

MAYAN CULTURE

LOCATION

Ancient Mayan culture once stretched from central Mexico to Honduras. It also included parts of what is now Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador. More than 40 cities were founded on the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico (and elsewhere) where they have now become tourist attractions. The climate here is warm and tropical. Today about 7 million people would call themselves Mayan or would say they have Mayan ancestors. Most of these people live in Mexico.

HISTORY

Records show that the first people to live on the Yucatán peninsula were hunters and gatherers who were nomads and lived in small family units. These first inhabitants arrived around 9,000 BC. The Maya arrived in the Yucatán area much later, around 2,600 BC. They were heavily influenced by the civilizations before them on the peninsula, such as the Olmec and Izapan.

Mayan culture expanded quickly, as they developed new tools and scientific methods. City-states of between 5,000 and 50,000 people were created and large temples resembling pyramids were built to honor the gods. The most famous of these is Chichen Itza in the Yucatan. The height of Mayan civilization was around 250 AD.

For reasons still unknown Mayan civilization went into decline around 900 AD. The Maya in the Southern part of their territory left their cities around this time. The Northern Maya, on the other hand, became part of the Toltec society around 1200 AD. This was the end of the powerful Maya city-state civilization, although some Mayan cities survived until the Spanish arrived several hundred years later. After the decline of the great Mayan cities the Maya returned to a simpler way of life, living mostly in villages. The great cities and temples quickly disappeared in the jungle vegetation.

The first contact between Europeans and the Maya is mentioned in the journal of Christopher Columbus during his fourth voyage to the Americas in 1502. His ship spotted large canoes in the water that could fit more than 40 people. Many more Spanish arrived throughout the 16th century and tried to completely destroy Mayan culture. In many ways they were successful. Helped by brutal repression, superior weapons, disease, droughts and internal wars, the Spanish quickly defeated the Maya. Most traces of their rich culture were removed. We know, for instance, that the Maya used maps and wrote in books during the Middle Ages, but these were destroyed by the Spanish.

Though the Spanish succeeded in destroying most of Mayan culture and converting the Maya to Christianity, resistance continues until today. There have been very recent uprisings in Chiapas (Mexico) by peasants who feel they are being exploited. The Mexican government and the native population are involved in difficult discussions about the future of this area of Mexico.

RELIGION

The ancient Maya believed that the earth was flat (like most other civilizations at that time) and that it had four corners. Some Maya believed that the earth was actually the back of a huge crocodile, resting in a pool of water lilies. Heaven was believed to have four layers, and each layer had its own god. The underworld, a cold unhappy place, had nine layers. The Maya believed that when the sun and moon set (helped by the gods) they went through this underworld. The mountains and hills are believed to be the homes of such ancient gods.

Mayan priests were in control of education and rituals. Because they could marry, their sons often succeeded them. Priests were also responsible for bloodletting and human sacrifice. Bloodletting was an important part of many rituals. Blood was offered to the gods to please them and to nourish them. Human sacrifice was also quite common. Prisoners, slaves and many children were killed to please the gods. Especially orphans and illegitimate children suffered this fate.

The Maya believed that when you died you entered the underworld through a cave. Kings, however, would be reborn as gods in the sky. Ordinary people who died were buried beneath the floors of their houses, their mouths filled with food for the voyage. Important noblemen, however, were cremated.

Maya traditional religion survives until today, but now contains many elements of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, many Mayans today believe, as the original Mayans did, in the influence of the cosmos and the need to pay homage to the gods through rituals. The sun is now associated with the Christian belief in God and Jesus Christ and the moon with the Virgin Mary.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

The Mayan world consisted of many city-states that shared language, religion and customs. On the whole, despite ritualistic human sacrifices, their culture seemed to be less violent and more artistic than other large civilizations of this period.

The ancient Maya used what is called a "slash and burn" technique to clear a forest and to establish agriculture. This allowed them to stop migrating and develop cities. Their main crops were maize, beans, squash and tobacco. Mayan society was arranged according to a strict hierarchy. Nobles and kings had a great deal of power, as did priests. Slave ownership was quite common.

Trade was an important feature of Mayan society. The Mayan used the Caribbean to connect one part of their empire to other parts. Around 300 BC the Maya started setting up a large system of trade over water (also using rivers), and developed many sea routes. For centuries after that period in time there were wealthy merchants who used large canoes to trade a variety of goods, such as salt, animal pelts, feathers, cacao, gold, honey, cloth, knives, etc. The merchants even had their own god and protector (Ek Chuah). Those who are descended from the Maya find themselves a minority throughout Central America, and have been

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Many Maya from Guatemala have also had to flee the country as refugees during the last decades due to civil wars and conflict. Thousands have died at the hands of killing squads, civil war and other violence. Most have fled to the United States, Mexico and Canada. Many have also had to move from their homes in Guatemala because large logging companies have cut down parts of the rain forest, taking away the livelihood of these people.

CULTURE

Ancient Mayan culture was one of the most advanced anywhere in the world. The Mayans were skilled potters, weavers, architects, sculptors and painters. Their many temples, pyramids and palaces were beautifully decorated and have survived the test of time. They are now major tourist attractions.

Mayan weaving is very popular throughout the world and one can find Mayan blankets, backpacks, purses, wallets, etc. in any country of the Western world. The Maya were one of the most advanced societies anywhere in the world when it came to their scientific developments, especially mathematics, medicine and astronomy. For instance, they developed the concept of the number zero and various other mathematical theories.

The Mayan language was also a highly developed form of hieroglyphics, and is still spoken, although Spanish is now the dominant language in the countries where the Maya live.

