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. Archaeologists (scientists who study ancient cultures) divide the period before the Spanish conquest in the 1520’s into several periods.

The Pre-Classic period began as early as 1800 BCE (Before Common Era). During this time, the Maya began to live in villages and cities, and around 300 BCE to develop a Maya writing system. In the Classic period (250 CE to 900 CE) the Maya expanded their settlements into great cities with large temple complexes, which were controlled by kings. These cities such as Tikal, Chichen Itzá, and Palenque, were larger in size than European cities of that time.
The Maya developed a sophisticated writing system using glyphs, such as the image above. Additionally, they created a unique number system that used a combination of bars and dots to create large numbers. Maya mathematics included the concept of zero, which is important because other civilizations had not discovered zero yet. By around 900 CE, many Maya cities such as Tikal and Palenque had fallen into decline. The reason for this decline is not known; theories include disease, warfare, or climate change.

The Spanish Conquest in the early 16th century brought devastation and upheaval to the Maya people. As the Spanish crown established its own administration Maya people had to leave their homes and were relocated into newly founded Spanish cities. In the 1820s Central American states like Guatemala gained independences from Spain.

While Maya civilization is often remembered for these Classic Era accomplishments, Maya culture did not end with the so-called collapse in 900 CE. Today there are over six million Maya people living throughout Central America—and many living as immigrants in the U.S. Today, half of the population of Guatemala is Maya. The Modern Maya show remarkable cultural resilience despite suffering from land equality and severe poverty. There are twenty-three Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala today and the Maya maintain traditions of dress and religion that can be traced back to the peak of Classic Maya civilization.