

Edition 01 • 2022 • Mtree

# Seeing the Unseen:

MOTHERS OF MAYA



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MOTHERS OF MAYA

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*“Life is being alive.  
Life is good health.  
Life is love expressed where you live.  
Life is felt from people around you.  
Life is being loved by your neighbor.  
Life is when you’re able to provide for  
and educate your children.  
Life is eating, or the strength you need to  
move forward.  
Life is knowing each other’s welfare or  
taking care of neighbors.  
I am happy because there is this life that  
breathes all around me.”*

*Focus group mother’s response to  
“What does life mean to you?”, Summer 2018*

# Mtree Meets Maya

**What we know about Maya, this land, and the community comes from our collective and collaborative relationship with the people in Maya.** We conducted focus groups and individual interviews with over 40 families in Maya from 2016-2018. We also facilitated meetings with community elders. Research in 2017 focused on collaborating with the community members to define what sustainable development meant for Maya. Research in 2018 shifted to learn more about the mothers in Maya and their views about families and raising children. The team believed that the specific focus on mothers was important. The mothers in Maya play an especially involved role since fathers, who are mostly fishermen, are often away for long periods of times. Lastly, our understanding of Maya also comes from the extensive efforts of our Fit in Community team. The team lived in Maya for over four months in 2015-2016 to gain a hands-on grasp of the landscape and natural resources and to build the local school. This extended stay deepened the rapport between Mtree and the people in Maya.

## **How Maya Defines Sustainable Development**

In 2017, we met over 20 members in Maya. Researchers and community members discussed together what resources could be invested to ensure the village's sustainable development in the future. We learned the following:

### **Sustainable Development is Through Human Resources**

We learned that the community's strengths lie in its clan-based mindset, which fosters a strong sense of community and responsibility. The community loves Maya and cares for its people. Families expect their children who receive good education to return to Maya to help develop it.

### **Sustainable Development is Through Investing in Economic and Institutional Resources**

Community members collectively expressed the need to create new jobs in the community and build institutional practices for the community to develop continuously. Currently, agriculture, fishing, and farming businesses are the primary sources of income. However, these businesses do not provide a consistent flow of income for the families, and the community recognizes the need to create new jobs to expand economic opportunities. On the institutional level, a clean water system and an accessible healthcare facility were identified.

## **Sustainable Development is Through Investing in Education Resources.**

Investing in the next generation's educational needs was prioritized and viewed as the lasting fuel for maya's sustainable development. Currently, the community suffers from a poor education system with the inconsistent supply of teacher workforce and remote locations of schools. The primary school is only up to grade 3, and children in grades 4 and up need to walk a couple of hours to the neighboring primary school. The community recognizes that the community's job prospects must support the educated generation.

# Mothers' Voices: Maya And Family In Their Eyes

Mothers' interviews and focus groups do not paint a single picture of Maya. Instead, they reveal the many stories that makeup Maya, both the positives and the negatives that coexist. There is still much more we need to learn about families, values, and challenges faced, but here, we share what we have learned so far after meeting and talking with 30 mothers in Maya.

**“Family is where love develops,  
and you grow as a person.”**

*Focus group mother’s response to  
“How do you define a family?”, Summer 2018*

## **The Daily Life of a Mother in Maya**

THE DAY BEGINS EARLY FOR A MOTHER IN MAYA. SHE WAKES UP AROUND 6AM AND BEGINS CHORES IMMEDIATELY. She sweeps the dirt floor of her compound. The compound often consists of independent homes of her mother-and-father-in-laws as well as her husband’s brother and his family. While polygamy is no longer common in Maya, some compounds include the husband’s many wives and children. After sweeping the floor, the mother joins other mothers to go draw water. She will have to walk over three hours to bring water. Little gossip and some singing make the 3-hour round trip bearable. She returns around 9am to make breakfast, usually tea and some corn, for her 5 children and family members. Before noon, she tends her own corn farm. She visits her nearby neighbor, and they chat while removing the corn kernel to use for dinner. Children often stroll by and grab a handful of the corn kernel and run off to the fields. The mother then takes one of her daughters to fetch firewood for dinner. The dinner menu is left-over ugali from the night before and few corn kernels from today. The meat will be on another occasion. As soon as dinner is over, the mother swiftly gathers her children to wash them before the sun goes down. With the sunset and no kerosene to light up the compound, it is time to sleep. She lies on the cold floor, missing her husband, who has been away for weeks at a nearby harbor. She closes her eyes, hoping he will return tomorrow.



