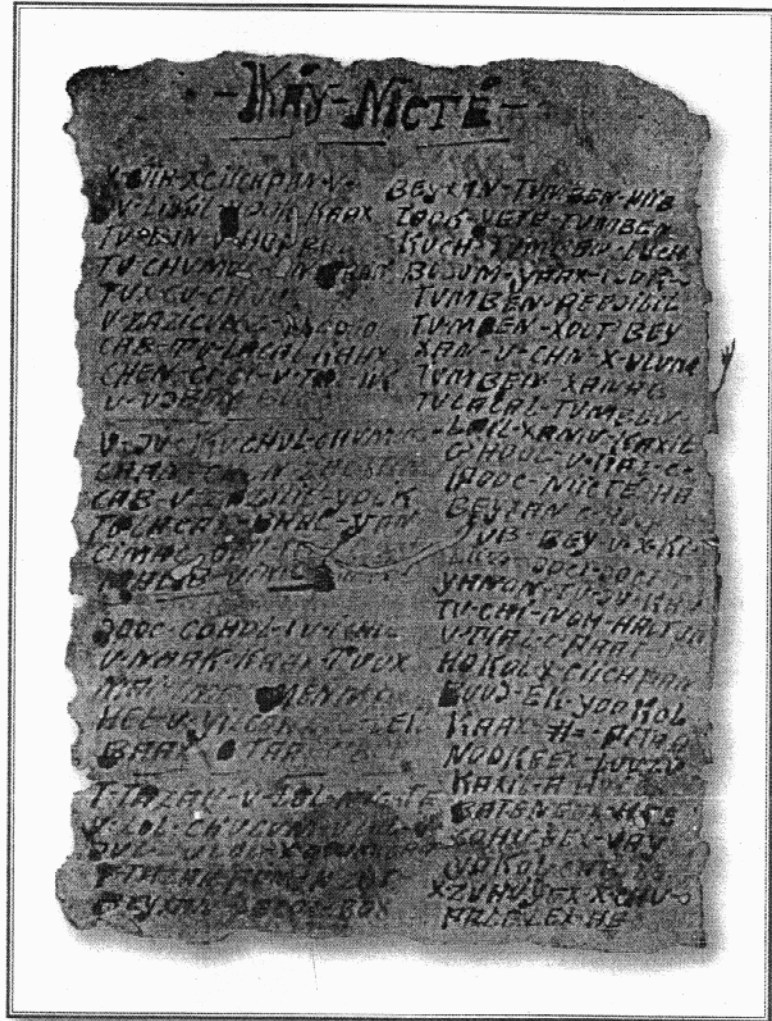


The Songs of Dzitbalche

ANCIENT MAYAN POETRY



A page from the Dzitbalche manuscript: Kay Nicté/Flower Song.

INTRODUCTION

THE SONGS OF DZITBALCHE

THE LIFE OF AH BAM

INTRODUCTION

The Songs of Dzitbalche include most of the ancient Maya lyric poetry that has survived. In these songs, the poet speaks of personal feelings and ideas of love, philosophy, ancient rituals, and spiritual values.

The original title page reads, "The Book of the Dances of the Ancients that it was the custom to perform here in the towns when the whites had not yet arrived." The title "Songs of Dzitbalche" was given to the collection by the first translator into Spanish, Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, and it is by this name that it is generally known. Written above the title is the word *kolomche*—a ceremonial dance—and below it is the first poem, "I Will Kiss Your Mouth."

The manuscript itself was probably written in the eighteenth century, though it could be a copy of an earlier manuscript. Some of the material it contains is obviously much older, probably from the fifteenth century. A number of the poems incorporate fragments of ancient ceremonies; others are descriptions of those ceremonies. It is not always possible to distinguish between the two. The poems about the ceremonies were written by Ah Bam during the colonial period, while the ceremonies described are clearly ancient.

