

# MAYA CITY STATES PROJECT

*K'inil winik* festival: A festival of being Maya  
(kee-nahl wee-neek)



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## INSPIRATION:

When our middle child was in 5th Grade, she studied Ancient Greece and her teacher immersed her class in the subject. Responding only to her Greek name, she learnt Greek poetry, made hummus from scratch, created a mosaic of the Gorgons and fashioned a Grecian urn. Her class was divided into *poleis*, such as Athens, Sparta, Thebes etc., and the citizens had to research the background of their *polis* and make a tourist poster explaining its character, attractions and the sources of its wealth.

It is our hope that one day the Maya will be as well known as their Greek, Roman and Egyptian counterparts. To that end, we have tried to illustrate the immense spread of Maya civilization, both temporal and geographical, in a living history unit called "A Festival of Being Maya". This could last a morning, a day or a week. But be warned. In our experience, the more you find out about the Maya, the deeper you want to dig.

Good luck with your *K'inil Winik*—let us know how it goes!

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## BACKGROUND:

Ancient Maya civilization spanned 3,000 years (ten times longer than the Aztecs or Incas), with a golden age of arts, science and culture from 200–900 A.D. Yet, due in part to the burning of their written records by an over-zealous Spanish monk, the Maya have remained relatively elusive.

Now recent archaeological findings have begun to turn the tide. It's becoming easier to reconstruct the delicate balance of ancient Maya society and to imagine the different personalities of the various city states as they grew and flourished, made alliances, conquered and were conquered.

There was no such thing as a Maya empire and no one called themselves a Maya citizen. Just as the Greeks divided themselves as Athenians, Spartans, Thebans etc., the Maya defined themselves by their home city-state. (Until the 19th century, the term Maya had a much more localized meaning, possibly associated with the city of Mayapan which ruled the whole Yucatan peninsula for 200 years until its alliances fell apart in 1441.)

It seems to us that an understanding of how great city-states like Chichen Itza, Copan, Caracol, Palenque, Tikal, Calakmul, Uxmal and Tulum related to each other in terms of time, politics, power and trade, is the most vivid way of illustrating the size and scope of Maya civilization.

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### GETTING STARTED:

Start by dividing the students into city-states. For ideas, please see the Teacher's Guide to the Ancient Maya. You'll see that, for each city, we have included a "Guesswork" section which encourages students to compare ancient Maya cities to modern US cities (eg Tikal was a center of power like Washington DC, Tulum was a scenic trading port like New Orleans) and inspires them to think a little deeper about the character of each place and its role in the politics of its day. As far as we know, this is a unique resource.

You could set the scene with an introductory session on geography/geology, with comparative timelines for other great civilizations. Then follow up with an explanation of the Maya cosmos, pantheon, calendar, math and glyphs to get your students in a Maya mind-set.

Then comes the real fun, as students prepare to create a tourist campaign for their chosen city. Each student could take on a Maya name (and know how to write it) and a municipal role - such as architect, astronomer, ruler, scribe or artist. The campaigns could include items on the location, ruling god, buildings, flora and fauna. Students should research culinary specialties, produce, handicrafts and other items for trade, based on the geographical location of their city, its natural resources and its role in local society. There are no hard and fast answers for much of this, but credit should be given for the most educated guesses.

After the tourist convention, all groups could come together for the K'inil Winik (a day or festival of being Maya). This could include the making and wearing of ornate headdresses, "tattooing" the skin with potato block prints and washable paint, and a classroom market - all prices in the vigesimal system, all payments in cacao beans, all calculations done with sticks, stones and shells. (If you want to go one further and deal in spoken Mayan, you'll find some useful shopping/eating phrases at [http://www.mostlymaya.com/yucatec\\_maya\\_intro\\_.htm](http://www.mostlymaya.com/yucatec_maya_intro_.htm))

When it's time for sport, rival cities could play each other in a Mesoamerican ballgame tournament and the day could end with a Maya feast. (Maybe hot chocolate with a little dried chilli pepper, tortillas, guacamole, salsa, fresh pineapple, limeade, chocolate cupcakes . . .)

Of course, one of the most important lessons about the Maya is that they're still around. Despite the last 500 years of oppression, 6 million Maya live in Central America today. Many of them still depend upon the rainforest for their survival, so we've developed some life science/ecology/biology lesson plans to complement your students' work in Social Studies.

To wrap up your Maya unit, you could end with a discussion about the demise of the ancient Maya. Many experts now believe that deforestation played a key role - an important lesson at a time when 150 acres of rainforest are cut down every minute.

*Ka xi'ik teech utsil!* (That's "good luck" in Yucatec—and do let us know how you get on!)