

# — PISTE —

## PAST AND PRESENT

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Morris Steggerda, Chapter I, *MAYA INDIANS OF YUCATÁN* (C.I.W.  
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### Introduction

A history of Piste is given to show the changes which occur in a typical Yucatan town from ancient to modern times. During its early history the Piste area undoubtedly prospered in the glory of Chichen Itza. Under the Spanish-speaking Yucatecans it became a thriving colonial town of 1500 inhabitants, which went down to ruin in 1847 during the War of the Castes. By 1918 its population had again increased, but a new revolution reduced its numbers by half and left the remainder quarreling and hating one another. Since then political changes, the archaeological work of Carnegie Institution and the Mexican Government, and the building of the Merida-Chichen Itza highway have produced their effects on the community. Today Piste is an agricultural Indian town in which the people live comfortably but without luxury.

The Indians who inhabit the northern part of the Yucatan peninsula are known as the Yucatan Maya. Physically they are very small; the average stature for adult males is only 155 cm. And for females, 142 cm. The average stature for North American Indians ranges from this low figure for the Maya to 175 cm. For Dakota Indian males. The Maya adults have excellent bodies and most young people are healthy and strong, due, perhaps, to rigid selection by a very high rate of infant mortality. (Photographs of a typical Maya man and woman appear in plate 1a, b.) They are a part of the Maya linguistic family of Southern Mexico and Guatemala. The Maya of Yucatan are similar in language and, for the most part, in custom to those of the State of Campeche and the Territory of Quintana Roo in Mexico, the Department of Peten in Guatemala, and British Honduras.

The State of Yucatan has an area of 48,064 square km. And in 1930 had a population of 386,096 persons, considerably more than 200,000 of whom are said to speak the Maya language 2 (a map of the Maya area is shown in fig. 1).

Seen from the air, Yucatan appears to be extremely level except for a range of hills in the southwest. This view changes, however, as one travels the small trails over little, irregular limestone hillocks sometimes 9 m. high. Frequently the mounds of the ancient ruins resemble these natural mounds. The trees and shrubs are referred to as "bush" and grow to 6 – 10.5 m. high. The shallow soil is formed by the erosion of limestone. No metals or precious stones are found in this area. The country is suitable for the cultivation of henequen, which is the chief export. Maize, which grows well, supplies the natives with their chief source of food.

Traveling in Yucatan is exceedingly difficult except on four or five recently built automobile roads. Very rough cart roads connect most of the chief towns, and only trails and footpaths lead to the smaller ones. Rarely improved, these paths curve in and out between the small hills. Charnay's description of Yucatan travel in 1863 holds, in the main, for today: "It was not without trouble that we arrived at Chichen, for our flesh was torn by thorns and our bodies covered with garrapatas, a kind of large wood louse [wood tick, *Amblyomma cajennense*] which sinks into the skin." 3 These garrapatas are extremely numerous in the dry season, especially in bush where cattle browse.4

The dry season lasts from November to May, the rains beginning in May and continuing through September. The average annual rainfall at Chichen Itza is 117.9 cm. The average maximum temperature during the day is about 91 degrees F.; the average minimum, 65 degrees. The nights are generally cool and, during March, the temperature may fall to 40 degrees.

Since Piste is a typical Indian town and its history may well exemplify that of the whole region, some knowledge of its development is necessary for an understanding of the contemporary Maya. Moreover, it is in this town that much of the anthropological material for the entire study was obtained. 5

Piste is in the north central part of the peninsula of Yucatan near the ancient Maya city of Chichen Itza. It has a population of about 400. Its location and that of the neighboring villages which I visited are shown in figure 2.

## Piste – Its Past

### To 1847

In nearly every part of Piste the impressive ruins of many large buildings erected by the ancient Maya are found in all directions but chiefly in the southeast towards Chichen Itza. These structures are so numerous between the two towns (fig. 3) that probably in ancient times the large city of Chichen Itza included the present site of Piste. Since Piste is only 2.5 km. from Chichen Itza and has the excellent natural water supply of three cenotes (water holes), as well as good soil for the production of maize, it is likely that people lived on the present Piste site when Chichen Itza was in its aboriginal glory. The fact that Piste is not mentioned by any of the encomenderos (Spaniards in whose charge certain Indians were placed and who had the right to collect specific tribute from the latter) in their descriptions

of Yucatan towns in 1579-81, whereas Chichen is noted, leads one further to suppose that Piste and Chichen Itza were then one community under the name of Chichen.

The pre-Columbian history of Chichen Itza, its rise and fall, are not the concern of this chapter. 6 Historians relate, however, that at the time of the Spanish conquest there was still a town at Chichen Itza but do not tell exactly where the people resided. 7 In 1552, an order by the oidor (representative of the king sent to listen to the complaints of the Indians), compelled the Indians to move from scattered farms and hamlets to larger towns, which in this region were Ebtun, Kaua, and Cuncunul, where they could be kept in closer touch with the Franciscan missionaries. 8 Thus, if Indians were living at Chichen Itza at that time, they may well have been affected by this rule. However, it is known that the place was not entirely deserted, for the account of Father Alonso Ponce's visit to Yucatan in 1588 mentions a cattle hacienda at Chichen Itza. 9 One hundred years later it was recorded that the town of Chichen Itza had 152 tribute payers (husbands, wives, unmarried adults, and widowed persons). 10 On this basis, it is estimated that the total population was about 400. (See p. 216.)

