

THE FAMILY IN LATIN AMERICA

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Pre-Columbian Americas

General Societies in the Americas developed without contact with developments in Afro-Eurasia until 1492, though some of the family forms independently created bore similarities to structures elsewhere. Substantial destruction of pre-Columbian cultures complicate the evidence available concerning family life. However, some striking findings have emerged, offering opportunities for comparison but also a grasp of some of the family traditions that would later be challenged in the European colonial empires. All the major pre-Columbian civilizations relied heavily on family formation, but interesting differences in family styles emerged as well.

Mayan culture What we know about families in Mayan societies corresponds to many familiar features of agricultural society: a family had 5-7 children on average, child labor was vital to the family economy; schooling was available only to the noble class. (Interestingly, noble offspring were subjected to a special procedure that elongated their skulls, making their social status quite visible.) Arranged marriage predominated, and there were both nuclear and extended family arrangement. Often, a man was required to live with his wife's parents for a set period, providing labor, later setting up a household near his father and paternal kin. Extended families often shared facilities such as kitchens. Divorce was rare but did occur; widows were expected to wait at least a year before remarriage, but this could then occur.

Child sacrifice and discipline Later in Central America, and particularly under Aztec rule, religious rituals sometimes involved child sacrifice. These rituals became common among Mexica people from the 14th to 16th centuries, and in one case (based on recent discovery of remains in Mexico City) involved as many as 140 children. Priests removed the hearts of the victims while still beating, offered as a sacrifice to the gods, and then decapitated the body. The whole process was meant to assure the continued existence of humanity. (Child sacrifice also developed in the Andes, though at a lower rate.) Not surprisingly, there is considerable debate about the meaning of these practices. Some argue that they served as population control (much like infanticide, but with far more ritual involvement). Others see them as helping to provide group identity and/or reinforce social hierarchy; in some cases, prisoners of war may have been used, another facet, as conquering groups sought to demonstrate their power and control. Spanish conquerors professed shock as the evidence they found, usually seeking to conceal it by building over the remains; this formed part of a strong, and often misleading, narrative of Christian superiority. Other traditional disciplinary practices were also singled out, such as exposing children to the smoke of burning chile peppers as a punishment for misbehavior; there is no way to determine the frequency of harsh measures given the tendency to exaggerate "native" cruelty.

Aztecs Aztec family forms replicated early patterns in Central America in many respects. Marriage age may have been a bit younger (18 or so for women, 22 for men). Marriages were often conditional, involving a trial period to determine compatibility; a couple could decide to separate after they had a first child (another practice that would shock the Spanish). Children were seen as gifts of the gods, but were expected to be strictly obedient. Most families were monogamous but some polygamy or concubinage occurred in the upper classes. Divorce was not legally recognized, but spouses could petition the courts for legal separation on grounds of domestic abuse, laziness or infertility on the part of the wife, or economic failure. Property would be divided based on what each party brought to the marriage. Both genders could hold property, but inheritance usually (not invariably) favored sons.

Incas Andean civilization came to rely heavily on relationships and attachments among extended kin, with some resemblance to patterns developed in Africa. Words for father and uncle, mother and aunt,

brother or sister and cousin were the same, with relationships based on patrilineal descent. Many small families units would be part of a common kin group, or *ayllu*, and almost all marriages were arranged within this group. Elders in the kin group helped allocate property to assure economic viability for individual families. Because there was no writing system, formal education was limited even for children of the nobility, but there was some instruction in this group concerning religion and group history (as well as training for warfare and use of the *quipu* record-keeping system).

Conclusion The Americas also included many hunting and gathering or other agricultural groups, with varied specific family practices and traditions, many featuring considerable gender equality in family and group governance. The Iroquois emphasized matrilineal kinship, with family groups sharing a longhouse with a Clan Mother at its head. Cherokee families were also based on matrilineal clans. Many indigenous groups identified and valued “second sex” individuals whose sexual identity differed from biology at birth – another custom that would prompt indignant response from European colonists later on.

Study questions

1. What are the most plausible explanations for the practice of child sacrifice? How much does the practice reveal about overall attitudes to children?
2. What were the main differences in family structure between the Andes and Central America?
3. What aspects of pre-Columbian family life reflected standard features of agricultural societies?