Many of the songs begin with an expository section explaining the ceremony related to the song. Most of the poems use the most typical device of Mayan poetry: couplets, the repeating of key words and phrases in consecutive lines. There are, however, very few choruses or refrains.

Four of the pieces could be classified as love (and ritual love) songs: I Will Kiss Your Mouth; Let Us Go to the Receiving of the Flower; Flower Song; and To Kiss Your Lips Beside the Fence Rails.

Two are prayers: To the Great Lord Ah Kulel; The Mourning Song of the Poor Motherless Orphan.

One is a hymn to sunrise: For the Traveler on the Road at Dawn.

At least four of the "songs" appear to have been spoken or chanted like poems. As Barrera Vásquez states, "Although we give the title of songs to all the texts of the codex, some of these appear to be more narrations or explications without any characteristic (of song) other than that of being written in columns, in the manner of meter, without having it properly" (*El libro 27*; my translation).

I have translated fourteen of the songs for this volume.

Mayan songs and dances were of course accompanied by music. An ensemble consisted of flutes, trumpets, whistles, gongs, drums, and rattles. Melodies were played on wooden or reed flutes. The most common Mayan percussion instruments were large horizontal gongs (*tunk'ul'oob*) made from hollowed trees, which were struck with rubber-ended sticks, giving a deep mournful sound; smaller drums made of wood, gourd, or tortoise shell, beaten with the palms; and rattles of clay, wood, or gourd containing seeds or pebbles. There were two kinds of trumpets, one made from a conch shell, the other from a long, thin, hollow stick with a large twisted gourd at its end. Whistles were made from both cane and deer bone.

The Songs of Dzitbalche is closely related to the *Books of Chilam Balam* (the jaguar priest), the "bible" of the Yucatec Mayas. The various existing manuscripts of Chilam Balam also date from the 1700s, but are copies of much earlier material. The name Bam is most likely a contraction of Balam, which means "jaguar."

Beyond the facts that he has included in this manuscript, nothing specific is known about Ah Bam's life. However, much about him can be gathered from the wealth of information known about the time and place.

THE MANUSCRIPT

The manuscript of the Songs of Dzitbalche surfaced in Mérida, Yucatan, in 1942 as eighteen pages of Spanish paper about 6" x 8-1/2", bound on one side with henequen thread. It was written in colonial Yucatec Maya, with all capital letters, in ink, using a sharpened stick and a feather quill, in the alphabetic script that the Mayas learned during the early colonial period after they were forbidden under penalty of death to write in hieroglyphics or possess screenfold books. The format and layout of the manuscript have similarities to European poetry books. The lyrics or poems are laid out with lines and stanzas, some in two columns. Each song begins on a new page and most have titles. According to the analysis of the extraordinary linguist Barrera Vásquez, the manuscript had to have been made around or after 1742 because certain orthography it uses did not come into practice until then. However, as Barrera Vásquez had to admit, it could easily be a copy of an earlier codex, as was the custom.

DEITIES

Many of the songs relate to specific Mayan deities, ceremonies, and rituals.

The Mayas had two primary deities, male and female, with many aspects. It is through the different names of their various aspects that they are called on in the Songs.

Itzamna (Iguana House) was the male creator of the universe, the sky deity, the sun. He went by different names according to his many aspects. Among these aspects mentioned in the Songs are Hunabku (One Being God), Kinich Ahau (Father Sun), Cit Bolon Tun (Deity of Medicine) and Kukulcan (Feathered Serpent).

Ix Chel (Rainbow Woman) was the female force, the Creation Goddess, wife of Itzamna. Also known by Ix Chebel Yax and many other names, she was the moon, earth, and bodies of water, and patroness of weaving, painting, procreation, and medicine.

Other important supernatural beings include the deities of rain (*Chac'oob*), of maize, of the planet Venus, the four *Bacab* who each held up a corner of the world, and the gods of evil, death, and the underworld (*Metnal* or *Xibalba*).