In 1734 a Catholic church was built in Piste, the date clearly inscribed on a lintel over a door of what was the sacristy of the original church (p1. 4b). The next date found concerning Piste, 1755, was carved on a stone built into a curbing surrounding the mouth of the cenote. 11

The first documentary reference to Piste is dated 1788. 12 It concerns a report of the Royal Treasury authorities mentioning tribute money paid by the town. Piste is shown on the map of Tomas Lopez published in 1801. 13 In 1811 a general census of Piste gives a total population of 1433 of which 1100 were Indians and 333 were non-Indians. 14 Then follow references to Piste in the Titles of Ebtun, which bear a stamp for the years 1814-15. The municipal authorities of Ebtun petition presumably the subdelegate at Valladolid concerning the destruction of forest without the payment of rent: "Furthermore, we state that in consideration of your determination, you commission, .... The Spanish Judge of the town of Piste [to ascertain] in our presence and that of the said Alcocer that the aforesaid forests are being cut." 15

Reference to this official in Piste is again made in a document of March 14, 1817, thus indicating that the town was of considerable size and importance in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to have supported such a dignitary.

Piste is mentioned also in the papers Titulos de Propiedad de la Hacienda Chichen. According to these papers, the owner of the Chichen Hacienda from 1841 to 1845 was Juan Sosa Arce. He was awarded as heir to an estate, "...a house consisting of one room...in the town of Piste..." 16

John L. Stephens, who passed through the town on his way from Peto to Chichen Itza on March 13, 1842, refers to Piste merely as a village, where he remained only four hours. He speaks, however, of a large party of mestizo boys from the village of Piste who came to bathe in the Xtoloc cenote. 17

Some Chichen Itza documents of 1844 and 1845 show that Piste in that period had both first and second alcaldes (minor justices). It is quite likely that these judges were either Spaniards or mestizos with Spanish names, for the documents tell that the cacique (West Indian word meaning native chief or ruler; in Maya called batab) of Piste was also present. These facts indicate a considerable non-Indian population at Piste during that period. 18

Also, the presence in the village today of 85 wells, most likely dug by Spanish-speaking people but none dug since 1900, would further substantiate this view.

### **1847-1900**

The War of the Castes, an insurrection of Indians against the ruling Whites, began in July 1847 and was soon widespread throughout Yucatan. Because Piste was populated chiefly by mestizos and by Indians who were sympathetic to the Spanish-speaking people, the population of the town was reduced to only a few families and in them strife and killing were uppermost in their minds. It is said that Piste was completely depopulated during those years. On August 16, 1859, the priest of Dzitas, Juan de la Cruz Monforte, wrote in a baptismal church record for Piste: "Baptismal records belonging to Piste people from the time of its delivery to the parish of Dzitas according to the loose papers which I have found and by superior order, I have set them down." Such data in Yucatan are generally recorded in separate books and, if, as the priest stated, he copied the Piste records from loose sheets, it cannot be certain that all of them have been preserved. It is my opinion that, since the Piste region belonged at that time to the parish of Dzitas, many people resided temporarily in Dzitas during those troublesome years but had their baptisms, deaths, and marriages recorded by the priests of Dzitas to read as if they still lived in their own town of Piste.

Although the region was almost inaccessible to travelers and to scientists wishing to study the Maya ruins, those who could command an armed guard did visit Chichen Itza. Desire Charnay reached Chichen Itza in 1859 and wrote in 1863 that Piste was a wretched pueblo, "for it comprised some Indian huts, and like other towns nearby, it bore indelible traces of the plundering of the Indian rebels." 19

In 1865 the government census of Piste lists only 228 individuals, 145 with Indian and 83 with Spanish names. 14

In 1875, Le Plongeon visited and described Piste, as well as the region from Dzitas to Chichen Itza. He tells that no one lived in the village of Piste except the soldiers who were stationed at this so-called advanced post:

Piste, ten years ago [more likely twenty-five], was a pretty village, built amid forests around a cenote of thermal waters and surrounded by most fertile fields, which the industrious dwellers cultivated. Suddenly, on a certain Sunday (election day), when they were entertained at the polls, the ominous war-cry of the Indians of Chan-Santa-Cruz fell upon their ears. Few were the villagers who, taking refuge in the bush, escaped the terrible machete of their enemies. Of this village, only the name remains. Its roofless houses, their walls crumbled, are scarcely seen beneath the thick green carpet of convolvulus and cowage. The church alone stands in the midst of the ruined abodes of those who used to gather under its roof. It is today converted into a fortress. The few soldiers of the post are the only human beings who inhabit these deserts for many leagues around. Its old walls, its belfry, widowed of its bell, are all that indicate to the traveller that Piste once was there. 20

In 1880 Charnay made a second journey to Chichen Itza and recorded of Piste:

It has been so often sacked and burnt by the revolted natives that the only building left is the church, occupied by a company of twenty-five men....the natives, who first arose to conquer their liberties, fell to massacring from a spirit of revenge and now only take the field for the sake of plunder. 21

From men now alive who were in Piste 1880-94, it has been learned that about 20 families inhabited the town during this period. Most of the people were agriculturalists and none owned cattle. Because of frequent raids by the Indians, the townspeople often had to flee temporarily to other communities for protection. Between flights, however, the people were not content, for there was the ever-present dread of raids, while petty jealousies and prejudices gave rise to murders. Although guard service was supposed to be obligatory for all men, many escaped by paying an exemption fee. In order to obtain money, the natives would sell their lands for a few pesos or would ask rich landowners for money and then serve their creditors in the capacity of peons. (See Appendix IV, "History of Piste as Told by Former Inhabitants," on file in the Division of Historical Research, for more detailed accounts.)

