

The Domestic World

Most ancient Maya people spent the majority of their lives in and around domestic settings. Activities and experiences that occurred here shaped not only what people did every day, but how they thought about themselves in many important ways. Even kings and queens, with their very different living quarters, had rituals they performed for their subjects that reenacted the daily habits of simple domestic compounds. Living structures varied according to one's access to resources: royal families lived in roomy palaces made of stone, with plaster- and mural-covered walls and a high, vaulted ceiling. These buildings were often situated on small hills or artificial platforms to catch the breeze and prevent flooding during tropical rains. Middle-society homes were set atop smaller platforms, and may have had a plaster floor, but the walls of these homes were made of wood and the roofs of thatch. The simplest homes were set on the bedrock or ground level, with a packed dirt floor, wooden walls, and a thatch roof. Ironically, the wooden homes had many advantages over stone palaces – they allowed for more light and air to circulate, making them drier and in some cases cooler, and the materials to construct or repair these simple homes were easily available in the wetlands or forest outside Maya cities. However, they were very vulnerable to fire, especially during the dry season when an attack of flaming arrows could easily set an entire neighborhood aflame. Surrounding the central palaces and temples of ancient Maya cities were thousands of domestic or residential compounds, clusters of small houses, patios,

and gardens occupied by extended multigenerational families of parents, children, spouses, and grandparents. In the 16th century, Spanish cleric Bishop Diego de Landa recorded that the Maya people of Yucatan had a matrilineal marriage practice, meaning that young men would move into the residential compound of their wives, so it is likely that multiple generations of family members lived together for most of their lifetime. Many of the tasks that took place in a compound, such as tending small animals, weaving, or gardening, were made easier by the collective efforts of an extended group of relatives.

THE MORNING MEAL

The day would start before dawn in an ancient Maya domestic compound. A younger woman, maybe a teenager or a newly married woman, would rise earlier than everyone else to grind corn that had been soaking overnight. Mesoamerican peoples invented a process to create corn dough called *nixtamal*, from the Nahuatl word *nixtamalli* used in the Aztec region of central Mexico, and it is a process still in use today by rural Mesoamericans. This ingenious discovery softened the hard, dried kernels of corn and prepared them for grinding into *masa*, or soft corn dough. A bit of lime ash, made from powdered limestone and wood ash, was added to a large pot of dried corn to soak overnight in the kitchen area of domestic compounds. The alkaline properties of the lime ash loosened the hulls from the kernels to make grinding easier, but it also increased the nutritional content of the corn. The corn was ground with a *mano* and *metate*, a smooth roller stone to crush food against a flat oblong stone, respectively, into a paste that could be used to make tortillas, tamales, pozole, and a host of other corn-based foods that Maya people ate at every meal (Figure 2.1). In Coba, the setting that inspired this book, pozole, or a thick porridge of corn and water, was likely the most common breakfast food, perhaps supplemented with sweet black zapote fruit or spicy habanero chili peppers. Later in the Terminal Classic period the flat ceramic cooking pan known as a *comal* was introduced to the northern Maya lowlands from central Mexico, and the tortilla became the food of choice for all three daily meals.

Young women would wake from their sleeping mats on the floor of a small thatched hut. The majority of houses were made much as they



FIGURE 2.1 Grinding stone for processing maize, found in a kitchen area of the Lool domestic group at Chunchucmil, Mexico. The author's son Cyrus provides scale. Photograph by the author.

were until very recently in rural Yucatecan villages with a stone foundation and tamped earth floor. The surface of the floor is made of a powdery form of limestone that becomes harder and harder with time and daily sweeping. Some ancient homes had a real plaster floor, which was easier to keep clean but required more resources to manufacture. Sleeping mats were made of woven palm fronds or other plant material, perhaps with a cotton pad, although cotton was a precious commodity largely monopolized by elites. The walls of the house were made of wooden poles lashed together with agave twine. These materials were easily obtained in the forest outside the city and could be

quickly replaced when damaged. They allowed air to circulate through the house, which helped keep the home a cool and comfortable place to work. In the coldest time of the year, however, damp breezes entered at night and people would have to sleep next to one another for warmth.

