

# Modern Mayas Treasure Ancient Glories

Archæology

By EMMA REH STEVENSON

When the first white men, a handful of romantic Spanish wanderlust-ers, touched on the silvery coastline of Yucatan, soon after the discovery of the New World, the famous old Maya cities were already empty and deserted.

The Indians that the Spaniards met in the "Land of the Pheasant and the Deer" were living in third-rate towns, as compared with older cities such as Chichen Itza or Uxmal. A century before, the last great Maya Empire had fallen to pieces, and when the Spaniards came trees were growing out of the famous temples, and noisy swallows and bats flew through the deserted rooms.

The native race, however, had not forgotten about the good old days, and humble Indians made devout pilgrimages to the old religious centers. The families of their old kings and priests had emigrated from northern Yucatan back into their original homes in Peten, Guatemala, leaving the great middle and lower class behind them. These, "without benefit of clergy," still brought their offerings of copal, rubber and chewing gum to burn in the old ruins. Every year stragglers trudged over long trails through the jungles bringing the most precious things they possessed to throw into the Sacred Cenote at Chichen Itza, that great round hole broken through the limestone crust, far down to a deep, silent subterranean pool.

Although the old religious organization that once held the monopoly of education in the land of the Mayas was no longer functioning, there were still people left in whom the old arts of writing and recording time survived. Many of the mysteries of the Maya civilization that are baffling scientists now, could then have been solved.

The early padres and Conquistadores saw no reason for mastering Maya writing, or the other arts on which they looked down. Neither did they encourage the Indians to hold on to their own culture, for when they beheld the strange synthetic monsters carved of stone and painted in color combinations Europeans never thought of, their impulse was to smash the monstrosities.

The Mayas of those days were probably as likeable folks as they



TWO MODERN MAYA MAIDS, with their hair in a characteristic "xtuch"

are today. The fact is that the first white man who made friends with them, a Spanish sailor, did not want to go back home any more, and lived happily with them for many years. Diego de Landa, second bishop of Yucatan, tells how this Aguilar the sailor married a native lady, adopted Maya customs and dress, and he fears, their "idolatrous practices as well." Thus one of the very first American conversions went in the wrong direction.

But how little the Mayas knew of their own history even 400 years ago is shown by the words of a Colonial observer who explained that "the Indians do not surely know who built the cities nor when they were built, though some did their best in trying to explain the matter, but in so doing showed foolish fancies and dreams."

The fact that the fallen cities were nevertheless still held sacred is indicated by the wording of a colonial

land-deed covering the ground where the beautiful city of Uxmal now stands. In part it reads, "It would prevent the Indians from worshipping the devil in the ancient buildings which are there, having in them idols to which they burn copal, and performing detestable sacrifices, as they are doing openly and publicly."

Although many secrets of the origin and development of the great Maya civilization must have died when its political structure fell to pieces about a century before the discovery of America, and although the coming of a new race and the introduction of a new religion has polluted much of the pure tradition that remained, there is still today a wealth of information in the everyday lives of modern Yucatecans. Human nature outlasts temples, and there is as much to read in living faces as in carved rocks.

The Maya spirit has not been stamped out in Yucatan and replaced by something else, because it was too positive a force to be swept away, but it has interwoven itself into the fabric of a new civilization that may once more bloom on the limestone peninsula that projects into the jade-green sea. It is perfectly proper to be an Indian in Yucatan, and the quiet assurance of the Mayan is a significant contrast to the shivering Aztec with his chin in his serape, on the Central Mexican Plateau, ashamed of his race and language.

As Dr. Manuel Gamio, well-known Mexican archæologist and sociologist, has pointed out, a truer racial mixture has taken place in Yucatan than on the mainland of Mexico, and one race has not crushed another. As a result, the dormant Maya civilization still lives to a large extent.

In the lower and middle classes Indian blood is strong and traditions are purer, and much could be salvaged today to help the archæologist who is excavating the ancient cities piece together the tale of the past. There is still a section of Yucatan that has never come under the rule of the Mexican government at all, and there the modern Mayas are probably much as they were at the time of the Conquest. The capital of this region is Santa Cruz, a matter of days on horseback from the eastern end of the Yucatecan railroad at Peto. The Indians are not unfriendly, (Turn to next page)

## Modern Mayas Treasure Ancient Glories—Continued

but few visitors ever reach Santa Cruz except on official missions for which permission is obtained from the Maya chief, "general" Mai.

But the student can find many relics of old traditions nearer the beaten track as well, and there is as much thrill in coming across some hidden spring of ancient tradition as there would be in finding a white temple in the jungle.

Jean Charlot, official artist of the Carnegie Institution Expedition working at Chichen Itza, during a trip through the brush to other ruined cities in the eastern part of the state, came across many fresh offerings of copal gum on long-forgotten ruins buried by vegetation.