Maudslay describes Piste as it was in 1888: "The Indian ruins had been freely used as quarries when the buildings of Piste and the hacienda were being raised, and many well squared blocks of stone bearing fragments of hieroglyphics and other sculpture can be found embedded in the church walls."<sup>22</sup>

Even as late as 1891 it was necessary for the archaeologist Teobert Maler to resort to the protection of the Piste garrison to carry on his work. He writes:

Piste is a sad village in which some dozen native families gain a living from their small maize farms, spending on a vile aguardiente the entire product of their labor. Although these workmen [who worked on the ruins with Maler] received four reales [50 centavos] a day for their light work, I had great difficulty in getting them, because money has little attraction for these native people, and at Piste, no one works when he has earned four reales or a peso. They then get drunk, and only when the last centavo has been spent will they again resolve to work for a day or two. <sup>23</sup>

Thus, the period from 1859 to 1900 was one of chaos and strife. Piste did not advance politically, economically, or culturally to any great extent. Such a situation helps to explain the attitude of the present inhabitants, for, although seemingly ingenious and in many ways a truly remarkable people, they can hardly be considered progressive.

### **1900-1933**

A number of families now living in Piste moved to the village between 1900 and 1933. <sup>24</sup> The general influx began about 1903. Of the people coming before then the May, Mex, and Tun families were still there in 1938. In 1910, when the laborers on the haciendas were declared free and could no longer be forced to work because of their debts to the landlords, many more families came to live in Piste. In this same year the whole neighboring settlement from Choch, which consisted chiefly of branches of the Mex family, moved within its boundaries. Incidentally, these Mex families return each year to Choch to prepare and work their cornfields.

As early as 1900 solicitations had been made throughout Yucatan to obtain funds for rebuilding the Piste church, a task completed in 1909. The church, formerly built facing west with the altar at the opposite end, was remodeled from the former sacristy so that it faced north and was considerably smaller than the original edifice. <sup>25</sup>

In 1918 a census of Piste was taken by the government. The names of the school children in 1918 are those of the men now occupying positions of authority in the town. Of the 472 persons, classified under 85 heads of families, who were listed in this 1918 census, 26 percent had Spanish names. All the rest had Maya names. (For their names,

relationships, and present location, see Appendix II, “A List of the Inhabitants of Piste in 1937 Showing Family Relationships,” on file in the Division of Historical Research.)

The political unrest in Mexico between 1910 and 1915 made itself actively felt in Piste about 1916, when Felipe Carrillo Puerto became leader of the Socialist party. In 1918 the President of the Municipality of Tinum came to Piste to organize the Liberal party as opponents of the more radical Socialists. In the words of two of Piste’s natives; “Senors Juan Aguilar and Antonio Martin were elected, the former as propagandist of the party and the latter as president of the Revolutionary Committee. It was then that the two parties began to fight.” 26 The residents were almost equally divided between the two groups and the town officials were determined by which political party was the stronger.

Perhaps the most serious effect of this revolution on Piste was the abandonment of the town by so many of its older inhabitants. Of the 472 people listed in the 1918 census, 258 (or 55 percent of its population) moved away. These individuals represented 49 of the original 85 families, or 58 percent of the total number of families living there in 1918. (The number of families and individuals living in Piste in 1918 and the locality to which they later migrated are to be found in Appendix III.) 24

During this time six people were killed, not necessarily due to the revolution but because law and order were at low ebb and old feuds were pursued. In addition, several houses were burned and cattle and property were stolen.

In 1922 a new road between Dzitaz and Chichen Itza was begun under the administration of Felipe Carrillo Puerto. For many years an unopened trail and later no better than a rocky cart road, the new highway gave Piste, for the first time, free access to the railway.

Two years later Carnegie Institution rented the hacienda at Chichen Itza as headquarters for its archaeological and other investigations. During the eight-year period between 1927 and 1934, when excavation and repair work were at their height, the Institution employed per season as many as 50 Indian and Yucatecan laborers, mostly from Piste. The Mexican Government also engaged many Piste men in its restorations at Chichen Itza. The large amounts of money paid in wages, most of which was probably spent in Piste, did not materially change the mores of the community. People continued to cultivate their cornfields and to eat the same kind of food as they had before. A few effects, however, were noticeable. The number of horses probably increased in that period, or rather, they conspicuously decreased after the Institution activity ceased. It is possible also that more Maya women wore gold chains, although no actual count was made. No automobiles or house luxuries were purchased, nor was extra food for the table observed, and I believe that by 1938 the temporary effects of the money influx were completely obliterated.