Once everyone was awake, the floor of the house became a working area and sleeping mats were rolled up and put away. Children, small animals, and adults came and went throughout the interior of the house on their way to larger and more spacious outdoor patios and gardens. Sharp tools such as obsidian blades were stored in the rafters of the thatched roof, out of the way of children. Cooking fires were often located outside the home, where food could be prepared without causing smoke and heat to fill up the small house. Cooking fires were also a threat to thatch roofs that, once dry, were easily ignited by a stray spark. The fire was formed by three large stones with tinder placed between them. This “three-stone hearth” was ubiquitous in ancient Maya households and symbolized not only the place where nourishment was created but the symbolic heart of the home, the axis mundi or cosmic center point around which all productive activities revolved. The idea of the three-stone hearth was so important to the Maya that they had a constellation named for it, and kings and queens were buried with three jade beads in an elite version of this same idea. Rulers knew the importance of the three-stone hearth to Maya culture but they had access to the precious material jade that reinforced their importance as the leaders of Maya society.

Once corn masa was prepared, water also had to be brought from a nearby well. Large ancient Maya cities had many wells located in different neighborhoods, and in Coba, water was relatively easy to obtain as the limestone bedrock is soft and freshwater rivers travel underground through channels in the karst limestone. Young women or girls would ask to be sent to fetch water, filling huge ceramic jars they could balance on their heads as they walked slowly back to their homes (Figure 2.2). Fetching drinking water was an opportunity to visit with your friends, to walk side by side to the well and catch up on news from each other’s households. The large jars were left in a shady part of the home, where the porous ceramic material allowed for a slow evaporation of moisture that kept the water cool all day, no matter how hot the weather. Maya cities had wells for drinking water



FIGURE 2.2 Young Maya women visit as they gather water in ceramic jars at a well in Yucatan, Mexico, circa 1945. Photo of historic postcard courtesy of Karen Elwell.

and others that were used only for ceremonial purposes, such as retrieving clean water for making *balche*, a mildly alcoholic mead that was used in many ceremonies and as an offering to deities. There were secret wells that only certain priests and priestesses used and others that were centrally located. On unlucky days the heavy water jar might break when someone tried to lift it and leave fragments for archaeologists to find today.

While girls were sent to fetch water, other members of the domestic compound would help tend to small animals kept in the yard outside their homes. Ancient Maya people domesticated the turkey and Muscovy duck, both hearty animals that provided tasty sources of meat and helped keep domestic gardens free of insects. They were allowed

to roam freely between houses as both turkeys and ducks return to their roost at night. Some families kept so many ducks or turkeys that they built wicker enclosures for them. These circular pens had a stone foundation and the pen itself was made of perishable tree branches. There is also good evidence that ancient Maya people kept deer in their household gardens, or at least allowed deer to forage on the plants grown there. Deer meat was highly prized in ancient Maya cuisine and may have been turned over to the queen or king by commoners. Deer were so important not only because they were one of the largest game animals but also because, like humans, deer prefer corn. Maya mythology includes a story of the Sun God who turns into a deer to transport the Moon Goddess away from danger (Figure 2.3). Deer haunches were a particularly important offering in Maya rituals, and there may have been some sort of equivalency between the two sacred corn-eaters, deer and humans.

After attending to small animals, household members would also check on the many plants that filled domestic patios. Maya cities have been described as “garden cities” because there was so much space between structures and household groups. Soil chemistry indicates these open areas were used for planting nutrient-rich fruits, vegetables, and spices. Open patio spaces between the three to four structures in a residential compound were busy working areas shaded by fruit trees surrounding raised-bed and container gardens where herbs were grown. By building a small pen and raising it off the ground, Maya gardeners could protect their most delicate herbs from tropical pests including the domesticated ducks or turkeys who loved to nibble young shoots. As with the raised bed, repurposing a cracked water jar or other container as a planter allowed Maya gardeners to enhance the soil with natural fertilizers such as wood ash or other organic debris. This made raised-bed and container gardens very productive and sustainable. Peppers of various kinds that provided high amounts of vitamin C as well as spiciness and other culinary herbs like epazote were grown in these beds.

