

The Cycle of Life in a Mayan Village

The day began before earliest light, when the women arose, stirred the fire and began making preparations for breakfast. Fire was obtained by twirling a stick with a hardened point in a cavity in soft wood, which acted as tinder, but this was not a daily exercise since the ashes under the three-stone hearth normally kept hot all night.

Preparation for breakfast was a somewhat lengthy affair; although beans were left in the pot overnight, a new batch of maize had to be ground each morning. The maize grains were kept soaking in lime-impregnated water all night, to soften the hulls, which had to be removed before grinding could begin. The grinding was done by rolling the soft grains on a flat stone with a stone rolling-pin. The end product was a paste or dough rather than flour, but of just the right consistency for making tortillas. These were baked on an earthenware griddle and then dropped, while hot, into a calabash, covered with a cloth to keep them warm.

While this was going on, the man of the house was about his morning devotions. Taking some embers from the fire for his incense-burner (an earthenware container), he squatted outside the hut, facing east. As he dropped little lumps of copal into the burner and watched the fragrant smoke curling up he prayed for good hunting, or favourable planting weather, or rain, according to the needs of the coming day.

When the tortillas were ready, the man came back into the hut and, sitting on a log stool, dipped into the calabash. Each tortilla was twisted into the form of a spoon or scoop which

enabled him to dip into the pot for a mouthful of beans. Eating the "spoon" with its contents, he thus obtained a nicely balanced diet of protein and carbohydrates!

The custom of early rising was dictated by the tropical climate, which required that work should be done during the cooler hours of morning and, perhaps, evening. In the heat of the day, the Maya preferred to rest. Also, of course, if it was a day for hunting, the best chance of success lay in the hours immediately before and after dawn. When hunting, the man would take his lunch, in the form of maize dumplings wrapped in a leaf. If he was working in the fields, his wife would usually bring his lunch out to him.

The evening meal was taken at about five o'clock. Before he sat down to it the man enjoyed his daily bath, normally a hot one, taken in a wooden tub, for which his wife had been heating water all day in earthenware pans over the fire. In the bigger cities, such as Tikal, he could alternatively visit the communal steam baths and sit there talking with his friends.

The five o'clock meal was the most elaborate and substantial of the day. Tortillas again formed the basis of it, but instead of beans the women would serve whatever meat or fish was available, usually in the form of a stew, together with herbs and vegetables. If flesh were scarce, eggs might be used as a substitute. For dessert the peasants had a wide variety of fruits in season. Their main beverage was chocolate, made from cocoa-beans and maize flour, which the early Spanish chroniclers described as a very pleasant, foaming drink. In the absence of cocoa-beans—and they tended to be expensive in Yucatan, having to be brought in from the hills—the family would drink a mixture of water and

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maize meal, perhaps sweetened with honey. To drink pure water was unusual.

The evening was spent either in conversation with friends and neighbours or in handicrafts. The man would make or repair tools while his wife spun or wove. Alternatively they might engage in making artefacts to be sold at the local market. At some time during the evening the wife would put the next day's ration of maize to soak in jars of lime-water. The evening meal—a light one similar to breakfast—would be eaten at eight or nine o'clock, after which the family went to bed.

The cycle of Mayan agriculture consisted

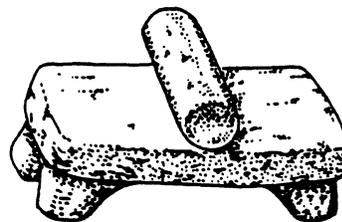
mainly of growing maize. From the cleared fields each family was allocated a plot of 400 square feet, but clearing the scrub and cultivating the land was a communal task in which all shared. Work in the fields was concentrated into certain busy periods, as in most tropical agriculture. The intense activity of brush-cleaning, planting, weeding and harvesting would be followed by long intervals of comparative leisure. As mentioned, the essential work of a Mayan farmer occupied him for only two months out of twelve. He had ample time left for building pyramids, hunting, craftwork, making war and enjoying seasonal festivals.



A detail from the Madrid Codex showing a merchant god making fire. The Maya obtained fire by twirling a stick with a hardened point in a cavity of soft wood.



above left Grinding maize. The grains were first softened by soaking and then ground on a flat stone with a stone rolling-pin. This drawing is based on a pottery figurine found at Lubaantun. The woman carries a child on her back.



A grinding stand and stone rolling-pin used for preparing maize. Found in a burial at Balancanche, Yucatan.