### **1933-1938**

For seven successive years I made a detailed annual survey of Piste, noting typical conditions and changes; and, for comparative material, I studied more briefly Chan Kom, Xocenpich, and Pencuyut.

Piste, with an approximate population of 400, is classified in Mexico as a pueblo. With several other small towns in the vicinity, it is under the jurisdiction of the nearby and larger municipio of Tinum. In such communities the chief officer is the comisario, who, with the help of his secretary, administers local affairs. There is also a president and secretary of the

League of Working Men, and a justice of the peace. All these officers are elected by acclamation of the adult men. The town clerk, or registro civil, whose duty it is to record births, deaths, and marriages, is a semi-permanent officer of the state. Police duty is considered part of the civic responsibility of every man on the town list. There are always two men on duty, each of whom serves a week at a time without pay.

Piste follows the general plan of nearly all northern Yucatan communities in that it centers around a cenote, a plaza, and a Spanish church. (frontispiece). Cenotes, natural water holes caused by the breaking-through of surface limestone, vary greatly in size and shape (pls. 2,3), the openings varying from a meter or so in diameter to 60 m. 28 The depth from the land surface to the water level ranges from a meter on the north coast of Yucatan to approximately 25m at a Chichen Itza, and even deeper as one moves further inland. Since Yucatan communities depend largely upon the cenotes for their water supply, most towns have grown up around them. Piste has three cenotes within its boundaries, and 85 wells dug chiefly during the period of Spanish domination (fig. 5).

All business transactions and town festivities take place on the plaza. Here games, bullfights, dances, and carnivals are held on fiesta days. Even in the precolonial period Maya villages centered around the plaza, for Landa writes of the Maya towns of 1560:

Before the Spaniards subdued the country the Indians lived together in well ordered communities; they kept the ground in excellent condition, free from noxious vegetation and planted fine trees. The habitation was as follows: in the center of the town were the temples, with beautiful plazas, and around the temples stood the houses of the chiefs and the priests, and next those of the leading men. Closest to these came the houses of those who were wealthiest and most esteemed, and at the borders of the town were the houses of the common people. 29

In general this description still holds true, only that in some of the buildings surrounding the plaza have been installed the village school, a cantina (saloon), and small stores. The church, the largest structure in the village, dominates the plaza (frontispiece).

From the plaza the streets, bounded by stone walls, extend to the outskirts of the town (pl. 7c,d). It is on such streets that the majority of the population lives. 30

Each road leading into a Yucatan town is marked at its entrance by two piles of stones, one on each side of the road and with a wooden cross on one or both sides. The custom of putting up such markers is one of long standing. Landa writes: "In all the towns of Yucatan it was the custom to have at each of the four entrances of the town two heaps of stones, one in front of the other; that is, at the east, west, north, and south; and here they celebrated the two festivals of the 'unlucky' days." 31

There are no large, active haciendas near Piste at this time. The nearest was the cattle ranch at Chichen Itza, 2.5 km. to the southeast. It has not been in operation for more than 60 years.

In 1933, when the present survey was begun, the church and cuartel (town hall) appeared as in plate 4c. The present cuartel was formerly the priests house. In 1935 the outward appearance of the church and cuartel were the same, though a part of the church roof had fallen. The church was no longer used, and the altar decorations (pl. 5) had been transferred to a small thatched house belonging to Yrineo Cauich. In 1936 the altar decorations were replaced although the roof had not been repaired. By February 1938 no additional changes had been made, but in May 1939 the church had been completely

remodeled with a new floor and roof. A little paved platform in front of the church for village dances was given to the town in 1928 by Carnegie Institution.

From 1906 to 1933 school was held in no. 31 a thatched house similar to those used as private dwellings (fig. 6). In 1918, however, the school for the larger children was conducted in no. 32, which was a large stone structure. The smaller children remained in no. 31. Approximately 125 children were on the school list in 1918 as compared with 65 in 1933 and 57 in 1937. In 1931 and 1932 no. 32 was closed for repairs, and the entire school again met in no. 31. In 1933 the whole school was moved into no. 32, and the other house was used as a residence for the schoolteachers. In 1937 a group of townsmen established a cooperative store (pl. 7a) and took over half of the school building no. 32. A cloth partition separated the two activities (fig. 6, pl. 7a).

A new schoolhouse and its associated buildings, a stone bathhouse and stone houses for raising rabbits and pigs, were started in 1934 but remained uncompleted and unused for nearly four years.

In addition to schools, church, and cuartel, the town also has a cemetery with a small thatched shelter inside the enclosure. Residents of both Piste and the Chichen Itza area bury their dead in the Piste cemetery. Formerly the inhabitants of Xkatun and Chan Chen, which are at least 15km. distant, also used this burying ground, but in 1938 they began to take their dead to Chan Kom and Tinum respectively. As far as can be learned, the Piste cemetery has always occupied its present site. It is exactly one mecate, or 20m. square. Grave holes, dug in the solid limestone, are re-used constantly, since the body remains in the grave for only two years, after which the bones are interred in smaller spaces along the cemetery wall, unless unclaimed and therefore thrown outside. Because of an increase in the construction of houses near the cemetery, there was agitation in 1937 to move the graveyard to a less populated area on the west end of the town, but due to superstition and local sentiment the project was abandoned.