Avocado, guava, sapodilla, black and white zapote, and guava trees provided delicious fruit nearly year-round. All these plants are native to the Maya area and have now become famous around the world. Some were planted in natural solution holes in the bedrock that held moisture; others were planted in the ground surrounding structures.



FIGURE 2.3 Classic period ceramic vase of supernatural deer in conversation with an Old God of the underworld. University of Miami Special Collections, Jay I. Kislak Collection. 1987.014.00.0003. Photo by Justin Kerr, K4012, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington. University of Miami Special Collections, Jay I. Kislak Collection.

Interspersed with the trees were other fruits like papaya, passionfruit, and dragon fruit. Maya people also grew beans, chili peppers, chaya or bush spinach, and achiote or annatto – a bright orange seed used as a seasoning for their complex cuisine. Likewise in the domestic garden there were medicinal plants like trumpet tree, whose leaves were used in a tea to treat digestive troubles, and ceremonial plants like balche, a tree whose bark was used to make a mildly alcoholic mead. Flowers were important in Maya art and rituals, and household compounds may have had plumeria or frangipani trees with its five-petaled white, pink, or yellow flowers, and an amapola tree whose dramatic pink bottlebrush flowers attract birds and bees.

Since Maya people did not have animals that provided wool, gardens also had plants useful for creating thread and cloth such as cotton, ceiba, and various agaves. Wild cotton was domesticated in Mexico, and it grew in a variety of colors from white to beige to brown that were easily dyed in a variety of colors. The ceiba tree, which can grow up to 200 feet tall, was a powerful symbol to ancient Maya people of the interconnectedness of the earth, the sky and the underworld



FIGURE 2.3 (cont.)

(Figure 2.4). It also created seed pods filled with soft fibers that could be used as insulation or for filling cushions and sleeping mats and were even spun into thread. Agaves are succulents that thrive in the dry soils of the Maya world and have many useful components. By removing the flesh from agave leaves, Maya people exposed strong fibers that could be made into rope or twine, and even woven into burlap-style cloth.

While the garden was tended and ripe fruits harvested, a female head of the family likely began preparing the daily meal. In addition to corn pozole in the morning, people who left the compound for their daily tasks, such as men and young boys who had to walk to the cornfields, would take a ball of corn masa with them and perhaps some leftover tamales. People who stayed in the compound all day, like the children, elderly, and most of the women, snacked on masa, fruit, and other leftovers all day long. Later in the afternoon the family would gather together for one larger meal, such as turkey tamales with beans that had been slowly steaming in a cooking pot all day or, if the family was not as fortunate, ground ramon nut and bean tamales. Chaya or bush spinach was added to the corn masa and increased the nutritional value dramatically. Tamales were served with a variety of salsas made from avocado, chili peppers, achiote, and other seasonings. Tamales and other stewed dishes were served in large lipped



FIGURE 2.4 *Ceiba speciosa*, the sacred tree of the ancient Maya. Selva Lacandona, Chiapas, Mexico. Photo: Martina Katz / imageBROKER / Getty Images.

plates that held the contents in their sauce. People had smaller ceramic or gourd bowls from which they ate their own portions. Most of the population likely never had the opportunity to drink the hot, frothy chocolate that queens and kings consumed on special occasions, but they had plenty of fruit to mix with water for a nutritious and delicious beverage.

Early in the day family members would attend the ancestral shrine located on the eastern edge of the residential compound. These small platforms held the remains of beloved family members along with a few small offerings such as their favorite bowl or ornament. In one compound the funeral of a dear grandmother known as Sak Kab', or White Earth, took place only a week ago, and the plaster covering the

