

MAYA CIVILIZATION - OVERVIEW

HOUSEHOLD: Just as they did in ancient times, modern Maya villagers live in household units or compounds occupied by extended families. Each extended family is made up of a group of related adults with unmarried children, and often, an older couple or elderly widowed parent. Such extended families provide the large number of people needed for subsistence farming, a labor intensive way of life.

The extended family unit provides labor for farming but also for other necessary household activities. These activities include routine tasks such as building and refurbishing houses, kitchens, and storerooms, collecting firewood, food preparation, and repairing and maintaining tools. In addition, craft activities such as weaving, making clothing and pottery or in some areas wood carving, create goods for use by the household or for sale or exchange at regional markets.

There is a clear division of labor in Maya households: Men farm and women prepare the food and other necessities in the home. Among the Yucatan Maya and others, children learn these role definitions from infancy. On the day children are first carried on their mother's hip rather than bundled in her shawl, a ceremony establishes the child's role in the family. Boys receive toy field tools and girls receive toy household utensils.

Participation in this ceremony by adults who are not kinsmen of the child (Godparenting) is one of the many ritual ways of forging social ties among different families and even people outside the Maya world. The rights and obligations associated with these relationships extend throughout the lifetime of the child and provide security networks during times of stress and need.

In modern Maya communities, men predominate in the public affairs of the village, while women carry substantial authority within the household and make many of the economic and social decisions concerning the family. Women are usually the experts in crafts, especially weaving and clothes making.

A household compound is composed of several buildings built around an open patio space, usually shaped like a quadrangle. This design provides privacy from neighbors yet enables the family members to interact freely. Houses, built much as they were in pre-Columbian times, are constructed with wooden posts covered with a cement-like material made from lime (or more recently cement blocks) and roofed with palm thatch or other readily available natural materials. Today, when available, sheet metal replaces thatch. In many Maya villages, the household kitchen is a separate building made of lighter materials to allow free air circulation around the smoky fire. The Maya store tools and extra foodstuffs in separate storage buildings.

GOVERNMENT: Today, the public authorities in Maya communities derive from three sources: offices surviving from pre-Columbian institutions; offices introduced by the Spanish; offices needed for working with the modern national and state governments presiding over Maya country. In the Maya highlands, the primary local government is comprised of officials who take on the burden of responsibility for organizing the religious festivals that make up the yearly cycle. Other officials handle civil matters, such as arbitrating disputes that cannot be handled by family elders.

These official positions are sought after years in advance in order to allow a person to acquire the necessary material wealth to carry out the duties. Public life is very expensive. The official often used most of the disposable income of his family and relatives for many years in carrying out the duties. He must pay for the festivals and the many ritual meals, flowers, incense, fireworks, and other paraphernalia used during the performance of his office. Thus, the entire family must be committed to supporting the responsibilities of office. Willingness to share material wealth through public office is a way of gaining prestige in an otherwise egalitarian society. Wealth is something to be feared, as seen in stories about pacts with the spirits in which people trade integrity for money. Preparation for public office is the only sanctioned way to amass wealth. Spending it on the community while in office is an institutional means of maintaining an egalitarian way of life in which everyone has similar material means and no one stands out as wealthy in the long term.

SHAMANS: Shamans also fulfill important roles in the public domain. They cure disease and carry out a broad range of rituals in the fields and homes of a village. They too have responsibilities at public festivals. Much of their present day role reflects ancient roles in Maya society. Their primary function is to conserve tradition within the community. The shamans were and are the public explainers, repositories of the stories and morals of thousands of years of village experience. Their power is unquestionable. They are the keepers of a very complicated world view. It is an ongoing interpretation of daily life. For example, in curing disease, instead of seeing illness as an isolated, purely physical phenomenon, the shaman treats illness within the context of the tensions and anxieties of interfamilial and social relationships. The curing of an individual is more than healing of the physical being. It is healing of the emotional being, the social being, and the social web holding the community together.

WRITING SYSTEM: The original form of Maya books was an accordion fold rather than leaf-like pages. The book was made from beaten bark paper that had been surfaced with a thin layer of plaster. Millions of Maya today speak languages based on one of the two languages we know were written in the ancient texts. Even when ancient Maya could not speak the same language, the writing system acted as an intermediary means of communication.

The writing system itself worked much like any of the worlds glyph-based systems but was developed entirely in the Maya world. Scribes could write using signs for individual sounds as well as signs representing whole words. The entire system is one of vast complexity. However, few of the ancient Maya were literate and there were no public documents, newspapers, or books to be read. Writing was a sacred proposition that had the capacity to capture the order of the cosmos, to inform history, to give form to ritual, and to transform the profane material of everyday life into the supernatural. As such, it could only be entrusted to an elite group of artist/writers.

MAYA PERIODS : Though scholars divide the Maya history into several categories of development, only three are necessary for understanding the movements of the civilization.

Pre-classic: 1500 B.C. - A.D. 100

Classic: A.D. 100 - A.D. 900

Post Classic: A.D. 900 - A.D.1502

TECHNOLOGY: Maya were essentially a stone age people. All they accomplished was done by means of stone tools, using human labor. There were no animals large enough or domesticatable in the area to serve as beasts of burden. The Maya built road systems to link parts of the kingdoms, some being winding paths, others, wide and straight arteries of commerce.

