

Belize Maya

The earliest record known of the Maya in Belize dates back to 2500 B.C. when they inhabited the area now known as Cuello. The area now known as Belize formed only a small part of their great cultural society. Today, we have only a few Maya who are direct descendants of those ancient people. Occupying an area of several hundred miles, the Maya empire included the Mexican states of Yucatan, Campeche, Tabasco; the eastern half of Chiapas, Quintana Roo; most of Guatemala; Belize, and the western parts of El Salvador and Honduras.

The peak of Maya civilization – the Classic Period – when at least 400,000 Maya inhabited Belize, extended from about A.D. 250 to A.D. 1000. Shortly after this, the Maya societies declined due to still unspecified causes. Among the reasons put forward for the abandonment of their great cities are: soil exhaustion, disease, and the most probable one that the common people revolted and massacred the ruling class. The loss of administrative power, as well as the decline of social and economic systems, dismantled the Maya civilization and their splendid cities.

Many Maya still lived in Belize when the Europeans (Spanish and British) came in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. Displaced by the British occupation, the Maya remained in the interior of the country until the mid-nineteenth Century when they began to resist the colonial invasion. They were defeated by the British in 1867 and 1872, after which they became integrated into the Belizean society as dispossessed and dependent people.

There are presently three groups of Maya living in various areas of Belize. The Yucatec Maya, who migrated from the south of Mexico, live in the northern districts and have merged to a great extent with the Mestizo population. The Mopan Maya came from San Luis in the Peten region of Guatemala, and settled in San Antonio, Toledo. Today, they can also be found in Santa Cruz, San Jose, Santa Elena, and Pueblo Viejo in the Toledo District; as well as Santa Rosa, Maya Mopan, and San Roman in the Stann Creek District. The Mopan Maya of the western area of Belize are a mixed Peten and Yucatecan stock. One of their larger villages is San Jose Succotz in the Cayo District. Immigrating from San Pedro Corcha in Guatemala, the Kekchi Maya inhabit several villages in the Toledo District, including: Dolores, Otoxa, Crique Sarco, San Lucas, Santa Teresita, San Benito Poite, Machaca, and Mabilha.

The Maya language group today includes about twenty diverse, but related, dialects. There are two Maya languages spoken: Northern Maya, or Yucateco, is the idiom of the greater part of the rural population of the northern districts. A distinct dialect variously called Itza or Mopanero is spoken by the San Antonio Maya of the Toledo District. Another Maya language, spoken mostly in the southern villages of San Pedro Columbia, Dolores, and Crique Sarco, is Kekchi. Many Maya people speak English as well as their mother tongue, and mainly through long contact with the Spanish culture of Mexico and Guatemala, speak Spanish also.

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The whole life of the Maya, especially those living in the south, centers around agriculture; and their very existence is bound up with their crops which they grow in clearings called MILPAS. The most common food of the Maya is corn, prepared in a variety of ways. Tortillas and tamales are eaten in all areas; and although most drink coffee, other popular drinks made from corn include posol, sacha, and pinol. Beans, pork, and fish are eaten, as well as game, and a variety of fruits.

The mode of dress tends to be more “modern” or “western” for the men; while the women in most Kekchi villages wear embroidered blouses with long skirts. The Maya of the Toledo District have several musical instruments which are all locally made. These include: the harp, guitar, marimba, violin, flute, kettle drum, and rattle. All the dances they perform at the important feasts are by masked dancers, and include the Cortez, the Moor, the Deer, and the Devil dances. In the west, dances are held about once a month in the villages, and the marimba is the only instrument used. Succotz village celebrates an annual fiesta which lasts for nine days, in honor of its patron saint, San Jose.

A tradition which is peculiar to the Maya is the appointment of an ALCALDE, or headman, in each village. His main function is to ensure that the laws of the village are not broken, and in this relation he can try cases and impose fines.

The Maya believe that the air is filled with the souls of the dead, and that the forests and rivers contain deities including the Tata Duende, Alux, La Sirena, and Sisimito.

Comprising about eleven percent of the population, the Maya live largely in spaciouly laid-out villages; some in close proximity to sites of the earliest Maya settlements with their ceremonial construction. Names like Altun Ha, Xunantunich, Cuello, Lubaantun, and Lamanai are some of the sites still maintained as tourist attractions, and as reminders of the magnificent past of the Maya.

This article can be found on the [National Library Service of Belize](#) site.