cavity where she was buried in the ancestral platform was still soft. The funeral had to take place quickly after she died – within a day or two. Her body was wrapped tightly in cloth in the flexed position – with knees to chin – and soft powdery limestone, the whitest that could be found, was placed into the platform cavity to prepare the space. As prayers were said the bundle of her body was interred into the spot where so many other family members had been buried before her, including the founder of this family's line, who was the original settler that built the household compound occupied now for generations. A tiny amount of precious powdered red hematite obtained from a trader was sprinkled over the cloth wrapped body of Sak Kab', and finally her eating bowl and a small bead made of limestone were placed over her head to protect her soul from any dangers as she crossed into the underworld. The bead was painted a light bluish green that made it resemble the precious jade beads worn by the queen, a stately women seen at a distance once by Sak Kab' many years ago. Now the family would visit the ancestral shrine and talk to her spirit every day, telling stories about how her grandchildren were thriving and how her favorite ceiba tree was about to flower. In this way, all the ancestors of the extended family remained close members of the compound, involved in the day-to-day life of their descendants. On the tenth anniversary of her death they would reopen the cavity on the platform and offer her a new ceramic bowl or something else she would have liked, but this was a long while off and they had plenty of time to plan what to give her (Figure 2.5).

Simple burials are found in modest domestic structures throughout the Maya area in the Classic period, and they are our best evidence that ancestor veneration was practiced at all social levels, not just among the elite. However, even though such burials are common, there are not enough of them to account for the entire urban population. And yet there were no cemeteries in ancient Maya settlements. From these facts we conclude that certain individuals, maybe the family member who first established the domestic compound, or someone who accumulated prestige for their skill or influence, were chosen to be the revered ancestor, while other family members were not. Many commoner individuals are unaccounted for in death – perhaps they were cremated, perhaps they were buried in a manner that has yet to be discovered by archaeologists. But ancestor



FIGURE 2.5 Domestic burial of an ancestor with ceramic vessels and shell offerings in structure 9M-136, from the site of Xuenkal, Mexico. Photograph by the author.

eneration of certain individuals was an important part of domestic ritual life, and by analogy to other cultures, these beloved dead continued to exert influence in the lives of family members for many generations.¹

CRAFT ACTIVITIES

Many productive activities took place in the household compound. Ancient Maya cities, no matter how large, did not have large-scale

¹ McAnany 2013.

workshops or warehouses as did the ancient cultures of Peru or Egypt; instead, almost every tool, object, piece of clothing, or work of art was made in a domestic setting by related family members. Archaeologists call this segmented production, and it is the best explanation of the particular archaeological materials related to crafting that are recovered from Maya households. Often objects found by archaeologists in domestic settings were unfinished, or multiple nearly identical objects are found. Both of these patterns are examples of the kind of material evidence that domestic production leaves behind. Making objects such as ceramic vessels or obsidian knives were activities that people folded into their daily routine, balanced alongside other daily tasks such as cooking and childcare or done after time spent away from the home in the fields and forests. Children or adults who moved into a compound learned how to craft tools and other necessities by observing expert craftspeople. Apprenticeship was informal and involved experimentation with materials and techniques under the supervision of a more experienced family member. In this sense the majority of ancient Maya people did not spend the entire workday engaged in a single activity as we do today; rather, they were expert multitaskers who produced goods needed by their household with extra goods paid to the state. Some members of Maya society who lived in palace compounds such as scribes or astronomers were obviously specialists and dedicated immense amounts of time to their art or craft (Figure 2.6). They did not have to spend time raising or preparing their own food, and their clothing and tools were provided by the goods made in commoner homes and paid in tribute to the elite. Overall, the ancient economy was based on surplus production in a household setting, a space filled with people of different skill levels and abilities who likely pooled their time and energy to complete many of the productive activities that occupied their days.

Without a large number of domesticated animals to provide wool or fur, almost all clothing was made of plant fibers in ancient Maya society. Plant fibers are versatile and abundant, but require a great deal of processing. Cotton must be cleaned of seeds, combed, and then spun into thread. Agave and henequen fibers must be cleaned of pulp and dried before they can be twisted into rope. In ancient painted bark-paper books and almanacs that survive today, known as codices, Maya women are depicted doing these activities in their household gardens.



FIGURE 2.6 Elaborate “eccentric” flint ornament made by a master crafts-person. The imagery shows three lords in profile. Courtesy of the Lowe Art Museum, 85.0078.

