

## THE LIFE OF AH BAM

**T**he byline of the Songs of Dzitbalche gives us almost all the information we know about the author, Ah Bam, but that is really a wealth of information. It reads, "This book was written by the honorable Mr. Bam, great-grandson of the great Ah Kulel of the town of Dzitbalche in the year 1440." That date cannot refer to the writing, because the only existing manuscript uses the European alphabet and can be reliably dated to some three hundred years later. The manuscript, however, could be a copy or a copy of a copy of a copy, which was standard practice. Much in the contemporary *Books of Chilam Balam* started out in ancient hieroglyphic form, and many of the Songs of Dzitbalche clearly date from long before the Spanish invasion. It is entirely possible that the Songs are a translation of an ancient hieroglyphic book into alphabetic Maya.

However, it is most likely that Ah Bam lived during the colonial period and was a follower of the old culture and a collector of ancient songs. On this assumption, we can reconstruct his life to some degree.

Besides the Maya name Bam, he must have had a Christian name too because he had to have been baptized. But significantly, he chose not to use his Christian name in the manuscript. He was obviously writing for a traditional Mayan audience, not a Spanish one.

He must have been sent to a Franciscan school, where all the children of noble lineages learned to read and write Maya using Spanish characters. Biblical writings and choir songbooks were the main texts. We can see the form of the choir song in the way the Dzitbalche poems are laid out by lines in the European manner.

Alongside the official colonial government, a traditional Mayan government continued, often almost invisible to the conquerors. This shadow government, made up of elders of the lineages, as it had been since ancient times, was the organization that really ran things and held the society together. Ah Bam was clearly a prominent person in that system. He was probably prominent in the colonial system as well, perhaps even the town clerk, whose job it was to transcribe community business in alphabetic Mayan, a position that the Spaniards created in every town in northern Yucatan.

Ah Bam was an elder when he wrote his book. To achieve prominence in Yucatecan Maya society necessitated marriage and a large family, so we can safely conclude that Ah Bam was the respected head of an extended clan. If the codex as we have it was written in the early 1740s and is the original manuscript, we can conclude that Ah Bam was probably born around 1680.

Besides all his duties as an elder, he had to have found time to keep a *milpa* throughout his life, a plot of ground where he grew corn, beans, sweet potatoes, and squash. Rich or poor, aristocrat or commoner, to be a true Maya who keeps to traditional ways, a man needed to have and to work his *milpa*, for the maize plant was a god.

Although ostensibly Christianized, the Mayas secretly retained much of their traditional religion. Ancient rituals continued to be performed in the family circle, in private gatherings, and in the fields of the *milpas*. In this way Ah Bam must have been completely in accord with the old religion and was surely a practitioner. These texts contain transcriptions of old songs and poems that Ah Bam must have heard and sung in those secret gatherings where the old culture was kept alive. He was not alone in writing down the ancient lore. Mayas in every town translated their old hieroglyphic books into alphabetic writing—the *Books of Chilam Balam*—and read them out loud in secret gatherings, where the old songs were sung and chanted accompanied by a drum and where, on special occasions, ancient plays were performed. No ancient Mayan drama from Yucatan has survived, but one has come down to us from the Guatemala highlands, the Rabinal Achí.

Dzitbalche is a small town a few kilometers south of Calkini, the ancient capital of the province formerly known as Canul, stretching for about seventy kilometers along the western coast of the Yucatan peninsula above the city of Campeche. In ancient times Dzitbalche was an important town due to its proximity to the capital and its location on the main road, which followed along the western foot of the Puuc hills.

When the Spaniards arrived, Yucatan was divided into fifteen chiefdoms, each ruled by a hereditary *batab*, a political-military chief, also known as a *halach uinic* (“a true man”) or *abau* (lord). This arrangement had been in place since the fall of Mayapan a hundred years earlier, around the year 1441. Each *batab* lived in his capital city or center. In the surrounding territory were smaller self-governing towns and villages (*cab'oob*), each run by a town chief, a *holpop*, appointed by the *batab*. Among the *holpop*'s duties was to be lead singer and chanter in ceremonies and to be in charge of the musical instruments of the town. The *ab kulel* was the first assistant and advisor to the *holpop* and therefore the second most important and powerful person in the town, at least politically. Musical ability was one of the most important qualifications needed to rise to those positions. The *holpop* and the *ab kulel* were also poets and composers of songs.

