

How Families Lived

Houses

Houses varied from very simple, single-room dwellings of the ordinary people to imposing stone buildings in which the nobility lived. Houses of the nobility and palaces of the rulers had many large rooms. Usually these palaces included rooms used as administrative offices. Ordinary houses had a family ossuary beneath the floor.

Maya houses were built with wooden posts supporting a thatched roof. The Mayas who lived in the lowlands often built their houses on low rectangular mounds of earth above the reach of flood waters. During the Formative period, this same type of structure was often built on flat-topped pyramids to serve as temples. An excavated house at La Sierra had two rooms with thick walls built of cobbles set in mortar and a paved floor.

Some houses were built as club houses for unmarried men undergoing informal social and religious education and others for unmarried girls of noble birth.

Houses for families were located near a good water source. Homes were arranged around an open space that was rectangular in design. Clusters of these arrangements formed hamlets in rural areas. For every fifty to one hundred dwellings, there was a minor ceremonial center. Planning of towns did not seem to involve neatly laying out streets.

SOURCE: Odijk, Pamela. *The Mayas*. South Melbourne, Australia: The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd, 1989, pp. 14, 16.

Families

Upon marriage during late adolescence, a young man was required to live with his wife's family for a period of service that lasted for about six years. After this the couple would live with or near the husband's family. Divorce was recognized in Maya society for several reasons. A Maya woman, for example, could be divorced for not producing children to work with her husband in the fields.

Women and men could own property, and this could be passed on from father to son or from mother to daughter. People took family names for identification and social status. In addition they took a *naal*, or house name, from their mother. This name could only be passed on via the female line.

Mothers brought up their girls strictly, and when they were old enough a marriage was arranged. Marriages could not take place between people with the same family name. Children of the nobility eventually had careers in politics, commerce, or the priesthood. Extreme contrasts in wealth and social status separated the nobility from ordinary Maya families.

Archaeological findings and documents tell us a great deal about education in Maya society. Maya writing shows that the children of the nobility and rulers were taught to read and write.

Furniture

Furniture in peasant homes was simple. It consisted mainly of wooden tables, benches and stools, and beds made of frames resting on slats with a reed mat.

HANDOUT #5 — continued

Below: peasant house.