Four codices survive today from the Classic period, after many hundred were destroyed by Spanish clerics in a misguided effort to convert Maya people to Christianity. Ceramic and wooden spindle whorls attached to a wooden shaft were spun within a small gourd to draw the plant fibers down into a thin line of thread as fibers were spun together. Women sat together outside in the shade of their gardens spinning thread and weaving cloth. Young girls learned to spin by the time they were seven or eight years old, and older women whose children were grown and no longer had as much responsibility to manage a household also spent their time spinning.

This thread was later used to create elaborate cloth on the backstrap loom, a simple but powerful piece of technology still in use in the Maya area today. Backstrap looms allow the weaver to make a single length of cloth as wide as their hips but many meters long. The weaver can then stitch together multiple lengths of cloth to create nearly any piece of clothing, such as loincloths, headdresses, dresses, or blankets. One of the technological advantages of the backstrap loom is the ability of the weaver to see every aspect of the cloth as it is made and to adjust the tension of the cloth by leaning in or away from their work. This facilitated elaborate brocade work, a form of decoration where

additional thread is added by the weaver into the warp and weft of the cloth. Patterns familiar in Maya art were often added to ancient cloth, such as animals like jaguars or birds, or the kan-cross (an equal armed cross that symbolized the world tree). Most Maya people wore simple clothing made of henequen or agave fibers, which would feel scratchy to us but were made of sturdy materials that were easy to obtain. On special occasions they may have worn clothing made of soft cotton, or leather, decorated with bird feathers or rabbit fur. In Maya art we see people wearing leather sandals or walking barefoot. Jewelry was also an important part of everyone's costume. Common folk wore shell or stone pendants, or a carved bone hairpin. From the ceramic figurines often found in domestic compounds, a variety of head gear including wide brimmed hats and elaborate hairstyles were also very common, as were tattoos and scarification in delicate spirals and swirls. Cloth was needed for many things in addition to clothing: food was gathered in cloth bundles, people carried goods to market in cloth, and in the urban palaces people slept behind cotton curtains on soft cotton mats. Thick bundles of cotton cloth were given as tribute payments to queens and kings by their subjects and by visitors from nearby polities.

Other plant fibers were just as important to the ancient Maya economy even if they were not used for clothing. Palm fibers harvested from the forest were used to weave baskets, mats, and hats and to make all manner of ropes and cordage. Palm fibers are pliable when they are first harvested and have to be used quickly before they dry out and become brittle. In addition to gourds, palm fiber baskets were likely the most common form of container in the ancient Maya economy. Durable and lightweight, a person who wanted to bring in corn from their milpa or to transport raw chert or obsidian from the mountains, or who had captured wild birds for their decorative feathers likely used a palm fiber net or basket to transport such commodities. Entire palm fronds lashed with agave fiber rope were used to roof the majority of structures in Maya cities, and, while waterproof, these roofs were under constant repair. The domestic houses of the Maya, with their plaster floors and thatched roofs, stayed cool in the tropical heat – air passed through a thatched roof, and the high pitch helped hot air move up and away from the living area. Plaster or tamped earth floors also stayed cool in the dark shade the thatch provided.

Another important activity that took place in the domestic compound was the manufacture of pottery and all forms of ceramic technology.

Ancient Maya people did not work metal until the last few centuries before European contact, when it was used for decorative purposes. They had an abundance of other container materials available from the plant and mineral worlds, including a wide variety of clays and powdered temper, which are the inert materials added to clay to enhance its elasticity and ability to withstand firing. They began experimenting with fire-hardening, or firing, clay in the Middle Formative period (as early as 800 BCE), and by the Classic period (200–800 CE) when Coba was occupied, potters excelled at using clay to create a huge assortment of different containers and objects of art. In the domestic setting, clay from the forest was stored under palm fronds to keep it damp. When time allowed an entire family would join together to process the raw clay into a usable material – children and older people could pick out plants or rocks in the clay, adults could knead additives or temper into the clay to make it stronger and more pliable. Children learned to make clay vessels when given small amount of clay to play with, and their miniature practice vessels are found in domestic excavations.² As the individuals who spent the most time in domestic compounds, women and girls likely made many of the ceramics used by their families. Large water jars, plates for serving food, and small bowls for drinking corn pozole were all simple forms that could be made in the garden while simultaneously supervising children and domestic animals. The potter's wheel was not utilized in this area of the world prior to European contact, and instead each piece was unique, made of slabs and coils, worked with a pebble until it was perfectly smooth (Figure 2.7).