CEREMONIES IN THE SONGS

RECEIVING OF THE FLOWER

Song: Let Us Go To The Receiving of the Flower.

The Receiving of the Flower was the wedding ceremony. In this song it seems to be a public ceremony in the town center, though other sources place it in the bride's house.



Itzamna, the sky god, and Ix Chel, the moon goddess. Itzamna is from Morley, The Ancient Maya. Ix Chel is from Anonymous, Cholb'al Q'ij Agenda Maya.

FLOWER CEREMONY

Song: Flower Song.

The Flower Ceremony was a rite to keep or bring back a lover. A group of women, under the direction of a female elder, met at night at a rock spring in the woods by the light of the moon. While the group of naked singers danced around her, the patient, also naked, threw plumeria flowers into the water, transforming it into a love potion.

INTERROGATION OF THE CHIEFS CEREMONY

Song: Lord Rattlesnake, Lord Precious Feathered Serpent

The purpose of the interrogation of the chiefs in the language of Zuyua was to ascertain the lineage credentials of Mayan chiefs. The interrogator was the *halach uinic*, the "true man," the *batab*. The ritual took place at the beginning of each new *katun*. It consisted of a series of arcane questions in an occult language based on Toltec-Itza knowledge, with the equally arcane answers known only to those in families eligible to

become chiefs. The questions and answers had supposedly been passed down from father to son since the fall of Tula, the city in central Mexico where Kukulcan was ruler before he and his followers emigrated to Yucatan.

This poem tells a mythological story in verse, a tale similar to the Egyptian story of the sphinx. Kukulcan (Quetzalcoatl, Feathered Serpent), named only in the title, is the protagonist who answers the riddle and thus defeats the centipede. Kukulcan represents enlightenment in the struggle with the forces of darkness. This myth probably refers to the ceremony of the interrogation of the chiefs. In another interpretation, Edmonson suggests that the centipede and the seven jumping heads represent the Spaniards and their seven-day week.

CALENDAR CEREMONIES

Songs: The Dark Days of the Last Month of the Year; Those Who Build Houses and Temples; Speech to the Lord, Sustainer of the Tun-Years; Speech of Cit Bolon, Priest of the Tun Year, Savant of the Uinal Month; Extinguishing the Ancient One on the Mountain.

In one way or another all Mayan ceremonies are calendrical. Mayan culture is so infused with calendar lore that it is difficult to understand the culture without studying the calendar as well.

Counting days was the basis for all Maya calendrics. They kept track of two basic cycles upon which all the others were built: the Sacred Year of 260 days and the solar year of 365 days.

There were 20 different days (*kin'oob*). The 260-day sacred year was formed by combining the 20 days with the numbers 1 to 13. The Maya solar year (*baab*) was divided into 18 months (*uinal'oob*) of 20 days, which made a 360-day *tun*, plus a final month of five days, the *uayeb*, adding up to 365 days.

The last two uinal months before the end of the year stressed pleasures and diversions. However, the five-day *uayeb* was dangerous and unlucky, a period of abstention from food, washing, and sex. If the *uayeb* ceremonies were not conducted properly, a year of sickness and disaster might result. A *uayeb* would someday lead to the end of this world. There were four different year-bearers, deities who presided over years in rotation.

For the *uayeb* (referred to in "The Dark Days of the Last Month of the Year"), an idol of one of the patron deities was set up at the house of one of the principal chiefs. Another idol was erected at a pile of stones at one of the four cardinal points outside of town, and a special road was built to it with arches of green branches. There they made offerings to the deity, then carried the idol to the house of the chief, where the ceremonies continued. The new year was a time of renewal. All utensils were destroyed and new ones made. The "Ancient One" referred to in "Extinguishing the Ancient One on the Mountain" was the temple ("mountain") fire, which was extinguished after having been kept burning all year, after which "new fire" was kindled with a fire drill.

