guatemala have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in countries such as Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The Maya are still very much discriminated against and have struggled to gain their rights.

What were the three Maya calendars?

The Maya people had three different calendars. These are known as the Tzolk'in (the sacred calendar), the Haab (the solar calendar) and the Long Count.

The Tzolk'in is a 260-day calendar split into 13 groups of 20 days. The calendar approximates the human gestation period as well as the time it takes for a corn plant to ripen. It is still used in some Maya communities today. It was and still is a sacred calendar which provided a chronological framework for Maya ceremonial life and a basis for prophecies.

The Haab is a 365-day calendar split into 18 months of 20 days and an extra month of only 5 days. The extra 5 days were considered to be a special time. The Haab cooperates very much like our own calendar does now.

The Long Count marked dates for a more extensive time from a fixed starting point. For the Maya the beginning of the present creation was 3114BC. Each cycle lasted 5128 years and it repeated indefinitely. The first great cycle was to end on 21st December 2012. This led to the popular idea that the Maya prophesied the world was to end on that date.