In 1937 there were 175 privately owned buildings in Piste, 107 of which were classified as dwelling houses, all very much alike. Wauchope believes "that the types of 'bush house' seen almost everywhere throughout the Maya area today have changed very little in the last 1900 years." 32 The present-day bush house (one having a thatched roof) is nearly rectangular, with rounded ends, averaging 7.5 m long and 3-3.5 m wide. The walls, about 1.8 m high, are made of poles 2.5-5 cm in diameter tied together with lianas, or woody vines (pl. 9). Sometimes the spaces between the poles are daubed with mud. Four large upright poles support the palm-thatched roof. There are two doors, one in each long wall, directly opposite each other. If made of finished lumber, they are swung on hinges. In Piste about half of the houses have wickerwork doors with rope hinges. The floors are generally bare earth, sprinkled with water daily to settle the dust and tamped hard by the constant tread of bare feet.

On the floor at one end of the house, generally away from the prevailing easterly wind, are three stones marking the boundary of the family fire. An iron kettle for boiling corn and an iron griddle for baking tortillas are found in nearly every Piste home. Poor families may substitute tin pails and pieces of tin from discarded gasoline cans. A stone metate (pl. 10a) for grinding corn is generally set on a long, low bench nearby. Many families use a small metal hand mill for grinding their corn, but recently the stone corn grinder and the hand-operated mills are being replaced in some of the larger towns by gasoline-operated mills owned by private individuals or occasionally by the town as a community project.



In the Maya household nearly everything is handmade, often by the head of the house, including small tables, chairs, washtubs, and dishes. Small benches or hand-hewn blocks of wood serve as chairs (pl. 10b,c). A three-legged low table accommodates the making of tortillas.

At the end of the room opposite the fireplace stands the family trunk, its lid bulging with extra clothing and other possessions (pl. 11). Next to it, corn is often stored, either loose on the floor or in sacks or bins. Chickens, pigs, and dogs have free run of the house, pestered by the ever-present fleas and ticks.

There are no pictures on the walls, no clocks or mirrors. Often a table, on which rests a cross with an image or a picture of a saint, serves as an altar. Candles and cloth draperies lend an air of sanctity. In the few Protestant homes in Piste, the open Bible takes the place of cross and candles.

Hung along the walls or stuck between the poles of every dwelling are a shotgun, an ax, a machete, one or more water gourds, and a small bag called a sabucan. Crude shelves contain salt and spices and whatever dishes the family may own.

Hanging from the cross poles are hand-woven hammocks, the beds of Yucatan (pl. 11b). Married couples customarily occupy one hammock. In Indian homes they are made of henequen fiber; in those of the wealthier white people, imported lined thread. Of the ancients Landa writes, "They sleep on beds made of small rods, covered with mats, and with their mantles of cottons as covering." 33 It was learned from one Piste informant that when she was small, perhaps 65 years ago, beds for the children were made of small saplings tied together with lianas. Pedro Castillo informed me that about 40 years ago, when he was in British Honduras, he found people sleeping in beds built with small poles which were covered with banana leaves, but these sleeping platforms can no longer be customary, for I have failed to locate one. Apparently hammocks have been quite uniformly adopted by the Maya of Yucatan.

Various objects are hung from the ceilings of houses as protection from insects and rodents, most commonly bundles of beans in the pod, which serve also as food and as seed for the coming year. Dishes made from half gourds (pl. 10d), containing unused food, are suspended from the thatched roof by cords which pass through an inverted gourd to prevent rats and mice from running down the strings.

In the yard behind the house one generally finds a few fruit trees, a chicken coop, a little vegetable garden raised on poles, and several gasoline tins containing flowers. The raised vegetable gardens are ordinarily built on a platform 1.8-2.5 m above the ground as a protection against chickens, pigs, cattle and the prevalent leaf-cutting ants. There are no privies. That the back yards remain in a fairly sanitary condition is due to the hot, dry climate, the vultures, and the livestock.

In Piste an extra house behind the dwelling often serves as a kitchen. Occasionally this is rented to migrants from other towns at two to three pesos a month. Near the dwelling there is often an open thatched-roof shelter for the washing of clothes. The wash tub is a hollowed split log, 9-1.5 m long and at least 30 cm in diameter, so that the bottom is flat and the sides 7.5-10 cm high. This bench-like tub is then placed horizontally on stones or wooden supports about waist high, and the clothes are rubbed on the bottom as upon a washboard. Not much water but considerable soap is used in the process.

Chicken coops, 1.2-2.4 m square and .6-1.2 m high, are made either of thin poles or of stones. Chickens are shut in during the night (pl. 12a,b). There are no shelters for hogs or

horses. Several head of cattle may be confined in a corral, one or two cows are allowed to find shelter where they may.

Information on length of occupancy was obtained from 89 houses in Piste for which the approximate date of building was known. Fifteen of these were older than 33 years but not much so. Fifty of the 89 houses are less than five years old and 61 less than 10. The average occupancy, a figure based on houses for which the building and destruction dates were known was 18.5 years. Termites are the chief cause of destruction, although occasionally fire completely consumes these pole-and-thatch structures.

