

The Maya Culture: Overview

General Overview

- **The Maya make up approximately 50% of the population. They are an ancient race of people who have not changed their customs and traditions very much over the centuries. They live in rural areas and are indigenous.**
- **For them, life differs greatly from other Guatemalans. In the rural areas, each village has its own customs, traditions, festivals, and colorful clothes. For example, the women wear 'trajes.' These are a unique patterned skirt with a very colorful blouse. The pattern of the skirt identifies them as being from a certain village or speakers of a specific Maya dialect (this was the Spaniards way of keeping track of the Maya). Although the women continue to wear the traditional traje today, most men now wear western-style clothing.**
- **The Maya think of themselves more as part of their community than of their country. They pay little attention to affairs outside of the community.**
- **Typical rural villages are seriously underdeveloped. A sign of this is the poor transportation system. Many villages have no connecting roads that can be used by any type of vehicle. Often times, a four-wheel drive vehicle is needed to get to where one has to go each morning. Rainy season makes it more difficult and hazardous.**
- **Only 48% of those living in the rural areas have access to safe drinking water and 50% have proper sanitation.**

Daily Life, Family, and Cultural Sensitivity

- **The Maya are very hard working, simple, and happy people whose lives center around their families and their faith. They readily greet you with a smile.**
- **The Maya are also very generous people. They will share what little they have and give you the best. Rarely do they eat meat, yet when there is an occasion for a celebration when we are there, they serve just us, meat.**
- **By our standards they shouldn't be so happy and generous because they are very poor, having few material possessions, little education and opportunity.**

- **The men and women are very strong. You will see them carrying incredibly heavy loads of wood, cement, tools, on their backs or on their heads.**
- **Women carry their babies on their back wrapped in a woven cloth. The babies are carried like this for at least a year. Commonly you will see mothers carrying a baby on her back, holding another by the hand while carrying a load on her head.**
- **Children are the treasure of the Maya. Frequently, 7- or 8-year old boys must work alongside their parents on the family land. For this reason they are not able to attend school because their labor is needed to help sustain the family. Rarely do they go beyond sixth grade if they are lucky enough to attend school.**
- **The Maya are very gentle people. You will not see them pushing each other or horsing around like we do. They make no body contact with each other.**
- **They are respectful of each others space. They are very soft spoken and women commonly will not raise their eyes when speaking to you.**
- **They do not raise their voices, call to one another or yell at their children. Their bodies are quiet and they are serene.**
- **It is no surprise that hernias are the most common medical condition. And the men have the cardio-vascular system of an American 20 year old.**
- **Visiting American surgeons have to make adjustments in the amount of anesthesia they give to their patients since American patients of equal age require much less due to poorer cardiovascular health.**
- **They live at an elevation of 6500 feet, walk everywhere which often times are on 45 degree inclines. Recently we are seeing more bicycles.**
- **In their culture, everyone has their role. You will see the women frequently sitting on the dirt floor. They identify with mother earth who gives forth life as she does. The man stands or sits on a bench not because he thinks the woman is lowly but because she is one with mother earth.**

- **The earth is sacred to them. They will ask mother earth forgiveness before putting a hoe to the earth or planting a tree.**
- **Nursing mothers are a common sight. Don't be shocked to see this. They don't try to hide this like we do in our culture.**
- **At Mass, for sign of Peace, they may gently touch your forearm or shoulder or give a modest hug. Let them take the lead in this. Because of our frequent visits, they have gotten to know us and have learned our way of modest hugs. Again, let them take the lead in this.**
- **The women have a genuine fear of taking photos of their children or of them. Some think you are taking their spirits. You must always ask permission before taking a picture. And do not pick up or comfort a crying child without first asking permission from the mother. Never!**

Employment

- **Most Maya are subsistence farmers, growing corn and vegetables in the valleys in a manner not very different from the way their pre-Columbian ancestors did.**
- **Land that is farmed by the Mayas may be hours away from their home and situated high up the side of a mountain or on the slopes of a volcano.**
- **Much of the best land was forcibly taken from the Maya in the past for coffee plantations so that the Mayas generally have to struggle to survive. It is not uncommon for the Maya farmer to have to tie himself by rope to a tree in order to till the ground on the deep slopes so as not to fall. You will see this type of farming on slopes as we drive up the mountains.**
- **The majority of the men of Quiche work on a daily basis and what they earn is what they spend for family consumption. The men who have daily work earn no more than \$3.00 for a 10-12 hour day. When there is no work in the fields, then there is no income and many of the men must seek work in Guatemala City shining shoes or at the Coast harvesting Sugar Cane. In the city or at the coast, they are grossly taken advantage of and are subjected to inhuman living conditions, more susceptible to disease, for very little pay. If they work in the city, they are also subject to street crime.**

- They will return at important times to their villages for the planting and harvesting of the corn.
- The work situation is devastating to family life, as well as to the Maya male self image which takes pride in caring for his family and contributing to the needs of his community.

