

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE NAME YUCATAN

The earliest mention of how the name for **Yucatan** came into the Spanish language was written in the 1550's by Bernal Díaz del Castillo. In Chapter VI of his book *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, published in 1632,¹ he writes:

y affimifmo les moſtrauã los Indios los mōtones que hazen de tierra, donde ponen, y fiembran las plantas, de cuyas raïzes hazē el pan çaçabe, y llamafe en la Isla de Cuba Yuca, y los Indios dezian q[ue] las avia en fu tierra, y dezian Tale por la tierra, q[ue] affi fe llama la en que las plantavan, por manera, que Yuca con tale, quiere dezir Yucatan. Dezian los Eſpañoles, q[ue] eftavan hablãdo con el Diegp Velazquez, y con los Indios: Señor eftos Indios dizen, que fu tierra fe llama Yucatã, y aſi fe quedò cõ eſte nōbre, que en propia lengua no fe dize aſi.²

Thus, as explained by Bernal Díaz, the name **Yucatan** is derived from a name meaning “planting bed of the yuca” (where “yuca” means yuca-cassava).

Another fairly early mention of the derivation of the name **Yucatan** comes from Landa's *Relaciones de las Cosas de Yucatan* which was purportedly written during the late 1560's. On page 1v Landa writes:

Que esta provincia se llama en lengua de los Indios V lumilcuz .yetel ceeh que quiere dezir tierra de pavos y venados, y que tambien la llamaron Peten que quiere dezir isla,³ engañados por las ensenadas y bayas dichas.

Que quando Franc[is]co Hernandez de Cordoba llego a esta tierra saltando en la punta que el llamo cabo de Cotoch hallo ciertos pescadores Indios, y les pregunto que tierra era aquella, y que le respondieron Cotoch que quiere dezir nrãs casas, y nrã patria, y que por esto se puso este nombre a aquella punta, y que preguntandoles mas por señas que como era suya aquella tierra, respondieron ciuthan⁴ que quiere dezir, dizcen lo, y que los Españoles la llamaron Yucatan y que esto se entendio de vno de los conquistadores viejos llamado Blas Hernandez

¹ There are in fact two publications of this date. Comparing the two show little difference in the text presented here. However, there is the 1904 publication which is supposed to be based on a copy of the original manuscript. The text in that publication reads as follows:

y ansi mismo les mostravan los montones donde ponen las plantas de cuyas rraizes se haze el pan çaçabe, y llamase en la ysla de cuba yuca, y los yndios dezian, q[ue] las auia en su tierra, y dezian tlati por la tierra en que las plantauan, por manera que yuca con tlati quiere deçir yucatan, y para declarar esto dezianles los españoles questavan con el Velasq[ue]z hablando juntamente con los yndios, señor, dizen estos yndios, que su tierra se dize yucatlan y ansi se quedo con este nonbre que en su lengua no se dize ansi.

Note the use of **tl** in the words **tlati** and **yucatlan**. The inclusion of this phoneme would imply that these words are in some way related to the Nahuatl language. See the following discussion about the possibility of the name **Yucatan** having a Nahuatl origin.

² And the Indians showed them the mounds made of earth where they put the plants from whose roots the çaçabe bread was made, and which they called yucca in the island of Cuba, and the Indians said, that they had them in their land, and they used the word Tale as they call it, for the earth in which they planted them, and that Yuca combined with tale makes the word Yucatan. The Spaniards who were talking with Diego Velasquez together with the Indians, said: Sir, these Indians say that their land is called Yucatan and so it kept this name even though in their language this is not what it is called.

³ Actually, the word Peten has a much broader meaning. See for example CMM: Peten: ysla o prouincia o region o comarca. ¶ vay tu petenil Yucatan: aqui en la prouincia de Yucatan.

⁴ For possible interpretations for the phrase **ci u than** see BMTV: Dulçe hablador: ah cich than, ah vtzul than .l. cij v than. / CMM: Cii than: dezidor; gracioso en dezir. ¶ cij u than Juan: / DMM: Ah cici than:: Grazioso en dezir: ah cijcij than; cij v than. ¶ Vide: dezidor; trujan.

q[ue] fueron con el adelantado la primera vez.