Once ceramic vessels were formed they were left to dry in the sun, perhaps in a part of the garden area off-limits to small children and animals. When dry to the touch they were painted with a thin clay slurry or slip, and the colors of these slips changed slowly over time as ceramic technology improved. In addition to slip, ceramics were decorated with beeswax that burned off during firing, leaving a resist design, often of spirals or swirls such as found on the flat interior of serving plates. Later the painted vessels would be piled up carefully on an exposed area of bedrock within the garden, and a hot burning fire made of palm fronds and other slower burning wood was set alight on top of the vessels. This

² Sheets 2006.



FIGURE 2.7 Modern Tzeltal Maya potter in the highlands of Guatemala using a traditional methodology. Photo: Insights / Contributor / Universal Images Group / Getty Images.

part of the process, known as open firing, was the most delicate and required considerable skill, although once the fire was set, anyone in the family compound could have supervised the firing and added more fuel as needed. The next day when the fire had burned itself out and the vessels were cool to the touch, family members could see which water jars or bowls had survived and which had cracked in the firing process. A cracked jar or plate might not be usable to serve food but it could be broken into pieces and those sherds could be repurposed as spindle whorls or fishing net weights. In some place broken sherds from “wasters,” the objects that did not fire correctly, were ground up to be used as temper in future ceramic production.

Ancient Maya people also made many beautiful figurines from clay. These ranged from very plain figures with no facial features or only simple indentations to extremely elaborate costumed representations of royalty and mythological figures. The most intricate figurines were likely produced in the city center within artistic compounds where craftspeople had access to the details of costume and headdress necessary to accurately portray a ballplayer or court dancer. But the majority of figurines were unpretentious and made in domestic compounds alongside the manufacture of ceramic containers. These anthropomorphic representations were sometimes made in molds, so they could be produced rapidly and with a standardized set of imagery, but just as often they were made individually by hand. By adding two or more perforations to the body, it was easy to transform the hollow body of the figurine into an ocarina or simple flute. Whistle figurines were often made in the form of songbirds, other animals, and clowns but female bodies were a very common theme for figurines in the Classic period. Sometimes dressed in elaborate embroidered huipiles, the Maya name for tunics, and sometimes undressed, these figurines are identifiable as female by their clothing and elaborate hairstyles. Often, they carry children and wear broad-brimmed hats that suggest a person headed out into the sun to trade wares in the market or to fetch water.

Headdresses, hairstyles, and hats were all ways the head was adorned and marked in Maya art, which used the face and head as a potent canvas for social identity expression. Hairstyles changed when a woman married; nobles wore elaborate headdresses made of paper, jade, and shell and spent hours getting facial tattoos. Figurines in a wide variety of forms were a ubiquitous part of Classic period domestic life and perhaps played a role in storytelling or rituals that centered on the intersection of official state mythologies and family life.

THE EVENING AND LEISURE

As the afternoon sun started to fade, members of the family would gather again in the patio area between houses. Children had been in the courtyard all day, playing with sticks and chasing ducklings. Their older siblings spent much of the day in the courtyard as well, tending to chores and learning how to craft the tools their family needed. Adults were busy cooking or tending to the cornfields; perhaps someone had made a trip into the forest to look for a special medicinal plant or

traveled down the broad paved road into the city center to visit the market where goods from other lands were exchanged. Before dusk they gathered together for a final meal of the day as the tamales and beans were finally ready. Extra food was prepared for visitors, for after dark there was little light available to work on crafts or other chores and it was time for leisurely activities in the twilight. The evenings in this part of the city were dedicated to visiting with neighbors and family, playing games, and storytelling. Ancient Maya people did not make oil lamps or other similar tools to illuminate the evening, although they had beeswax available for candles. It is unlikely that modest households like the one we discuss here were able to keep much of the beeswax they generated, as it was highly prized by the noble families who lived in larger palatial compounds that were illuminated at night.