## **The Meaning of Marriage and Family in Maya**

ACCORDING TO THE MOTHERS IN MAYA, THERE IS NO ONE STANDARD DEFINITION OF FAMILY AND MARRIAGE. Some mothers have described the broken families in Maya due to absent fathers who work away from home as fishermen. Life becomes even more difficult for these families because fathers may not return to support the family financially. For these families, survival-mode trumps love. For example, a 40-year-old mother narrates the realities faced among some families in Maya, “Life is difficult in Maya. For some of us, it is about just getting through the day. If you are just trying to survive, what meaning do family and love have? Nothing. You are just trying to make it through the day and hope you have enough tomorrow.”

She adds,

*“Many children don’t get loved by their mothers and fathers because hard life drains love. Single mothers don’t have enough love in them to give love to their children. Expecting abandoned mothers to love their children?*

**That is a curse”.**

HOWEVER, TO SOME, FAMILY MEANS “CLOSENESS, LOVE, AND UNITY.” Mothers explain that there is “friendship and love” in the relationships in their family. A young mother says, “marriage is a happy experience because we are two, but we complete one another.” She continues to explain that “marriage removes certain types of loneliness, both physical and emotional loneliness. But my marriage is something deeper; we have conversations. We discuss our problems together”. When probed why it is important to have these conversations, she pauses for a moment and explains. “We are a family; if we don’t build it together with love and care and by talking to one another, who will do it? My children won’t know if they don’t see us do it (converse with one another)”. To these mothers, friendship and love experienced in the family serve as a mirror for their children to reflect and live by.

*“We are a family;  
if we don’t build it together with love  
and care and by talking to one another,  
who will do it?”*

LASTLY, TO OTHERS, MARRIAGE MEANS SOMETHING MUCH MORE “TRANSACTIONAL”—A SPACE TO REPRODUCE AND HAVE CHILDREN. These mothers paint a more primitive and raw reality of marriage. For example, a mother in her forties describes, “Marriage is to have sex, you know, to have kids.” The family then becomes an extended partnership for the future. She explains, “I raise my children now because they will take care of my husband later in life and me. That’s all”. Raising children and having a family, thus, seem to be an investment process that reaps a return in the future.

## The Meaning of Motherhood

MOTHERHOOD ALSO HOLDS DIFFERENT MEANINGS TO THE MOTHERS IN MAYA. A mother in her late twenties describes that she couldn't go to school when she was young because her parents believed that girls should not get an education. She met her husband when she was 13 years old at a funeral party in Jaribuni, a neighboring village. He fell in love with her, and they got married immediately. She has five children, and the eldest is 14 years old. She believes that motherhood is strictly about "raising children and tending to their well-being." She adds, "being a mother means making sure you raise your children to become healthy; being a mother means doing the house chores to make sure your children grow well." Other mothers in Maya have interestingly linked motherhood to luck.



For example, a young mother explains, “There are other women who wanted to have kids, but they weren’t able to bear children. So, becoming a mother is both luck and an opportunity”. Other mothers voice a similar pattern of responses where motherhood is connected to nature’s reproductive blessings. Another young mom explains, “being a mother is not for everyone; having a child is hard, some die at birth. So being a mother is a blessing; you have to be blessed from above to have children”. Her response suggests that neonatal death may be high in Maya, especially given the village’s dire medical supplies and remote access to hospitals.

