

# HANAL PIXAN – Life and Death in Mayan Culture

**Grades:** 6-12

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## **Lesson Plan Summary:**

In Mexico, the Day of the Dead is very much a hybrid tradition, mixing prehispanic and Western religious beliefs. The Spanish and the Catholic Church tried all kinds of methods to eradicate the beliefs of native ethnic groups in order to consolidate their political and cultural domination in the New World. Many methods, such as the Spanish Inquisition, were heavy-handed and brutal, but the more enlightened clergy often employed the more subtle tactics of studying and understanding local customs and finding ways to absorb them into Christian tradition. Because of Mexico's enormous cultural diversity, Day of the Dead traditions therefore vary from one part of the country to another. In the case of the Yucatan, where it is known in Mayan as "Hanal Pixan," Day of the Dead is infused with ancient local beliefs that precede the arrival of Christianity by at least 2,000 years.

This lesson plan offers an opportunity to introduce students to the great cultural diversity of Mexico, as well as some thought provoking activities on how different cultures, ancient and modern, deal with the inevitability of death and how attitudes can reflect often opposing world views. The Mayan concept of time, for example, is quite different to the Christian concept (being cyclical instead of linear) and, as the students will discover, the symbol of the cross stands for life rather than death in the Mayan cosmological system. In addition to the strong historical and social studies content, this lesson can also be used for Spanish language practice, and for developing research (reading and asking questions), oral, and written skills in English or Spanish.

## **Objectives:**

### **A) To develop the following skills:**

- Develop critical research skills
- Information gathering, sharing and group cooperation
- Oral presentation
- Spanish language practice and vocabulary building
- Practice written skills

### **B) To appreciate cultural differences through exploring the following themes:**

- The historical significance of Day of the Dead in Mexico.
- "Hanal Pixan" Day of the Dead in the Yucatan.
- Beliefs about death among the ancient Maya and Mayan world view.
- Funeral rites among the ancient and modern Maya.
- How different cultures deal with the inevitability of death.
- How cultural symbols and traditions may mean different things to different people, and how these differences can lead to misunderstanding, prejudice, war and strife.

## **Activity:**

### **1) Presentation and class discussion (Class activity)**

The teacher will introduce the subject with some open discussion questions, backed up by slides in the accompanying short PowerPoint presentation. This is intended to awaken the students' curiosity and prepare them for the individual research task to follow:

- Name 5 things you associate with Mexico (use these to discover the students' ideas of Mexican culture and what their attitudes are towards foreign cultures in general).
- What languages are spoken in Mexico?
- Are there any other languages apart from Spanish?
- Show PowerPoint slide of indigenous cultures in Mexico to show that there are 59 different ethnic groups in Mexico, making it one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. Point out that there are 291 different dialects spoken there.
- One of Mexico's most important contributions to the world is the domestication of different food plants (Show slide of maize and other species domesticated).
- How long have people lived in Mexico?
- Where did these people originate?
- What religions are practiced in Mexico? (Make sure students are aware of the religious diversity in Mexico, and that not everyone is Catholic.)
- What religions existed before the arrival of the conquistadors?
- Did they believe in life after death? In heaven and hell?
- What happens after people die? What is done with the body?
- Recently you learned about Day of the Dead in Mexico. What do you remember?
- Do you think it's strange that death is celebrated?
- Why do you think Mexicans treat death with a certain amount of humor?
- Is death a joke?
- Do you think that the Day of the Dead is celebrated the same way all over Mexico? (Remind them of the nearly 60 different cultures.)
- On the PowerPoint map of Mexico, ask students to point out in which part of the country the Yucatan is located.
- What is the name of the people from the Yucatan?
- Make sure that the students know there are a number of different Maya groups and that over 30 different dialects are spoken (see slide of Mayan Family of Languages). The Maya inhabited Guatemala, Honduras, Belize & El Salvador.
- Tell the students that The Mayans celebrate the Day of the Dead differently than in the rest of Mexico.
- In Mayan, it is known as "Hanal Pixan" (see slide of "Hanal Pixan" altar).