Within this part of the city, where simple homes with gardens and extended families were packed side by side, there might have been a family of people who had formerly been enslaved. The practice of slavery in Classic Maya times is not well understood, but 16th-century Spanish accounts of Postclassic Maya society make it clear that enslaved people lived, worked, and were traded in many Maya settlements of that era. Extrapolating from European views of Postclassic Maya life back to native institutions of the Classic period 500 years earlier is a challenging proposition – iconographic and hieroglyphic evidence from the Classic period depicts mostly elite captives and prisoners who may have been ransomed, as we will discuss later. There are few, if any, images of commoner slaves from this time. Yet from the better documented Aztec practices of slavery and the most trustworthy accounts of Maya life written by Spaniards, we can conclude that Classic Maya society was not likely to be a “slave society” but rather a society with people who were enslaved.³ The former are cultures on which all economic and social relations are determined by the slave-master relationship. This was clearly not the case in Classic Maya culture. However, royalty, elites, and even those middle-society members with wealth may have “owned” enslaved people along with their other privileges of wealth, including more elaborate architecture and long-distance prestige goods such as jade or painted pottery.

³ Restall 2009:13.

Archaeologists have so far failed to identify the households or burials of enslaved people from the Classic period, in part because their lives may not have differed dramatically from those of most commoners, who regularly experienced nutritional deprivation, physical violence, and debilitating work requirements. We do not think there was a permanent enslaved class, or that children were born into slavery – in Spanish descriptions of both Aztec and Maya slavery it is usually the result of misfortune or criminal activity. Maya people who stole food or goods might have become enslaved to those from whom they stole, a status that could be temporary and terminated with successful repayment.⁴ But there is documentary evidence that some enslaved people were obtained through interpolity raids or as the result of being taken captive in war. These may have been primarily higher-status individuals, who were subject to ongoing humiliation for political purposes, or they may have been unfortunate commoners. An important characteristic of Classic Maya society is that it does not seem to have a social identity associated with slavery, and people did not spend their entire lives born into and subject to the type of ownership and institutional violence associated with slavery in the colonial New World. Individual ancient Maya people became enslaved during the course of their lives, and often their fortunes changed to allow them freedom before death. When someone worked off their debt or escaped from slavery, they must have sought out refuge with their extended family perhaps in neighborhoods like the one described here, where each family group provided for themselves far from daily interactions with the powerful Maya who might seek to recapture or further exploit a less fortunate person. Formerly enslaved people would have had much in common with our family, and evening visits from a woman who had stolen to feed her family or a man taken captive in war might have been routine.

One visitor that was due to stop by the residential group was the midwife Pichi', or guava in English, since a baby was born only a month before to one of the younger mothers who lived in the compound. Midwives were highly respected specialists who attended all the births in the neighborhood, and expert midwives were even called

⁴ Restall et al. 2023.

to the palace when the queen and her court gave birth. The baby boy born a month ago was healthy, and all the family rituals after his birth had gone as planned. His mother went through a period of seclusion afterward and then visited the sweatbaths for physical and spiritual cleansing. Sweatbaths were located throughout the city. Some were built of stone and set into the ground; others were more perishable and made of wood with branches above ground. Special prayers were said inside the sweatbath when someone needed cleansing, and by spending time inside this metaphorical cave new mothers emerged feeling stronger and cleaner. All the adults knew how to perform a sweatbath and no one needed a priest or priestess for this particular ceremony. Women would go with their female relatives and men would go with their male friends.