***“being a mother is not for everyone; having a child is hard, some die at birth. So being a mother is a blessing; you have to be blessed from above to have children”.***

## Values and Expectations for Daughters and Sons

OVERALL, MOTHERS HAVE CONSISTENTLY ECHOED “RESPECT” AS KEY VALUES THEY WANT THEIR DAUGHTERS AND SONS TO LIVE BY. Respect is a value mothers want their children to practice to one another and to others in the community. An elderly mom explains that “respect is what I wanted all my children to have. If you don’t know how to respect your parents in the family, how will you know how to respect others outside the family? Respect begins at home”. A young mother of three children defines respect as, “respect begins from accepting yourself because respect is how you let other people see you.” She seems to understand the importance of respecting oneself first before expecting respect from others.



ACROSS MAYA, DESPITE THE SCARCE RESOURCES, MOTHERS HAVE VOICED THEIR DESIRES FOR PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR BOTH THEIR DAUGHTERS AND SONS. Not surprisingly, education is essential for the sons in the family. However, the expectation for educational equality seems to be more prevalent than just privileging the educational opportunities of sons. In fact, an elderly mom of late fifty thinks that “it is when a lady is educated, that a woman can be respected—she is worthy.” Yet, some mothers adhere to the stereotypical roles of women; they believe “women should get married as soon as possible, have children, and help out in the family.” However, overall, the economic constraints often force mothers to make a choice of advancing the educational attainment of their sons over their daughters.

DELAYING SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS IS A DOMINANT EXPECTATION FOR BOTH DAUGHTERS AND SONS. Mothers across Maya have voiced how early pregnancy impedes educational advancement for both their daughters and sons, although this concern is heavily weighted on daughters than sons. Early pregnancy is thus linked to educational disadvantage. Some mothers have had an explicit conversation about sex, body, and reproduction with their children. Christianity is the major religion in Maya, and the Christian teachings, such as preserving one’s virginity before marriage and the sacred meaning held in sex, seem to also influence mothers’ beliefs around premarital sex.

***“It is when a lady is educated, that a woman can be respected—she is worthy.”***

Based on our findings, we included mother's voice into our reproductive health education curriculum and delivered the program since 2020. Using arts and theater, teens express their concerns, fears, and excitement about becoming men and women and learned how to make healthier choices in life. Mothers are educated about sustainable women's hygiene products and contraception methods to learn that there are choices in women's life. We are growing together with the next generation of Maya village to make informed decisions and to grow together, building a sense of self and sense of community.

**We are growing together with the next generation of Maya village to make informed decisions and to grow together, building a sense of self and sense of community.**

## Letter from Hyewon, Executive Director of Mtree

Dear Friends,

Thank you for reading this unique story on Maya's mothers.

Since 2011, our journey started just like that. We packed our brushes, paints, papers, and other items to remoted villages of African countries, and conducted a short two-week program in partnerships with schools and communities. We saw the apparent need to understand our partnering community on a deeper level. So, we created a community research team to visit home by home and ask questions about daily life and their beliefs while we were peeling corns together in a hut. We have walked miles and miles to visit the family of the child who joined our program and shared meals.

We found that the transforming power of art and design is not limited to the individual but expands to the community, and now we aim to create artful change in this partnering community, Maya. In 2015, Mtree developed the first Maya map using google satellite and identified community landmarks for future economic and sustainable development together with community members. Mtree remodeled Maya Primary School and built common spaces with locally available materials and demonstrated to the community how visual and structural design can meet the needs of the community. In the future, Mtree plans to build a design-centered vocational school for youth, especially for teen girls who may have limited options for a career due to early marriage and pregnancy. Mtree plans to continue to have an open and collaborative partnership with Maya and other local entities by integrating art and design into various learning opportunities.



**It is surreal to look back on how we started as a small mustard seed, and now we have grown like a tree – a mangrove tree that can survive and thrive in harsh salty water. Village people said it usually takes a few decades to grow a tree. We are ready for that.**

Let me end this unique report with a poem written by Fatuma, a 6th grader at the Maya primary school during our poetry class.

## **The Hope**

*People say,  
life is good, but we need some hope  
to make things better*

*Yes! Hope!*

*This one person is hope  
That one person is hope  
We need them who are hope*

*I hope one day one time  
I live with you*

*Fatuma, 6th grader at Maya Island Primary School*