The *katun* was a 7,200-day cycle (almost 20 years) made of 20 *tuns* (360 days). There were 13 different *katun'oob*, each with different auguries and predictable tendencies. In this way they saw history as repeating. This was the basic time frame in which

the Mayas recorded their history. They kept track of what happened in each *katun* so as to better deal with the present and future. A commemorative stone was erected at the end of each *katun*. The ending of one *katun* and the beginning of a new one was also probably the occasion of a *kolomche* dance, the subject of two poems in the original Dzitbalche anthology, but not translated in this current selection. The *kolomche* was a cultural transformation of the arrow ceremony, in which a high-ranking captive was ritually shot. In the dance, one dancer would throw arrowlike reeds at another, but the would-be target would catch them all and triumph, cheating death. Similarly, the ending of each *katun* did not signal doom, but a new beginning.

There is far too much information about the Maya calendar and its ceremonies to cover here. I encourage the reader to pursue this knowledge, which can be obtained from many excellent sources.

THE YUCATEC MAYA LANGUAGE

The Mayan language family diverged from a common stock over the centuries into the large variety of related languages found throughout the Maya region today, much as the Romance languages diverged from Latin. There are twenty-eight Mayan languages with numerous dialects. Yucatec Maya, however, forms one of the three major subgroupings, the others being Huastecan and Southern Mayan. All Mayan language speakers together total about four million people. Yucatec Maya remains understandable throughout the Yucatan peninsula, despite minor local differences. Over 450,000 people speak Maya in Yucatan today.

Mayan word roots are often strung together to form long compound words, one of which can express an entire English sentence. Nouns with possessive pronouns often replace verbs. Instead of "they eat," a Maya would say, "their eating." The subject usually follows the possessed verb and its object; for example, "the boys ate food" would be translated as "their eat past food the boys." However, word order is flexible, and any word can go first depending on what is being emphasized. Yucatec Maya is glottalized in some consonants, tonal in certain vowels, and uses glottal stops.

SIMPLIFIED GUIDE TO MAYA PRONUNCIATION

Vowels and consonants approximately as in Spanish, except:

c = English /k/

x = English /sh/

dz, tz = English /ts/

u followed by another vowel = English /w/

Glottalized sounds (emphatic versions): The sounds usually written today as p', t', dz' (ts'), ch' and k' do not exist in English or Spanish. They are glottalized or explosive versions of p, t, ts, ch and c made by holding the breath and then releasing it while making the sound. The glottis closes as the tongue reaches the point of articulation for the consonant, then it opens at the same time the letter is pronounced, making a distinctive popping sound.

Colonial Mayan was written in a number of variations. The most common are:

ph, pp = p'
 th = t'
 dz = ts'
 chch = ch'

Yucatec Maya uses tone the way English uses stress. There are three tones: high, neutral, and low, with the voice rising on the last syllable of most words, but sometimes on the penultimate. Aside from this, vowels should always be given full value (never reduced to the schwa as in English) and intonation should be kept as flat and even as possible. Maya can sound somewhat singsong to anglophones.

LINGUISTIC GUIDE TO MAYA PRONUNCIATION

	<i>phoneme</i>	<i>modern variants</i>	<i>colonial alphabets</i>	<i>colonial variants</i>
<i>vowels</i>	/ā/, /ã/, /a/		a	
	/ē/, /e/		e	
	/i/		i	
	/o/		o	
	/ü/, /u/		u	
<i>consonants</i>	/b/		b	
	/ch/	c	ch	
	/ch'/	c'	ch'	chh, chch, ch
	/h/	j	h	
	/k/		c	
	/k'/		k	
	/l/		l	
	/m/		m	
	/n/		n	
	/p/		p	
	/p'/		p'	pp, p
	/s/		s	z, ç
	/sh/	s, sh	x	
	/t/		t	
	/t'/		t'	tt, th, t
	/ts/	tz	tz	
	/ts'/	dz, tz'	dz	o
/w/		u		
/y/		y		