



# ***Maya: Hidden Worlds Revealed*** **at the Milwaukee Public Museum**

**Limited Engagement: February 10 – May 28, 2018**

## **Facts about the Maya of Belize**

Evidence suggests that **people of Maya culture first settled in Belize between 2000 and 1200 B.C.** They likely migrated into the area from the highlands of Guatemala or from southern Chiapas in Mexico.

Maya religion was **polytheistic and animistic**, meaning the people believed in many gods, in the power of ancestral spirits and that both inanimate objects and living beings had an inner force or spirit.

**The Maya perceived their universe as having three levels:** The heavens, earth and the underworld. At the center of the universe was the sacred Ceiba tree, whose limbs touched the heavens and whose roots descended into the underworld. Heaven was the abode of the sacred gods and deified ancestors. Earth was the home of humans, forests and all other creatures. The underworld was a place of death and diseases.

**Human sacrifice was an important aspect of ancient Maya ritual.** People were sacrificed and placed as offerings during the commemoration of monumental buildings. They were sometimes sacrificed during the funeral rites of rulers, during ceremonies that celebrated victory in war and to appease the gods. They were also sacrificed in caves when the community petitioned their gods for rain, bountiful harvests, and continued sustenance.

To the ancient Maya, **no stone was more precious than jade.** Its light green color embodied all that nourished life on earth. The largest carved jade object discovered in Belize is a jade head depicting the sun god Kinich Ahau. It weighs almost 10 pounds.

**Maya communities ranged in size and complexity.** Villages may have had only a few hundred people, but large cities, like Caracol, may have had as many as 100,000 inhabitants.

***Pok-ta-pok* was an important Maya ball game** that sometimes served as a public re-enactment of warfare. During these instances, elite captives were forced to play a game against their royal victors. In the end, the losers were often sacrificed and their decapitated heads would have been placed on skull racks that lined the alleys of the ballcourts.



The Maya provinces of modern-day Belize were **well-known for the production of high-quality cacao**.

**The Maya never really had a monetary system.** They relied on a system of barter to acquire and exchange goods. Sometimes the value of goods was based on a certain number of cacao seeds or possibly jade beads.

The **average Maya household** had 6-8 family members and was patriarchal, meaning the father was the head of the household. In most communities, women were considered of marriageable age between 14 and 16 years of age, and men married between the ages of 18 and 20.

The **ancient Maya had a very high rate of infant mortality.** Of those who survived past early childhood, the average age at death was between 35 and 50 years.

The **Maya practiced various forms of personal beautification**, from tattooing and face painting to scarification and dental and cranial modification.

The **main staples of a Maya diet** were corn, beans, squash, and chili peppers. They also ate yucca, tomatoes, avocados, chilla and a variety of fruits, and they grew cacao and vanilla.

The ancient Maya, it can be said, were **victims of their own success.** Droughts, decreasing productivity of food, conflict and competition for resources made it difficult to sustain the requirements of such a large population, forcing them to move into neighboring regions.

**More than six million Maya still inhabit Guatemala, Belize and the Mexican states of Yucatan, Campeche, Quintana Roo and Chiapas.** They continue to farm the land of their ancestors and actively contribute to the cultural diversity of modern Central America.

**Source:** *101 Questions and Answers About The Ancient Maya of Belize*, Dr. Jaime Awe

*Maya: Hidden Worlds Revealed* is presented in partnership by the Science Museum of Minnesota, Denver Museum of Nature and Science and the Museum of Science Boston.

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