When Pichi' arrived at the house, she checked the mother to make sure she was feeling well and then she checked the baby. He had received a name shortly after the seclusion period but it would change at seven or eight years of age when he learned the male activities that his father and uncles would teach him. She checked his cradle board, the two wooden planks that held his head flat and shaped the pliable frontal and occipital bones so he would have a handsome profile like all his male relatives.⁵ Everyone in this family had their head shaped in the first year of life – older midwives and the grandmothers knew how to place the infant on the cradle board and how much pressure to apply to shape the bones of the skull without hurting the child. Anyone in the city who did not have a shaped head was considered to have been poorly cared for as a child, except those people whose *wahy*, or animal companion spirit, prohibited them from using the cradleboard – there were a few people like that, even in the palace. Pichi' massaged the mother's pelvic area to make sure her reproductive organs were back in the correct place and then massaged the baby with an oil that contained ground annatto seed so his skin would be reddish and healthy. After all this work she sat down to share a tamale and hear what news there was of the neighborhood.

After Pichi' left, there was time for games and stories. The moon was bright enough to play *patolli*, a game of chance played with beans

⁵ Tiesler 2011.

instead of dice. A geometrical board was scratched into the dirt in the garden and two players would take turns moving their colored beans around the squares of the board. Some families had a woven mat with a board painted on it, and in the palace boards were permanently painted or inscribed into the stucco of a sleeping bench. Everyone in the city was crazy for the game, and some people even bet turkeys or fruit that they would win. Our family does not have enough extra food to allow betting but they loved to throw the marked beans and beat one another in the count of patolli squares.

While the patolli game was going on, grandfathers told stories about the constellations in the night sky. With little artificial light, at night nearly everyone in their neighborhood had an excellent view of the Milky Way, known as the White Road in Maya, and all the major constellations. Ancient Maya people wrote that their kings and queens passed into the underworld via the Milky Way when they died and “entered the white road.” The end of the dry season and the approach of the rainy times could be predicted by the appearance and disappearance of certain major constellations like the three stars of the Great Turtle, which we call the belt of Orion today.⁶ When this constellation was no longer visible in the night sky, the rains would soon arrive. Stories were told about other constellations that the Maya saw as a rattlesnake, scorpion, bird, and frog, among others. Everyone could pick out the bright planet Venus above the horizon when it appeared as an evening “star” and when it later reappeared as a morning “star.”

As the moonlight faded, most of the family moved into their homes to roll out their sleeping mats. The day would begin again before dawn. For comfort and companionship family members slept next to one another, with the baby close to his mother so he could nurse through the night, and the younger boys together so they could whisper to one another while the rest of the family slumbered. The embers of the cooking fire just outside the door of the hut were banked before bed, so they would be easy to kindle in the morning. Dried corn had been put into water and lime to soak in preparation for tomorrow’s corn dough. All the animals were in their pens and fed.

⁶ Bricker and Bricker 2011.

The domestic world was at the heart of ancient Maya culture. Most ancient people spent a huge part of their lives in and around the domestic compound where they were born and where their female relatives had been born for many generations. These compounds were used for centuries, with slight modifications such as a new plaster floor or a patio enlargement. Even death did not separate most people from their homes, as ancestors were buried in nearby household shrines that were actively used for small-scale, personal rituals. The interior and exterior areas of residential compounds were the most familiar spaces of ancient lives, just as our homes are the most familiar parts of our lives today. But unlike our society, ancient Maya people spent many hours at home engaged in the manufacture of goods that were then traded and exchanged throughout their neighborhood, their city, and the region in which they lived. Households were largely self-sufficient and each of the members had important responsibilities no matter how young or how old. Many central aspects of Maya culture were generated in the practices that took place inside the private family area of the residential compound. These intimate family practices were carried out at every home throughout the city, and much of what it meant to be a Maya person was knowing that other modest families also told stories about the stars, also played patolli, and also made pottery. These shared daily practices and the expectation of their perpetuation made life in the city meaningful.

Suggested Readings

- Bricker, Harvey M., and Victoria R. Bricker 2011 *Astronomy in the Maya Codices*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.
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- Sheets, Payson 2006 *The Ceren Site: An Ancient Village Buried by Volcanic Ash in Central America*. Belmont, CA: Thompson Wadsworth.
- Tiesler, Vera 2011 Becoming Maya: Infancy and Upbringing through the Lens of Pre-Hispanic Head Shaping. *Childhood in the Past* 4:117–132.