He also tells of playing with a little Maya boy on the American hacienda at Chichen Itza, and pretending to be choking him, he put his hands around the boy's neck and said "I am going to kill you." The boy quickly said, "If you do it will rain," a remark that harked back to the times when it cost a human life to get a little water for the corn crop.

The Maya laborers working with the archæologists at Chichen Itza did not show the white man's great excitement at the recent finding of the beautiful plaque of inlaid turquoise in the Inner Sanctuary of the Temple of the Warriors, but they were curiously interested in a polished stone ball that came with the find. They said it was a "sas-tun," an object of great importance in their old religion and which is still used because it is believed to have great magical and curative properties.

Miss Katheryn MacKay, trained nurse attached to the Carnegie Expedition Staff, and who has had many opportunities of getting acquainted with the natives during free clinics which she holds several times a week, tells of rain ceremonies in the nearby villages during which the Mayas cook sacred meals to Chac with water which they get from a sacred cenote.

Don Luis Rosado Vega, director of the Archæological and Historical Museum at Merida, describes rain ceremonies which are common throughout Yucatan today. He states that the Indians always hold two "parties" for their crops, one when they are sowed and the other when they are reaped, and at both of them they get very drunk and dance.



*MAYA ARCHITECTURE OF TODAY.*  
A hut built by the people whose ancestors made the great structure shown on the cover

Details that Dr. Herbert Spinden, Harvard University archæologist, has noted on Maya monuments such as one at Yaxchilan, Chiapas, belonging to the Old Maya Empire, suggest that the styles in dress in vogue in Yucatan today have not changed radically for perhaps a thousand years. Dr. Spinden finds a Maya woman on a carved door lintel dressed in a sacklike garment embroidered all over and especially heavily around the hem, and he believes it may be the prototype of the modern "huipil," that Maya women wear.

Dr. Cook of Fiji Island fame, when he was a young man 165 years ago, tells of the white cotton sacklike garment richly embroidered around the bottom and neck, that the native women wore, a description fitting exactly today. Don Luis Rosado Vega, of the Merida museum, has three stone statues of Maya women in his collections, coming from the state of Campeche, which show embroidered collars that could easily be very like the modern ones the native women wear when they are "dressed up."

The carved door lintel on which Dr. Spinden sees the forerunner of the modern "huipil" of Yucatan, also shows that the curious "xtuch" or knot of hair the women wear on top of their heads in the back was also in good style when Yaxchilan was a fashionable city. The Maya lady who posed there for her picture many centuries ago gathered her hair in a knot at the back of her sugar-loaf shaped head and tied it with a ribbon as the Yucatecan women do today.

A diverting picture of a modern Maya Indian looking down into his

own past was given recently by a talkative native who lives on the edge of the brush at Chichen Itza. I was on my way to "Las Monjas," a towering palace of the ancient city, to see the red sun-ball set for the last time in the flat sea of low jungle that stretches as far as one can see.

The path led by his hut and in order to be polite I said "Buenas tardes," and asked if it were the right trail. He was chopping a pole propped on a stump with a curiously shaped machete that had a curl on the end like the nose of the famous "Long Nosed God" on the Temple of the Warriors not far away.

He was in a talkative mood and I stopped to hear how he was going to build his mound of wood in order to produce charcoal. While he illustrated with little twigs and drawings in the dust, I chopped on the pole with the long-nosed machete and his wife came out with the baby on her hip and sat on the other end of the pole.

I asked how he supposed the ancients chopped the hard sapote wood they used for door lintels when they had no metal axes. He replied that they must have had metal because they had bells. I explained that those were of copper and gold and too soft to cut.

He answered that in old times it was easy to do anything, because the king had many slaves, and all he had to do was command. He made a curious sweeping gesture with his hands. And when the king said you had to give your son to be sacrificed, there was nothing else to do, he continued. He asked if I had seen the Cenote de Sacrificios, and the altar in front of it, and the oven underneath where they roasted the heart of the victim after it had been cut out so, and he illustrated. The priests and nobles got a little piece of the roasted heart to eat, he said.

Then he wanted to know if we had Saints in my country and I replied that the "central" god is worshipped more, and the Saints are not so important as in Yucatan. That puzzled him, and he said that the Saints were God's office staff and each had a different job.

"The antiguos only had one god," he remarked. "They worshipped the Sun." He made another sweeping gesture with his arms and his head bent back gracefully and his eyes rolled up as if in adoration. (*Turn to page 397*)

## Gypsies of Hindu Origin

*Ethnology*

Gypsies are on the wing in their motor caravans again, migrating chiefly northward for the summer and just as hard for scientists to track and study as any rare migrating birds.