The Land and its Fruits

- Land is an important mark of the Maya identity.
- The land produces beans and corn. Corn is the staple food crop of the Guatemalan population. The Maya eat corn tortillas with every meal, 365 days a year. To them it is the bread of life. Although machines are used more commonly now for grinding the corn, it is still not unusual to find women using stone tools for this purpose. The national sound of Guatemala is the sound of the women making the tortillas and the sound of the “*molinos*” humming early in the morning grinding the corn.
- The women walk to the Molina twice a day in order to grind the corn.
- Chiles and fruits are cultivated whenever possible and sold at the weekly village market.
- Chickens, turkeys, or pigs are sometimes found on a Maya farm, but are rarely killed for the table. Occasionally a chicken is cooked for a family feast or for a local festival.
- We have been noticing more families with animals that makes us believe an organization has helped them obtain Animals.

Maya Homes

- Traditional Maya homes still follow the design of the their ancestors. The roof is usually thatched or tiled and the walls are made of adobe or cornstalks.
- Only the more affluent villager can afford to build a home out of concrete blocks or have a corrugated iron roof.
- There are usually no windows and the floors are earthen. The kitchen area is often little more than a small fireplace made of stones in a corner of the room. Commonly, there are no chimneys so the smoke finds its own exit through the roof tiles or eaves.

- Typically what we see is the cooking area set a little apart from the living quarters which keeps the smoke away.
- There is, however, a heavy concentration of smoke in the cooking area because the women cook like her ancestors with an open fire.
- Stoves with a little chimney are now becoming available, which helps to reduce the health hazards for both mother and the baby she carries on her back.

Altars

- Typically every home will have three rooms and the largest one will have an altar that will be decorated with candles, pine needles, flowers, a religious picture, etc.
- The sacrifice of animals to honor the gods, which in ancient Mayan times extended to human sacrifices, is still practiced among the Quiche Indians in some areas, although we have not observed this.

Health

- In general the level of health care in Guatemala is very poor and there are serious untreated health problems in the rural areas.
- The lack of proper facilities and medical personnel in the countryside helps account for the high infant mortality rate.
- One in five children die before the age of 5. The main causes of infant mortality are diarrhea, respiratory infections, and childbirth problems all of which are relatively easy to prevent with necessary resources.

Water

- Water came to the community where we visited in 2002. It is a little easier for the women now. However, homes do not have running water inside the house and no one has indoor plumbing.
- In areas without water the women will collect water from a communal standpipe and carry it home in containers balanced on their heads.
- The washing of clothes commonly takes place at communal washing places or on the banks of a local river or stream.
- Some homes have 'pelas' which are sinks outside the house where clothes are hand washed and air dried.

Electricity

- **Most villages have access to electricity, but most families cannot afford it. Electricity came to the village where we visited in 2001. We are starting to see sadly enough, TVs in some of the homes.**

Education

- **Because of the prolonged civil war and because of the necessity to work, many of the men and women cannot read or write. In the Department of Quiche, there is an 80% illiteracy rate.**
- **Typically, there is only one Government school in a large rural geographical area for students in kindergarten through 6th grade. Most of the children do not attend 7th – 9th grade due to the lack of access to this level of education.**
- **Some more statistics on the Educational level in the Quiche area:**
 - **20% of the Maya never finish the 6th grade.**
 - **35% of the children do not attend any schooling due to a lack of economic resources or because they live too far from a school.**
- **It is for this reason that S.O.S. has recently undertaken establishing an Educational Fund for the Maya children. We are in our beginning stages of this and are offering 20 scholarships this year.**

Summary:

- **Now you know more about the Maya culture, about how they live, and what they have suffered. It helps us to understand the point in their history in which we enter into their life.**
- **It explains the need for a Ministry of Presence and why we need to go slow with great gentleness and respect -why we must bring above all our loving presence - to be balm for their wounds.**