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Abstract: Before the arrival of Europeans during the 16th century in the region called Latin America, two of the major native groups were the Maya of Mexico and Central America and the Inca of South America. The Inca of South America had a hierarchical, patriarchal class structure. Men were the heads of their families and of the Incan society. Families were divided into classes. The ruling class was composed of the ruler and his family members. Temple priests, architects, and regional army commanders were lower in class only to the elite members of the ruling-class family. The two lowest classes were made of artisans, soldiers, and peasant farmers. These farmers grew all of the crops necessary to feed their own families, as well as the families of the upper classes.
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Family Ties in Central and South America

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Before the arrival of Europeans during the 16th century in the region today called Latin America, two of the major native groups were the Maya of Mexico and Central America and the Inca of South America.

The Inca of South America had a hierarchical, patriarchal class structure. Men were the heads of their families and of the Incan society. Families were divided into classes. The ruling class was composed of the ruler and his family members. Temple priests, architects, and regional army commanders were lower in class only to the elite members of the ruling-class family. The two lowest classes were made of artisans, soldiers, and peasant farmers. These farmers grew all of the crops necessary to feed their own families, as well as the families of the upper classes.

Ruling-class women sometimes had power, but it was more usual for rulers to be men. The sapa (high priest or ruler) and the army commander were the most important men in any Incan village.

Inca women used llama wool and cotton to weave cloth. Dyes were made from indigo and other plants. The finest dyed and woven cloths were given to the ruling class. A particularly fine weaving might be given to the gods during an important religious ceremony. Cloth was also used as a material for bartering. Fine cloth might be traded for cocoa, turkey, or even gold.

Inca children did not always live long lives. Sometimes, they were chosen to serve as sacrifices to the Sun God. These children were taken high into the mountains and buried alive with food, corn beer, and coca leaves during annual ceremonies that were held to ensure a good harvest and a happy Sun God. To be chosen to serve as a sacrifice was considered to be a great honor.

Inca men were expected to marry by the age of 20. Brides and grooms would exchange sandals at their wedding ceremonies. Inca leaders married their sisters to keep the blood of their families pure. Their sisters became their first, or principal, wives. The Inca tradition was for the son of the ruler and his principal wife, or sister, to be the heir to the throne.

Like the Inca, the Maya of Central America also had a family-based caste system. Caste membership was hereditary. The elite noble class was made up of the ruler, his family, nobles, and priests. Upon the death of a ruler, his son or brother took his place. Mayans who were not born into the elite noble class were divided into a class of warriors, a middle class of tradesmen and craftsmen, or a lower-class peasantry.

Mayan working-class men were skilled tradesmen. The peasant men were farmers. They spent most of their days in the fields. They grew maize (corn), cotton, beans, squash, and cacao. Mayan peasant women were often skilled weavers as well. They used cotton to weave cloth. The dyes used by Mayan women included indigo, brazil wood, logwood, annatto, and iron oxide. They also made baskets.

Soon after birth, a Mayan infant's head was pressed between two boards. It was secured and left this way for several days. The pressure reshaped the child's skull. It is believed that this was done to make the shape of the head resemble that of an ear of corn.

Upper-class Mayan children were taught to read and write using pictograms and hieroglyphics. They studied religion, math, and astronomy. They also studied the Mayan calendar and learned to count and write out the Mayan numeral system.

When Mayan boys and girls became teenagers, they participated in a celebration called the "Descent of the Gods." After this, a matchmaker could negotiate their marriages. The bride's father expected to receive a good price for his young daughter's hand in marriage. The bridegroom's father would try to negotiate a fair amount of time for his son to work for his father-in-law. After the marriage, the husband would have to work for his wife's parents for five to six years.

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PHOTO (COLOR): The members of this family are Maya Indians of Central America. Around 1,600 years ago, their ancestors established a highly evolved society in Mexico and Central America. Today Mayan families still follow some of the same practices of the ancient Maya.

PHOTO (COLOR): Inca men loosen the soil with a taccla (foot-plow), while women behind them sow seeds in this drawing from an Inca codex. The book, which dates to 1565, is the only codex in existence that shows drawings of 16th-century Peruvian life.

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By Troy Johnson

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Both the Inca and Maya enjoyed a special ball game. Most cities had ball courts close to their centers, and ball games were a big event. To play, two teams faced off on the ball court. The players could not touch the ball with their hands — they could only use elbows, knees, or hips. The players scored by touching special markers or passing the ball through their team's ring.

#### Untitled

If an Inca child went to school, the child was taught to make and read the Inca quipu. A quipu was made of many colored knots tied together. The way that the knots were spaced and the colors of the cotton rope used to make them all had special meanings. Religion, law, and math were also studied.

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