

“Mayan Folktales: Folklore from Lake Atitlan, Guatemala”, is a compilation of 35 short stories that highlight past and present Guatemalan culture. Ranging from tales of cheating wives to descriptions of traditional dances, these stories cover a wide range of topics. However, the tales do have a common theme; they all manage to incorporate a unique blend of Mayan and Christian beliefs.

The combination of Mayan and Christian ideals can be traced back to the time of Spanish Conquistadors (~1500’s). The Mayan’s introduction to Christianity is described in the book through the “Story of the Dance of the Conquest”. Don Pedro de Alvaro, as it’s told, slaughtered the Mayan King Tecun Uman in battle. Upon seeing the body of Tecun Uman, the remaining leader, King Quiche, deemed it futile to fight the Spaniards. He then made an agreement with the Conquistadors to become baptized into Christianity. The story ends with the “Spaniards and Indians taking each others’ hands like brothers” (pg. 115). The resulting dual belief system continues to this day.

As a product of this history, Christianity has incorporated itself into many of the traditional folktales. This is most easily seen in the “Creation Myth”: a Mayan take on the story of Adam and Eve. In this tale, the king of the animals feeds forbidden fruit to a woman named Evarial (similar to Eve!), who then feeds the man. God becomes angry with the humans and forces them to work. He also punishes the King of the animals by turning him into a snake; the same form the Devil takes in the classic Bible tale. Christian values are undeniably present in this story; they can also be found in the other chapters as well. Stories of cheating wives and corrupt priests wanting to sleep with churchgoers demonstrate the sin of Lust. While the story of a man that turns into a buzzard due to laziness demonstrates the sin of Sloth. One story, involving multiple Gods, even uses the term “real god” pg (91) to differentiate between the Christian and Mayan Gods. In both large and small ways, Christianity has impacted much of the local folklore.

Despite Christian influences, the tales still retain a rich Mayan flavor. For instance, characters often shape shift into different forms based on their fortune at the time of birth. Those with good luck become rain-makers; they dawn special clothing provided by the gods and shoot into the sky to create thunder and lightning. In contrast, those with bad luck turn into *brujos* (witches) or *characotels*- people who feast on the bones of the dead and carry spirits to the cemetery. Others still, transform into *naguales* (animal forms) such as the hunter in “The Story of the Hunter *Compadre*”, who takes the form of a jaguar, coyote, and dog to hunt prey. Throughout the book, these characters as well as normal people (who neither have good or bad luck) often interact with the Mayan *dueños* such as the white haired god of the hill or the vengeful gods of the corn. These storylines, involving fate and dealings with the Mayan gods, demonstrate deeply rooted beliefs and characteristics that were present before the Christian Conquistadors arrived; these aspects of the stories highlight Guatemala’s traditional Mayan heritage.

Overall, this book was an exciting read. The combination of Christian and Mayan culture, present in the folklore, provided insight into the unique history of the Guatemalan people. Although the 35 short stories were based in the past, they beautifully highlight the values and culture of Guatemala today.