It seems likely that the real gypsy race is slowly on the road to extinction, according to Dr. Walter Hough, anthropologist of the U. S. National Museum, who has long been interested in these elusive wanderers. The clearing of forests and the broader settlement of this country leave fewer peaceful havens for gypsy encampments. Horse trading and tinkering are not good twentieth century business projects. Gypsy fortune telling must compete now with forms of popular psychology, character reading, astrology and other more learned-looking methods of dicking with the future, although the gypsies are shrewdly taking on some of this learned patter.

But scientists have learned and deduced some facts about the gypsies and their mysterious ancestry before it is too late.

"More than 100 years ago, a student of comparative languages showed that the gypsies are originally from India," said Dr. Hough. "They came to Europe in the middle ages by way of Egypt. When any one asked where they were from they said, from Egypt, and they still claim Egypt as their native land. But many signs point to their Hindu origin."

A camp of pure blood gypsies, such as are rarely seen nowadays, would reveal tawny, lithe men with

expressive faces, black eyes and hair and clean cut features, a real Hindu type, Dr. Hough points out. Then, too, the gypsy maiden's love of finery betrays the oriental strain. The gypsy dances suggest the oriental freedom and postures. Gypsy love of horses no doubt was brought from the hills of India, the anthropologist also believes, for it is known that when the gypsies emerged into Europe they had fine animals and plenty of money, and they have always been connoisseurs of horses and dogs.

A few traces of Hindu religion have clung to them.

"They will not eat eels and a few other animals because they think that in the mutations of the soul the spirits of their ancestors may inhabit them," Dr. Hough states.

"A long standing custom of the gypsy that is a survival, no doubt, of India, is their burning of the possessions of the dead. In 1900, in Maryland, chief Seth Lovell's gaily painted palatial wagon valued at \$2,000 and filled with his property was burned. The ceremony was conducted by his widow Rhoda, and several relatives who wept while the flames destroyed the gypsy chief's equipage."

The gypsies steadily tend to blend racially, as wanderlusting strangers with red hair, freckles, alien features, or un-gypsylike speech join a gypsy band and marry into gypsy families. It is difficult now for an anthropologist to find a pure gypsy type, but gypsy temperament runs as true to form as ever.

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## Medicine in Stars

*Medicine-Astronomy*

Aesculapius, the classical god of medicine, though promised a place in the stars by Zeus, has never till now been placed with his Olympian confreres among the celestial bodies.

This neglect, however, has been repaired. In a recent letter, Dr. Edwin B. Frost, director of the Yerkes Observatory, informed the American Medical Association that the medical profession is at last represented in the heavens by an asteroid of the fourteenth magnitude, circulating between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. The tiny planet was christened Aesculapius at Dr. Frost's suggestion

by its discoverer, Prof. George Van Biesbroeck also of the Yerkes Observatory.

"Doctors wishing to consult their Patron Saint," said Dr. Frost, "will have to use a pretty good sized telescope, and we shall be glad to be of any assistance."

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Long-distance electrical transmission of energy in the United States dates from 1893, when a current of high voltage was carried from Pomona to San Bernardino in California, a distance of about 19 miles.

## Maya Glories—Continued

"They did not worship snakes and other animals, but raised them as the Cristianos raise cattle and hogs, and they offered these to the Sun in sacrifice.

"The ancianos did not kill every snake they saw, however little it might be, like the Cristianos do," an act which he illustrated with a stick. "They let them get old and fat and when the king ordained they killed them.

"They ate the flesh for food and made clothing and ornaments out of the skins and rendered the fat like the lard of the hog. The fat was burned in the hollow stone pots you see lying in the ruins as an offering to the Sun."

He asked if I had seen the black stains on the walls and ceilings of the inner rooms of the temple that stands on top of El Castillo, the highest building in Chichen Itza. That comes from burning snake oil, he stated.

The sun went down, the log was cut through, and the wife fell off the other end giggling, while the baby took up the machete.

"The snakes were different in the old days from what they are now," the Indian continued. "They had big mouths like large lizards and they had strong teeth. You have seen them in the frescoes. I don't believe there were any animals existing then that are not shown in the carvings and paintings in the temples.

"I believe the Castillo was built before the flood," he said, "I mean the Great Flood when Noah saved a pair of every kind of animal. Just how long ago was the Flood?" he asked.

Six thousand years, I told him. He showed surprise. His reckonings were all upset, and it took him a long time to struggle through his private system of logic and set the Christian faith up again in perfect accordance with what he believed of the story of his own race.

The unfortunate "break" about 6,000 years cost almost as many bug-bites there on the ground on the edge of the jungle in the dark. It was not until after nine o'clock that he got the two religions hooked up once more to his own satisfaction, after which he lighted the way, proud as any Greek logician, back to my own hut on the main road.

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