That somehow the name **Yucatan** is derived from **ci u than** continues to be one of the main conjectures amongst the Mayanists.

Another possibility is that the name for **Yucatan** comes from Nahuatl. There should be noted that name seems not to be Mayan because most Mayan place names have recognizable meanings and **Yucatan** does not, although there have been various attempts to explain it as a Mayan word as noted above with Landa. The reason for considering that **Yucatan** is a Nahuatl word is because of the suffix **-tan**. The Nahuatl suffixes **-tla** and **-tlan** both indicate “the place of”, although it seems that **-tla** indicates more precisely “the place where there is an abundance of”. Both the Maya and the Spanish were not very good about writing, and thus presumably pronouncing, Nahuatl words, especially those with the **tl** in them. Normally the **tl** is turned into a **t**. Thus the suffix **-tlan** would become **-tan** in Mayan. As further evidence that the name **Yucatan** is derived from Nahuatl, a person from **Yucatan** is referred to as a **Yucateco**, or in English **Yucatec**. The Nahuatl suffix **-tecatl**, which has become **-teco** / **-teca** in Spanish and **-tec** in English, means “a person from”. Parallel instances of the usage of **-tlan** / **-tecatl** in the Nahuatl language are numerous and are carried over into English: **Aztlan** / **Aztec**, **Mazatlan** / **Mazatec**, **Mixtlan** / **Mixtec**, **Tepoztlan** / **Tepoztec**, **Zapotlan** / **Zapotec**, etc. The word **Yucateco** appeared early in the Spanish literature, as for example in Coronel’s publication in 1620 and Lizana’s publication of 1633, and thus can be assumed to be contemporary with the inclusion of the word **Yucatan** in the Spanish language.

Yuhcatla is given in Siméon’s *Diccionario de la Lengua Nahuatl* as meaning “deserted place, solitude, vacant space”. On the other hand, **yuca** is given in Molina’s dictionary as “to be of another”. Thus there seems to be at least two possibilities in Nahuatl for a word which is similar to **Yucatan**: **Yuhcatlan** or **Yucatlan**. Either of these two words could have been the basis for Yucatan’s name.

On page 63 of the Chilam Balam of Chumayel there is a line which seems to confirm that for the Maya of Yucatan the word **Yucatan** is a foreign word: **uay ti luum Yucal Peten, Yucatan tu than maya ah Itzaob lae** (“here in the land Yucal Peten, Yucatan in the Mayan language of the Itzas” or as Roys translates this line “here in the land Yucalpeten, Yucatan in the speech of the Maya Itza”). The word **Yucal Peten** can be looked at as a composite of **u** (collar), **cal** (neck), and **peten** (island, province, region, from the root word **pet** (round)). Given that **yucal che**, meaning “yoke”, is in fact “neck collar wood” (**u, cal, che**) one could say that **yucal peten** is “neck region” or “neck island” which yields “peninsula”, a recognition by the Maya that their land is a peninsula. Roys maintains that **Yucal Peten** is a Mayan imitation of the name **Yucatan**, but the reverse could also be true. In the Mayan language **peten** is not used to the same extent that the Nahuatl language uses **-tlan**, but they are somewhat equivalent. On page 4 of his “*Compendio de la Historia de Yucatan*”, published in 1871, Bishop Crescencio Carrillo y Ancona also came to the conclusion that **Yucatan** is derived from **Yucal Peten**. As further evidence that the name **Yucatan** was not the name which the Maya called their homeland, on page 66 of the *Códice Pérez* there is the following comment: that with the coming of the Spanish **c’ petenil bin yanac u kaba uale; Yucatan bin alabal uale** (“Our region will get its name; Yucatan it will be called it seems.”) In any case, we have not found in the various pieces of literature written by the Maya themselves any explanation for the name **Yucatan**, so we will leave this problem inconclusively.