Major long distance trade used canoes on rivers and swamps that crisscrossed the landscape and to hop from city to city along coast lines. Until very recently, the canoe was the most important form of travel into the interior of the Maya region. Carved from a single piece of a huge hardwood tree, dugout canoes plied the slow-moving lowland rivers. These rivers drained huge swamps fed by rains that could, and still do, average 150 inches a year in the southern lowlands.

The Maya also developed a method of intensive farming called raised fields or chanampas. With this method, many small garden plots were created divided by canals. The canals provided moisture for the crops, yearly dredging provided new organic rich soil, small fish and aquatic food plants lived in the canals, and several crops could be grown each year. This system produced excess crops that could be stored and/or traded. Areas of chanampas are thought to have fed thousands of people, much like large commercial farms today produce much of the food for the United States.

THE MAYA COSMOS: The world of the Maya is composed of three layers: the upper starry arch of heaven (represented by a giant crocodilian monster); the stone middle-world of the human earth; the underworld below. The three worlds are interrelated and joined by the "tree of life." The underworld, sometimes called Xibalba (She-bal'-bah), is in no way like the Christian idea of hell. It is close to the original Maya way of understanding to think of the underworld as the unseen parallel world to the middle-world into which the Maya kings and shamans could pass by way of a trance. Since plants (living things) come from beneath the earth, the underworld was considered the source of life. It was home to many life-giving Maya spirits.

In all three worlds, there were animals, plants, inhabitants of various sorts, and a landscape with both natural and constructed features.

The human world, like the spirit world, was a sacred space. The surface of the world was divided into four directions. Each direction has a special tree, a bird, a color, gods associated with its domain, and rituals associated with those gods. East was red and the most important direction since it was where the sun was born. North was the direction from which the cooling rains of winter came. It was also the direction of the north star around which the sky pivots. West, the leaving or dying place of the sun, was black. South was yellow and was considered to be the right-hand or great side of the sun. In the Maya conception, east, not north, should always be at the top of maps.

This model of the world was also domed-shaped, with the four directions related to a center. The center has its color (blue-green), its gods, its bird, and its tree. The tree, the Tree of Life, acted as an axis that bound the three Maya worlds at their centers. The tree was personified in the king who could bring it into existence through rituals held at the temples atop tall pyramids. While in the rapture of blood-letting ritual, the king opened the doorways between the three Maya worlds.

The rituals performed in pyramid top temples were so powerful that, over time, the very spot became more and more sacred. Therefore, future generations of kings built new and bigger pyramids and temples over the core of earlier temples on the same spot.

BLOODLETTING: During the Classic period, the heart of Maya life was the ritual of bloodletting. This is not the heart-ripping ritual of the later Aztecs, though ritual drowning was a frequent means of sacrifice. Rather it was giving the gift of blood from the body as an act of piety in all rituals, from the birth of a baby to the burial of the dead. This act could be as simple as an offering of a few drops of one's blood, or as extreme as the mutilation of different parts of the body that generate large flows of blood when cut. The most sacred sources of blood were the tongues of males and females and the penis of males. The aim of these rituals was vision quest: opening the portals into the other worlds so that the gods and ancestors could be accessed by humans.

The practice of bloodletting took place not only in the temples of the mighty but at altars in the humble village as well. What the great kings did on behalf of the nation, the farmer did on behalf of his family.

CURRENCY: The ancient Maya used trade as a means of exchanging many goods. However, certain precious commodities served as money. They include carved and polished greenstone beads (jade or jadite), beads of the red spiny oyster shell, cacao beans, lengths of cotton cloth, and measures of sea salt. Many of these currencies were prized beyond the Maya territories and were traded to all the civilized peoples of the Mesoamerican world. Certain commodities, such as bird feathers and obsidian were traded as far north as the Great Plains of the United States and evidence for trade down to South America exists.

CALENDAR: The Maya calendar consisted of two cycles: the Tzolkin (soul'-kin) consisting of 260 days and the Haab (ha-ahb') which had 360 days. Every 52 years these two calendars corresponded. It was this period that marked the beginning of a new era, much like we celebrate the beginning of a new century. Because it marked the beginning of a long period, many elaborate rituals took place at this time to assure a continuing cycle of life. In the past as is true today, Maya parents name their children for the day on which they were born. For the ancients, the god of the day one was born became its patron god. Each day carried its own omens and luck and personal attributes and the person was stuck with those for life. Those unfortunate enough to be born during the 5 "extra" days not included in the 360 day calendar, suffered a life of bad luck with no hope for improvement. Everyone was very careful during this period to fast and obey sacred rules to avoid evil during this time.

The Maya used a set of bars, dots and shells to count. Dots represent units of one to four, bars represent units of five, and a shell represents the concept of zero. The shell symbol of zero marks the Maya as great thinkers. As hard as it might be for us to consider, at the time of the early Maya civilization, most of the world's civilizations had no way to symbolize the concept of nothing. Being able to work with zero enabled the Maya to perform complex mathematical calculations and figure time from the far distant past.