Indian houses in Yucatan frequently require re-thatching, often accomplished by building an entirely new house. In the five years 1933-38 less than one-half (35) the owners of dwellings kept them unchanged.

From 1933 to 1938 the stores in Piste underwent considerable change. In the absence of licenses cantinas in 1933 and 1934 liquor was secretly sold in several private houses. In 1935 a cantina was opened in house no. 2 and was maintained in 1936 and 1937 (fig 6). In 1935 a partition was placed in house no. 7 and liquor was sold there. This place was torn down in 1936, but on the opposite side of the street a similar partition was placed in house no. 6 and liquor was sold there during the next year. In 1936 a group of townsmen operated in a newly built house a liquor store which also lasted for one year only, while, in 1937, liquor was sold in two of the Piste stores. During recent years drunkenness in Piste has been far more prevalent. In 1933 and 1934 only rarely were drunken Indians found about the plaza, but by 1936 and 1937 they could be seen nearly every afternoon, and on Sunday and fiesta days nearly one-third the population was under the influence of alcohol. General stores, where corn may be exchanged for sugar, coffee, salt, and other necessities, also increased at this time. For example, in 1933 two stores were maintained in Piste, one in house no. 9 of the Castillos and the other in house no. 36 of Alejandro Calife. From 1934 to 1937 the first two stores were maintained, but Alejandro Calife (a Syrian) moved from no. 36 to no. 2. In 1936 and 1937 the cooperativa likewise maintained a small grocery store (pl. 7a). In 1936 another store, no. 69c, was opened in Piste on the Merida-Chichen Itza highway. In addition to the usual business transactions, gasoline was sold to motorists, who became more numerous after the road to Merida was opened.

Twice during the period 1933-38 corn-grinding mills were established, only to fail and be removed to other towns. A baker came to Piste in 1935 and set up his shop in a house (no. 9) near one of the many old Spanish ovens, maintaining a profitable business in 1936 and 1937. In 1937 a group of townsmen that make up the cooperativa hired another baker from Merida and operated a separate bakeshop in their store, house no. 32, which at that time was also the village schoolhouse. In 1937 a butcher from Merida set up a counter and scales outside his house, no. 69, and sold fresh meat to the villagers. He did a regular and prosperous business, which in previous years had been carried on solely by migrant butchers.

The population of Piste increased from 316 to 439 in the five-year period under consideration. In 1936 the total population of 397 persons was slightly less than in 1935, when there were 420 people. This may be due to the fact that the Merida-Chichen Itza road was not yet completed in 1935, when the census was taken and many of the road workers were temporary residents.

The following table is based on the census records for February 1936.

Table 1 –NUMBER OF PEOPLE PER DWELLING HOUSE IN PISTE, XOCENPICH, CHAN KOM, AND PENCUYUT IN 1936

Town	Dwelling Houses	Total # of Inhabitants	Ratio of people to occupied dwellings
Piste	94	397	4.22
Xocenpich	64	310	4.84
Chan Kom	40	232	5.80
Pencuyut	110	497	4.52
Average	77.0	359.0	4.66

It is difficult to ascertain the average age of the inhabitants of Yucatan towns, since about 75 percent of the persons do not know their exact age. One of the problems that prompted this study of the Maya dealt with the comparative growth of children of different races. Exact ages were, of course, necessary and because of this much time was spent in reading the town and church records for the birth dates of the Piste population. Considerable research revealed exact birth dates for 65.6 percent, from which the various age groups were determined. It was found that the mean age of the Piste population in 1933 was practically the same as in 1937. The mean age of the townspeople is relatively young, 19.3 and 19.4, respectively, for the two years. Figures given by Redfield for Chan Kom were slightly less, 17.0 years.

Many villages in Yucatan have some industry like hammock or hat making, the manufacture of pottery (pl. 8a), baskets, candles, or chocolate mixers, but Piste has none of these. Some communities specialize in cattle raising or henequen growing. Piste grows no henequen and raises only a few cattle. It is primarily a corn-growing community, and nearly every man owns a cornfield. Piste people who do have special trades have all come from other towns. Of the two merchants, one is from Dzitas, the other from Merida. The two stone masons also came from Merida. During 1937 and 1938, there were two bakers and one butcher from other towns. Although in none of these trades are local people gainfully employed, there are about 10 native men who act as barbers.

There are still some women in Piste who spin thread from wild cotton and, in the nearby village of Yaxche, there is a woman who even today weaves cotton cloth (pl. 8e,f). In the village of Dzitya near Merida I found men making chocolate pots and bowls by means of a primitive lathe (pl. 8b).

Rodrigo Dzib and Gregorio Bolio of Piste are able to make fire without matches. They use the wood of the chacah tree (*Bursera Simaruba*), twirling a stick rapidly in a small depression of the two main block until the fire is made (pl. 8c,d). This takes from five to ten minutes depending upon the speed with which the stick is revolved.

### **ACTIVITIES OF THE TOWN**

Against the historical and the statistical background a description of the daily life of the Piste inhabitants introduces the reader to habits characteristic of the Maya and to conditions typical of life not only in Piste but in all rural Yucatan.