Further reading

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Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (Facts on File, 2006)

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Early Modern Latin America

Disease The arrival of Europeans in the Caribbean and the Americas, in growing force after 1500, disrupted established family life in many ways. High death rates took their toll; we lack elaborate evidence about family reactions to the new contagious diseases, and of course many whole families were wiped away. But ultimately mortality rates above 80% must have imposed tremendous strain on family survivors, and the process did not end until about 1700 (only to be repeated then in the northwest and Pacific Oceania). Ultimately, disease resistance and the growth of a mixed, or mestizo, population ended the vulnerability, allowing demographic growth that would continue until recently.

Other disruptions European arrival also brought intense Christian missionary activity, particularly in Latin America but also in the French holdings in the north (Protestants were long less interested in this effort). Missionaries found many faults with existing family patterns and worked to correct them. In addition, however, European sexual depredations created a high rate of illegitimate births, another ongoing challenge. Family structures rebounded in many ways; it would be misleading to overemphasize the fluidity. But social class differentials, in one of the world’s most stratified societies, introduced further complications.

Christian concerns Missionaries in Latin America quickly concluded that a number of Native American family practices were immoral, though the specifics varied with the region. Clothing was a concern, and both genders were pushed toward greater concealment – men ultimately adopting loose-fitting pants. Older patterns, like a Mayan willingness to allow boys and girls to swim together naked, were quickly attacked. Other functional practices, such as abortion, were attacked, and locals were urged to replace extended families with more strictly nuclear households. A great deal of attention was paid to regulating contacts between unmarried young people and eliminating the custom of trial marriages. In other words,

as one historian has put it, the Spanish worked hard to subvert the normal conduct of Indian family life in the name of Christian values. Many locals withdrew from areas with active missions, to preserve older customs, or found ways to compromise. Some women, for example, lied to authorities about their kinship with a proposed husband, in regions where traditions allowed matches with close relatives. Efforts to convert children, and in a few cases school them, could also be disruptive, but educational systems were not in fact very extensive beyond a portion of the native upper class. On the other hand colonial authorities worked hard, and successfully, to eliminate earlier practices such as child sacrifice.

Family authority and discipline Europeans generally strove to promote greater authority for men in the family (this was true among native populations in North America as well). They criticized some customary disciplinary practices with children as cruel – for example, exposure to hot pepper smoke – but they confirmed the importance of parental control and the importance of child labor, pressing whole families to work on colonial estates.

Illegitimacy Spanish and Portuguese conquerors, from Christopher Columbus onward, routinely requested access to native women. As one put it, after a military victory, “You are to deliver women with light skins, corn, chickens, eggs and tortillas”. The practice was compounded by the fact that, initially, relatively few women came over from Spain. Sexual depredations were profoundly shocking, but resistance was difficult; and some women participated more willingly out of affection or in hopes of preferential treatment. And some matches developed with mutual commitment but simply without the benefit of a formal marriage ceremony. The result was a persistently high rate of illegitimate births, plus a large number of maternally-based families. In one Brazilian parish in 1740, for example, 23% of all births were registered as illegitimate, and percentages would actually rise even higher in many parts of Latin America in the 19th century.

Results Consequences were varied. Some fathers recognized illegitimate offspring and tried to provide economic support, even stipulating a share in inheritance; but others bowed out entirely. Mothers raising children on their own received considerable help from other village or neighborhood families; the results for many children were not as unstable as might be imagined. A number of children “circulated” – that is, they were sent to families that were childless or needed some supplementary help – though this sometimes led to harsh treatment. In one Chilean city as late as 1880 17% of all children were living in households with adults who were not their parents. Reliance on Catholic-run orphanages developed as well, with children allocated for labor when they became old enough. (Some orphanages, however, as in Cuba, would not take Indian, Black or mixed-race children.) These patterns contributed as well to a pronounced gap between upper- and middle-class families, disproportionately of European origin and officially hewing to Christian family values, and the real and imagined behaviors of the *mestizo* and native populations. Well into the 20th century condemnations of popular family behavior as “infamous”, “leaving an indecent and shameful mark” circulated widely in official circles. Preserving or re-establishing family life in Latin America posed clear challenges, prompting a variety of responses.

Study questions

1. What were the main Christian concerns about American family practices?
2. What were the common responses to high illegitimacy rates? How disruptive were they for the children involved?

Further reading

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