## **2) Research Task (Home study)**

Using the web links provided, or any sources they find through their own research, the students will find the answers to the questions on the attached worksheet (see "Materials" for web links and question sheet).

## **3) Information Sharing (Class activity)**

After completing the research task, students will be divided into groups of 4-5 to cross-check and share information. A group member will be nominated to give an oral report to the rest of the class. Questions may be divided up between the groups for this task.

#### 4) Written Exercises

##### a) Vocabulary building in Spanish

With the aid of dictionaries, students will find the English equivalents of the following Spanish words:

alimentar	dolor	limpiar	rezo
alma	duelo	luz	ritual
ánima	dulces	misa	rumbo
barda	entierro	muerte	sábana
bebida	esqueleto	muerto	saludo
bienvenida	esencia	novena	sentimientos
bordado	exhumar	nutrir	sentidos
calabaza	familia	ofrenda	ser
calaca	familiares	olor	tiempo
calavera	festividad	orar	tradicción
casa	fiesta	pedir	tristeza
ceiba	flores	pérdida	tumba
celebración	fúnebre	peregrina	unir
cementerio	gastronomía	peregrinar	urnas
ceremonia	herencia	quemar	usar
cirio	honrar	queridos	vela
comida	huesos	quitar	velorio
concebir	iglesia	querer	vestimenta
cruz	incienso	recuerdo	viaje
difunto	indígena	representación	visita
día	lamento	retrato	vivo
	letanía	reunir	

##### b) Compose original sentences in Spanish

Students will make sentences in Spanish about “Hanal Pixan” using any of these words or others they might need or remember.

##### c) Written composition

Students will compose a written essay on what they have learned about Mayan customs through studying “Hanal Pixan.” The essay should be structured by the teacher according to level, and may be attempted in either English or in Spanish.

#### MATERIALS

**Mexico PowerPoint** (short presentation as support for teacher presentation)

[www.civilization.ca/civil/maya/mminteng.html](http://www.civilization.ca/civil/maya/mminteng.html)

[www.mayas.uady.mx/articulos/pixan.html](http://www.mayas.uady.mx/articulos/pixan.html) (Hint: click on “exposiciones” also)

[www.fuegonuevo.com/maya/festivals.html](http://www.fuegonuevo.com/maya/festivals.html)

[Day of the Dead photos on TIDES](#)

[Modern Mayans on TIDES](#)

## Hanal Pixan Question Sheet

Using the web links provided, or any other sources available to you, find the answers to the following questions about “Hanal Pixan” – the Mayan version of Day of the Dead.

- 1) How long have people lived in the Yucatan?
- 2) When did the Mayan civilization flourish?
- 3) When did the civilization disappear?
- 4) How many Mayans are there today and where do they live?
- 5) Who is the most famous living Mayan today?
- 6) What does “Hanal Pixan” mean?
- 7) What is the social purpose of “Hanal Pixan?”
- 8) How did the Mayan think about time?
- 9) How did they envisage the earth and its place in the universe?
- 10) Where did the “Pixan” come from?
- 11) How did the Mayan attitude towards suicide differ from Christian views?
- 12) How did the Maya bury their dead? Was it the same for men and women?
- 13) According to the Maya, what happened to the souls of the departed?
- 14) Where did the Mayans bury their dead? Was it the same for rich and poor?
- 15) What did the Mayans do to the bodies of warriors, priests, and nobles?
- 16) What did the altar represent in the Mayan system of beliefs?
- 17) What objects were placed on the altar and what was their meaning?
- 18) How were Mayan beliefs transformed by the Spanish invaders?
- 19) How did the Spanish (Christian) concept of time differ from the Mayans’?
- 20) Why are candles not lit for the souls of the adults?
- 21) In “Hanal Pixan,” how long do the souls of the dead stay among the living?
- 22) What are “pib” and “mucbil pollo?”
- 23) What unusual burial custom is still practiced in some Mayan communities today, and what is the main reason for this?
- 24) What differences did you find between “Hanal Pixan” and Day of the Dead in other parts of Mexico?
- 25) What is your reaction to these different customs?