Life moves actively from six to ten in the morning. The farmers walk briskly from their homes to their farms, each one carrying an ax, a machete, a water gourd, and a bag which holds his food. Sometimes he carries a gun. He may lead, drive, or ride a horse, which is

used chiefly as a pack animal. Children, neatly dressed in white, assemble in the schoolhouse. Pigs, chickens, dogs, and cattle are busy on the plaza gleaning whatever food is available. Women rise early to grind corn, to draw water from the cenotes for their daily wash, and to carry small amounts of corn to the village store to exchange for cloth, coffee, sugar, or soap. There are no special wash days, baking or cleaning day, or visiting days; all are the same for Maya women.

From ten to three the plaza takes on a quiet, lazy appearance, as if all the villagers were asleep. Rarely does one see people on the streets. Horses congregate in the shade, switching, stamping, and biting off flies. Lazy iguanas bask in the blazing sun, and the town drunks sit or sleep near the cantina. Occasionally one hears a rooster or a crackling hen, a baby may be crying in a nearby house, or a lone bull may wander across the plaza, lowing or bellowing in search of the members of his scattered herd.

This picture may leave the reader with the idea that the town as a whole spends these hours in what is supposed to be a universal practice in warm climates, the Spanish siesta, but this is not the case. The men are at work in their cornfields away from town. Very rarely do the Maya nap during the day, though the men do rest in their hammocks when they return from farming. The women are constantly busy with cooking, sewing, mending, or taking care of their babies.

At about three o'clock the schoolmaster sounds the church bell three times to recall the children to school. There is little punctuality, but by four o'clock they are again assembled. The weather becomes cooler, and more people gather about the cuartel and cantina. Between five and six o'clock, the young men in the more progressive towns assemble at the plaza for a baseball game. At this time the most familiar sound in every house is the constant patting of the boiled ground corn into tortillas, mingled with the muffled rhythmic sound of the chocolate mixer, a wooden pitcher in which a single cup of chocolate at a time is mixed with a wooden beater.

Just before dark one hears the constant twittering of the swifts, which seem to appear from nowhere, as they fly in spirals over the town. Then one by one they dive quickly down into the walls and cenotes to find shelter for the night.

When darkness settles, small groups of men are found talking or smoking cigarettes together and exchanging news which comes to Piste only by word of mouth. Drunken men become more loquacious and sometimes noisy. Small lights from candles or tin kerosene lamps mark the little thatched houses where mothers are putting their children to sleep in the swinging hammocks. By nine most of the lights are out and by ten even the young men have straggled to their homes, leaving the town dark and quiet except for the almost constant barking of dogs.

During my observations in the village, I have never seen any evidence of hobbies among the men. No one carves stone or wood; no one is interested in learning to play a musical instrument well; no one has made a collection of archaeological material, either small artifacts such as flints, pieces of obsidian knives, potsherds, or the beautifully carved stone objects found in the neighborhood. No one seems to feel the need of such diversion. It is true that the women care for flowers under all the adverse conditions of Yucatan, and they do embroider tablecloths and dresses purely for enjoyment. But there is an apparent lack of interest, as far as the men are concerned, in most forms of recreation. There is no tendency among them to form clubs or organizations. Piste has no band, although it might well have one considering its size. There are no outstanding leaders, priests, ministers, or doctors. In

1933 there were two yerbateros (herb doctors), but accusations of witchcraft forced them to leave the town. The town is not particularly religious, being indifferent to Catholic and Protestant and, apparently, to the remnants of its own Indian beliefs.

Piste is a corn-growing community located in rather fertile bush, and its inhabitants are more or less tied to the soil from which they derive their livelihood. It is not to be thought, however, that the Maya never move. Although not a nomadic race, they can easily migrate to another region when a situation is no longer desirable either economically or socially. This freedom of movement is facilitated by the facts that the land is owned by the state or community and that the Indians have few personal effects. Such may also have been the case during the time of the ancients.

Life in Piste is also probably very similar to that of ancient agricultural towns of the same size. Today it has only corn and cattle to barter or sell for all products other than food. Gunpowder, cotton cloth, colored thread, earrings, necklaces, and finger rings are all imported. In ancient times and even in colonial days, conditions were apparently much the same. Then the Maya exported mainly plain cotton cloth and salt, whereas such novelties as fine feathers, embroidered fabrics, gold and copper bells, jade jewelry, and fine pottery were imported. Indeed, in many ways, the life of the modern Maya probably duplicates that of their ancestors. The little boys carried the wood in those days and their sisters carried the water, even as do the children of the present time. The women played the same rather inconspicuous role that they do today; the men worried at the approach of rain when it was time to burn the bush or when no rain fell in the growing season. The medicine men practiced and men became drunk even as they do now. The climate was hot, and the wives prepared their husbands' baths in the evening and waited to pick off the pestiferous and ubiquitous garrapatas. The ancestors of the present swiftns dived into the same cenotes. The zopilotes gracefully glided through the air, the same fruits ripened, the same wild mammals bred, and the same birds sang. The chief difference is that today the Maya are ruled by Indian-White crosses, largely of Spanish descent, rather than by native Indian leaders.

