Native peoples are those who were the first people to live in a particular place. The Maya are native peoples who live in parts of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are countries located in the northern part of Central America. The Maya were the only people to live in these places until the Spanish conquerors arrived in the 1520s.

The majority of Maya were farmers. The main staple of their diet was maize or corn, which was sacred to their people. Other crops were beans, squash, avocado, sweet potato, guava, chili peppers, cocoa beans, vanilla beans, papaya and tomatoes. The Maya grew most plants for food, although plants were also grown to make dyes for clothing and chewing gum from the Sapodilla tree. Maya people used plants to make medicine.

The people cultivated their fields as a community, planting seeds in holes made with a pointed wood stick. Fields were planted on steep mountain slopes, on plains, and in raised fields, on riverbeds, and also in swamps and bajos (wetlands). Over the last few decades we have learned that the ancient Maya practiced strategies as diverse as terracing, drained fields, raised fields, canals, continuous cultivation involving crop rotation and household gardens.

In addition to farming, the Maya raised dogs, turkeys and ducks for food, using the feathers from turkeys and ducks to decorate their clothing. They raised bees to make honey and, in the wild, they hunted deer, rabbits, boar, armadillos, fish, turtles, iguanas and insects. They used every part of the animal for food, clothing and tools and nothing was ever wasted.
Extended family all lived together in one compound. Maya houses were built on low platforms around an open patio. Each family's compound included: single room houses for each family, a well, a latrine, a place for food storage, a garden and a rustic-roofed batea (laundry room). Each individual house was one rectangular room with rounded corners, no windows, and one central door built to face east. Sometimes there was another door that led to a second hut, or kitchen. In the traditional kitchens, women cook over fire on a clay griddle set over three rocks on the floor. When the hammocks were hung, the main, single-room house was converted into a dormitory.

The men farmed and hunted, and women were cooks and weavers. Children helped out with the chores and only went to school if they came from a noble family. There was a class system in Maya culture with nobles, priests and commoners. The King was the most powerful person, and royal position was hereditary, which means that the oldest son would become the King when he died. The next most powerful were the priests who helped the king and lead religious ceremonies. The next strata of people were the commoners, who were mostly farmers. At the lowest level of society were the slaves, who were often captives from wars with other tribes or cities, or those labeled as criminals.