Lineage (*chibal*) as well as ability determined social position among the Yucatec Mayas, both before and after the Conquest. Each province of Yucatan was organized around its “first” and “second” lineages, which together traditionally held the most important public positions. Dzitbalche is located in the old province of Canul, in which the Canuls were the first lineage. A Canul was always the *batab* (provincial chief) and he ordinarily appointed a Canche as his *ab kulel* (assistant, second in power). This arrangement was usually reflected on the local level. The *batab* usually appointed a Canul as *holpop* (village chief) and a Canche as village *ab kulel*. The Canul lineage were descendants of Mexicans originally invited into Mayapan from Tabasco as a garrison. The Canches were the second lineage of the province, below only the Canuls. However, in some circumstances the *batab* might appoint a member of the second lineage as *holpop* instead of a first lineage candidate.

When Mayapan, the centralized capital of Yucatan, was abandoned in 1441, all the lineages dispersed and founded independent provinces. The Chronicle of Calkini tells us that the leaders of the Canul and Canche lineages, Tzab Canul and Namay Canche, led their people to jointly found the province of Canul, with the capital at Calkini, not far



*A chief (batab or halach-uinic) dressed in ceremonial attire of the era of Ah Bam.  
Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayal.*

from Mayapan to the north and Dzitbalche to the south. Tzab Canul was the first *batab* at Calkini, and Namay Canche was his *ah kulel*. Several years later Tzab Canul appointed Namay Canche to be *holpop* of Dzitbalche, despite the fact that the latter was of the secondary lineage. After that, Canches succeeded each other as *holpop* of Dzitbalche generation after generation. At the time of the writing of the Chronicle of Calkini (1579), the narrator, Alonso Canche, tells us that his father, Napot Canche, was then the current *holpop* of Dzitbalche.

Let us return to the byline of the Songs of Dzitbalche: "This book was written by the honorable Mr. Bam, great-grandson of the great *ah kulel* of the town of Dzitbalche in the year 1440."

The first phrase in Mayan is "*Laiil h'an alteah dzib taan tun men yum h' Ah Bam.*"

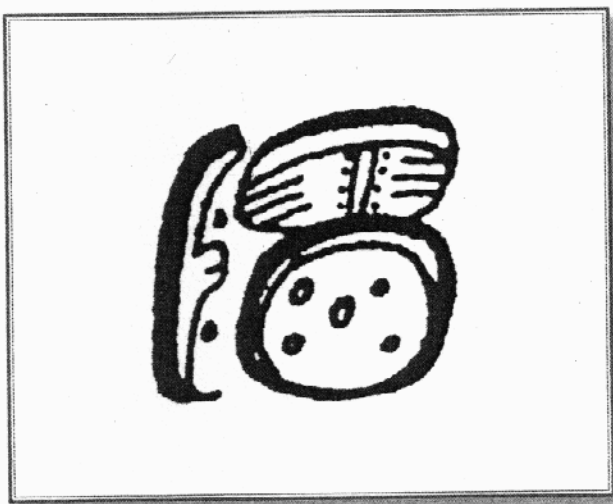
*Alteah* is equivalent to *analte*, which means a traditional Mayan screenfold "book" made of bark surfaced with white lime and written in hieroglyphics. The Mayan word for a Spanish book is "*hu'n.*" So Ah Bam does not actually call this a book, but a traditional screenfold.

"*Men yum h' Ah Bam.*" *Men* is a verb root which means "to do or make something" and also refers to a native priest or shaman; today in Yucatan a shaman is still called a *hmen* or "one who does." *Yum* means "father" or "the honorable." *Ah* is the equivalent of "mister." *Bam* is a shortened form of *Balam*, meaning "jaguar," like the great Chilam (priest) Balam, famous for his prophesies, whose name graces the *Books of Chilam Balam*. Together with the internal evidence of the attitudes expressed in the poems, his very name strongly indicates that Ah Bam was probably a *chilam*, a native priest.