## ENDNOTES

### Chapter 1 Pisté- Past and Present

1. Wissler, 1911.
2. Throughout the text, the word Maya will refer to those of Yucatán unless otherwise designated.
3. Charney, 1863, p. 335.
4. On one small twig an inch long more than 3,000 of these wood ticks were counted.
5. Information on the history of Pisté from R. L. Roys. Pisté is pronounced pees-tay.
6. Morley, 1938, p. 544.
7. Molina Solis, 1896, p. 487.
8. Relaciones de Yucatán, 2: 187.
9. Ciudad Real, 1932, p. 322.
10. Archivo General de Indias, Contaduría 920.
11. In the curbing there were three carved stones (fig. 4), only one of which, however, bore a specific date. This one, according to Pedro Castillo and R. L. Roys, is to be interpreted as, "January 2 (or 20) of the year 1755 A. D.," and ends with the initials

“E. M.” (fig, 4a). In fig. 4b is shown a copy of the inscription on a second stone which reads, “Por la order de Sr. Capitan Don Bernardo De Arse Viejo [veteran] Del Regimento Guardia Civil.” The third stone (fig. 4c) could not be fully deciphered by Castillo or Roys. They did suggest, however, the following: “VVI NVB 78 Fallecio [died] el Independiente Juan Martín Encernacio.”

12. The item containing the name Pisté is literally translated as follows: “Seventy-six pesos, one real, paid to Don Iph de la Camara y Bergara, as attorneys for Dona Juana Calderon, usufructuary [beneficiary] of the towns of Cuncunul and Pisté, for the half yearly settlement discharged at the end of June for the aforesaid period of time, imposts and annual charges deducted; it is of record from an entry on p. 120 item, of the account book. 76 pesos.” Archivo General de Indias, Mexico 3124.
13. Lopez, 1801.
14. The census was found in the Archivo General del Estado in Merida and supplied by F. V. Scholes.
15. Roys, 1939, p. 371.
16. Information from R. L. Roys.
17. Stephens, 1843, 2: 280, 285.
18. I quote from a letter from Roys: “In a document of June 15, 1844, Damaso Sansores states that he is ‘Alcalde primero municipal’ (1<sup>st</sup> municipal Alcalde) of the town of Pisté. He has been respectfully addressed by owner of Chichén who wants a certain certificate from him. (‘I beg and supplicate you,’) so he is plainly not an Indian alcalde.  
 “In a document of July 25, 1844, Damaso Sansores, 1<sup>st</sup> Municipal Alcalde of Pisté, appoints Raymundo Ruz and ‘Santiago de la Cruz Perez’ to be ‘witnesses present’ (testigos de asisitencia) at a proposed survey of Yulah. These two men are evidently also residents of Pisté.  
 “In another document of December 11, 1845, connected with the above survey, there is mentioned ‘Juzgado del Alcde. 2 de Pisté’ (Tribunal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Alcalde of Pisté). Here also the ‘Alcde. 1’ is mentioned, so we know Pisté had both a first and a second alcalde at this time.”
19. Charney, 1863, p. 335.
20. Salisbury, 1877, p. 67.
21. Charney, 1877, pp. 322-323.
22. Maudslay, 1889-1902 (text) 3: 10.
23. Maler, 1932, pp. 24, 27.
24. The names of these people and the houses in which they lived are listed in Appendix III, “The 1918 general Census of the Town of Pisté with Ethnological Comment concernng the Individuals Nineteen Years Later,” on file at Division of Historical Research.
25. My faithful assistant and interpreter, Martiano Dzib, was the first baby to be baptized in the remodeled church. He was born Jan. 2, 1910, and was baptized a few days later.
26. Our informant stated: “In 1918 the Liberal party won for three months and all those who were in the Socialist party went to the bush. When again the Socialist party won, the members came back to Pisté and began their revenge for what had been

done to them. It was then that many of the people went to live in other towns where they might be protected.

"In 1921, the Socialists of Pisté joined by some men from Tinum and Chan Kom, went to Yaxcaba and killed many Liberals. When they returned, many of the Socialists of Yaxcaba accompanied them and settled in Pisté. Shortly afterwards the newcomers began to steal among themselves, and some of the Pisté people began to do the same.

"This unhappy situation continued until the death of Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto on January 3, 1924. Four months later the Socialist party triumphed and has not been overthrown since."

27. For more information concerning the government of the Indian towns see Redfield and Villa, 1934, pp. 102-103.
28. Pearse et al. (1936, p. 6) write: "Cenotes may be divided for the sake of discussion into four types. (A) The jug-shaped type with a small opening and gradually expanding circumference nearer the water-level and below. (B) The open type with nearly straight vertical walls. (C) The so-called "old cenote" with sides which recede above the water-level. Many of this type are dry or hold a little water in the rainy season. (D) The cave type with an entrance to one side." See also Cole, 1910.
29. Landa, 1937, p. 26.
30. To estimate the population of a Yucatán town from the appearance of the plaza is difficult, since nearly all plazas are of the same size and general appearance.
31. Landa, 1937, p. 62.
32. Wauchope, 1934, p. 123.
33. Landa, 1937, p. 32.