

Maya Culture and Civilisation ~ From Ancient Times to the Present Day

The Maya civilization was one of the major civilizations to develop in ancient Mesoamerica. It is noted for its elaborate writing, numerical and calendar systems, as well as its impressive art and architecture. The Maya culture lives on in the same areas where its civilization first developed, in the southern part of Mexico and part of Central America, and there are millions of people who speak Mayan languages (of which there are several).



The Ancient Maya: The Maya occupied a vast area covering southeast Mexico and the Central American countries of Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Mayan culture began to develop in the Pre-Classic period, around 1000 BC and was at its heyday between 300 and 900 AD. The ancient Maya are well known for their writing, of which a great part can now be read (it was, for the most part, deciphered in the second half of the 20th Century), as well as for their advanced mathematics, astronomy, and calendrical calculations.

Despite sharing a common history and certain cultural attributes, ancient Maya culture was extremely diverse, largely due to the range of geographic and environmental conditions in which it developed.

Maya Writing: The Maya devised an elaborate writing system that was largely translated in the 1980s. Prior to this, many archaeologists believed that Maya writing dealt strictly with calendrical and astronomical themes, which went hand-in-hand with the concept that the Mayas were peaceful, studious stargazers. When Mayan glyphs were finally translated it became clear that the Maya were as interested in earthly matters as other Mesoamerican civilizations.

Mathematics, Calendar, and Astronomy: The Ancient Maya used a numerical system based on just three symbols: a dot for one, a bar for five and a shell that represented zero. Using zero and place notation, they were able to write large numbers and perform complex mathematical operations. They also formulated a unique calendar system with which they were able to calculate the lunar cycle as well as predict eclipses and other celestial events with great precision.

Religion and Mythology: The Maya had a complex religion with a huge pantheon of gods. In the Mayan worldview, the plane on which we live is just one level of a multi-layered universe made up of 13 heavens and nine underworlds. Each of these planes is ruled by a specific god and inhabited by others. Hunab Ku was the creator god and various other gods were responsible for forces of nature, such as Chac, the rain god.

Mayan rulers were considered to be divine and traced them back to prove their descent from the gods. Maya religious ceremonies included the ball game, human sacrifice and bloodletting ceremonies in which nobles pierced their tongues or genitals to shed blood as an offering to the gods.

Archaeological Sites: Coming upon impressive abandoned cities covered by vegetation in the middle of the jungle caused early archaeologists and explorers to wonder: who built these spectacular cities only to abandon them? Some decided that the Romans were responsible for these magnificent constructions because it was difficult to believe that the native people of Mexico and Central America could be responsible for such amazing engineering, architecture, and artistry.

The Collapse of Maya Civilization: There is still much speculation about the decline of the ancient Maya cities. Many theories have been put forward, ranging from natural catastrophes (epidemic, earthquake, drought) to warfare. Archaeologists today generally believe that a combination of elements brought about the collapse of the Maya empire, probably brought on by severe drought and deforestation.

Present-day Maya Culture: The Maya did not cease to exist when their ancient cities went into decline. They live on today in the same areas their ancestors lived. Although their culture has changed over time, many Mayas maintain their language and traditions. There are over 750,000 speakers of Mayan languages living in Mexico today and many more in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Present-day Maya religion is a hybrid of Catholicism and ancient beliefs and rituals. Some Lacandon Maya still live in a traditional manner in the Lacandon jungle of Chiapas state.

The Maya Today

Today, there are about six million Mayan people, making them the largest single block of indigenous peoples north of Peru. Some of the largest Maya groups are found in Mexico, the most important of these being the Yucatecs (300,000), the Tzotzil (120,000) and the Tzeltal (80,000). The Yucatecs live on the warm and tropical Yucatán Peninsula, and the Tzotzil and Tzeltal live in the highlands of Chiapas. Other large Maya groups include the Quiché and Cakchiquel Maya 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.

In spite of modernisation and intermarriage between the indigenous population and Spanish immigrants, 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.

Among the most fragile of the Maya groups today is the Lacandón of the Chiapas rain forest who are a small group - numbering only 200 in the early 1980s - and have attracted great interest among researchers. This is partly because the Lacandón have never been Christianized, and are believed to practise a variant of the ancient Maya religion. The Lacandón are, however, under intense pressure from the modern world. In the 1950s, the Lacandón were still hunting with bow and arrow. Since that time, their forest home has been opened up to travellers and tourists, and the Lacandón often travel outside the forest to sell their handicrafts. There is great concern that the Lacandón way of life will not survive long into the next century.

The Maya face greater challenges, however, than those presented by tourism. Maya regions have also been subjected to intense political upheaval in recent decades, with significant loss of life and economic devastation. 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. Human-rights groups are calling for an end to these injustices and governments are working to find lasting solutions to the problems of discrimination.

The Maya also face problems of their own creation, particularly in areas like Guatemala's Petén region, which contains the largest expanse of forest left in Central America. In the Petén, the tropical rain forest is being felled (chopped down) at an alarming rate to make way for corn fields. The population of the Petén has skyrocketed from 15,000 in 1950 to more than 300,000 today. More settlers arrive from southern Guatemala all the time, placing enormous pressure on available natural resources. A study by NASA and the National Geographic Society discovered that in the four-year period between 1988 and 1992 alone, 1,130 acres of forest had been felled by individual farmers.



As the forest disappears, so do its treasures. Wildlife vanishes, ancient Maya sites are exposed to thieves, and whole chapters in human and natural history are erased or threatened. Workers with government- environmental groups such as Guatemala's National Council of Protected Areas also face constant death threats and the burning of guard posts by loggers and others who stand to profit from the destruction of the forests.

The Maya have faced significant challenges, some of which continue today. Some scientists who study the lives of the Maya even doubt the ability of Maya culture to survive the pressures of the modern world. However, a look at the traits which have kept the Maya culturally and physically alive to date (their hold on the land, devotion to their communities, and a deeply held system of belief) offer some hope.



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 ancient Maya calendar has also survived remarkably well. In the Maya highlands, many communities still have shaman-priests or "day-keepers", whose job it is to keep track of the round of days according to the Maya calendar, and to conduct traditional rituals for individuals and the larger community.

Maya intellectuals have also begun to realise that diverse Maya language groups must band together if their culture and languages are to survive. Most heartening of all to some observers, Maya populations are actually increasing rather than falling in numbers, and some believe that the Maya's heightened awareness of their strength as one people with a glorious past and an ability to adapt may help them survive for centuries to come.