Ah Bam does not give his family or lineage (*chibal*) name, but he had to have been either a Canul or a Canche. The great-grandfather mentioned easily might have been Namay Canche, the famed *ah kulel* who led the Canche lineage out of Mayapan when that great city fell and who later became *holpop* of Dzitbalche. The term "great-grandfather" does not necessarily refer strictly to only four generations, but could simply mean "ancestor."

The very fact that Ah Bam signs his name to his *analte* book may seem unusual for an Amerindian of his time, since artists are traditionally anonymous in many Amerindian cultures. But writers were not always anonymous in ancient Mayan society. The concept of authorship was part of the culture. A Mayan scribe-writer-artist, known as *ah dzib*, signed his work with the glyph "*u dzib*," "his writing," followed by the author's name. Sculptors had an equivalent way of signing their works. The *ah dzib* was scribe, writer, and artist at the same time. There were no distinctions. The *ah dzib'oob* belonged to the nobility, and their work brought them high status.

Ah Bam does not give the year in the Spanish form, but as "*hum pic hum baak ca kaatun*," that is, "one *pic*, one *baak*, two *katun'oob*." The date is in the Mayan counting system. The Mayas were constantly refining their calendar count, so there are several possibilities for the equivalent date in our calendar. Mayan counting was primarily by twenties instead of by tens; however there were variations in the calendar count. A *pic* is equal to 20 x 20 x 20, or 8,000, but in the colonial era it was usually



*Author's signature in ancient Mayan script: u dzib, "his writing."*

considered the equivalent of a millennium, or 1,000 years. A *bac* is equal to 20 x 20, or 400 years. A *katun* is equal to 7,200 days (20 x 20 x 18), almost 20 years, so two *katun'oob* equal about 40 years. If a *pic* is considered 1,000 instead of 8,000, the year is 1440 A.D.

That date can be read two ways: to refer to the time when Ah Bam wrote the book or when his great grandfather was *ab kulel*. Since 1440 was before the arrival of the Spaniards, it cannot possibly be the year the book was written, at least in alphabetic form. It is possible that it was written in hieroglyphic Mayan in that year and later translated into alphabetic Mayan, but that is highly speculative. It is also possible that 1440 is a mistake, but since the Mayas were so very concerned with accuracy in dating, that is doubtful. A more probable interpretation is that 1440 refers to the time when Ah Bam's great-grandfather—or other ancestor—was *ab kulel*, first advisor to the chief.

Why single out that one year? Because that was the last year before the fall of the great city of Mayapan, a watershed event in Mayan history. The most important lineages in Yucatan all proudly traced their descent and authority back to Mayapan, the only centralized and unified Mayan government Yucatan had ever seen, founded by the legendary leader Kukulcan (Feathered Serpent). Out of a time of chaos, constant war, insecurity, and poverty, the rule of Kukulcan and the Itzas had brought order, peace, security, and prosperity. Culture and the arts once more flourished. Forever after, the heyday of Mayapan was remembered with reverence by the Mayas of Yucatan as a golden age and Kukulcan as the epitome of a wise, benevolent, almost godlike ruler.

So by saying that his great-grandfather was *ab kulel* during the era of Mayapan, Ah Bam is endowing him with the highest authority, respect, and credibility, and, as his great-grandson, Ah Bam was receiving this also.

However, many Mayas did not look favorably on some of Kukulcan's successors and came to view the later Itzas with resentment, as foreign interlopers.

When the Spaniards conquered Yucatan, they did not abolish the native aristocracy at first but, on the contrary, confirmed the power structure of the old system for those Mayan nobles who were willing to cooperate in the new power system. The Spaniards simply reappointed the cooperative *batab'oob*, *holpop'oob*, and *ab kulel'oob* to the positions they already held, and replaced any who resisted.

When the conqueror Montejo arrived in the province of Canul in 1541, the *batab* Nachan Canul went into hiding, leaving his *ab kulel*, Napot Canche, to officially meet the Spaniards. Because of this, Montejo appointed Napot Canche as governor instead of Nachan Canul. After that a Canche was always governor of the province in the Spanish colonial system, but to the Mayas a Canul remained the real *batab* of Canul province.

Whether Ah Bam was a Canche or a Canul, and many other questions about his life, may be cleared up by further research. Somewhere in the annals of Dzitbalche or Calkini there is probably much more information about Ah Bam, waiting for someone to dig it out.