

AN UNTRANSLATED CHANT FROM "RITUAL OF THE BACABS"
CHANT No. 42, PAGES 212 THROUGH 214

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In the book "Ritual of the Bacabs" Ralph L. Roys left untranscribed and untranslated pages 1 - 3 and pages 214 - 237 (the first two line of 214 are transcribed) and transcribed but did not translate pages 212 - 214, line 2. There is no explanation given as to why pages 1 - 3 were not worked on, nor is there any mention of them. They are legible enough in the Newberry Library microfilm copy of manuscript of the "Ritual of the Bacabs" which that library has kindly sent me. These pages contain what seems to me to be the final part of a chant, indicating that in fact some pages are missing and that the page numbered page 1 is not really the actual first page of the manuscript. As for the pages 214 - 237 Roys mentions only that, "Of the last twenty-four pages of the Bacabs manuscript, eighteen are devoted to medicine and plant lore, three contain what appears to be a fragment of an incantation, and three are blank pages. None of this material has been transcribed or translated in the present volume." (pages xxv - xxvi, Introduction).

While Roys did transcribe pages 212 through 214, line 2, which forms a single chant which Roys has numbered Chant No. 42, he gives the following reason for not translating this chant: "Although it is legible, this incantation appears to be written in a mixture of Yucatecan Maya and some other language of the Maya stock." (note 154, page 70). In preparing the text of the "Ritual of the Bacabs" for entry into a computer database so that a word in context concordance could be made of it I found that Roys' statement about the chant being a mixture with some other Mayan language to be not necessarily true. Given the type of orthographic shifts and inconsistencies which are common in Yucatecan Colonial Mayan texts most of the words seem in fact standard Yucatecan words. That is, by applying the rule for these orthographic shifts I found that a standard Yucatecan text could be constructed. Since it was my interest to standardize the orthography of the various Yucatecan texts I was working on so that like words would appear in a single alphabetical area in a concordance I applied this standardized orthography to this text and an intelligible text resulted.

During a visit with René Acuña he asked me if this chant was really untranslatable, and I assured him that in fact all of the chants from the Bacabs are very difficult, but that this chant was also translatable given ample time and accessibility to dictionaries. He determined that we should give it a try, since he had the necessary dictionaries. The following translation, given with a transcription of the source text and an edited version in what I consider to be standard Colonial Yucatecan orthography, is the result of the work. Given first is a transcript of Chant 42 which I have tried to make reflect the actual text as accurately as possible. Then comes the

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edited version from which Acuña and I worked. Finally given is a translation with what I think are the necessary notes on the transcription and translation.

There are still many unresolved problems with both the edited version of the transcript and the translation. Certainly one of the greatest problems is knowing how to edit the transcript. As is common with most of the Colonial texts, the words in the text here are not properly segmented and it is often difficult to know what should be a word and what is in fact a syllable of a larger word. Further, it is unfortunate that with the Mayan language with its many homonymous and nearly homonymous words (those words which are spelled the same in the Colonial orthography but which actually are pronounced somewhat differently) that many different and often unreliable readings are possible simply because we Western-minded persons are not able to comprehend what is actually being written.

As can be seen from the translation, there are certain phallic references in this chant, and these may in part be the reason why Roys avoided attempting translating it. This assumption comes from the fact that Roys frequently avoided forthright translations of phrases with sexual references. For example, the phrase “pel u na ta uach” and similar phrases which occur 13 times in the Bacabs is translated by Roys as “curses upon you” or appropriately similar which is of course the intention of these words, but literally translated the phrase should be rendered as “vagina of its mother on your penis”. (It might be mentioned that “Pel a na”, “Your mother's vagina” is a common curse today.) Acuña and I agreed that a Victorian prudishness might have inhibited Roys in working on this chant.

Acuña noticed that there seems to be a reference to Tezcatlipoca (Smoky Mirror, thought among other things to be a patron of wizards) on line 16 of the chant in the words “yabac nenum”. “Yabac” is a word for “soot” and “nen” means “mirror”. The particle “-um” generally indicates a bird (other “-um” examples: “kukum” - “quetzal” (literally “feathered bird”); “yaxum” - “*Cotinga amabilis*” (“green bird”); “ucum” - “dove” (“louse bird”); “chuyum” - “falcon” (“lifting bird”)). Whether we have correctly interpreted the phrase “yabac nenum” as the “smoky mirror bird” is of course open for debate, but this seems to be the intent of the phrase. This incidentally is the only reference to this deity in the Yucatecan Colonial Mayan manuscripts either in Mayan or Nahuatl. (In contrast Kukul Can - Quetzal Coatl is mentioned in both languages, at least 7 times in Mayan and once in Nahuatl.)

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Original Text:

¹V thanil ceh payab lae

Cuyahal Can silimtun hun pokigiuCum
sactah kayum yk tah kayum yk tah popol kayum sactah yk,
yk tah popol kay saclahun huyum
sasanal ynthan un sac tah yk top kay yk kah yk
top kay tasac lahun kaum u xibil .y. u mop. kabil
.y. u yulcilu hole
samal yn kayunhual kayum
noh yk la ciman ti Ceh²
atoppsicbenunteil u ciichpamil ax may
hin citah okol utzil ax may tac lahun tasmets nal
dzeh yk lacaman ti ceh
atoppsicbinuniceil u cijch pamil ax may
hin citah okol ax may taclahun tasmets nal:
yalan man ti ceh
a topp cibin uniceil ax may
hinci tahokol ax may tac lahun tas met nal
yabac nenun la ma n ticeh
a topp sic bin u nicateil ax may
tac lahun tas met nal³
tij hun molahi hun hual ka yum
Amen

¹Ms. page 212.

²Ms. page 213.

³Ms. page 214.

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Edited Text:

u thanil ceh, payab lae

cu yahal caan zilim tun hun poki hi ucum⁴
zac tah kayum ik,⁵ chac tah kayum ik,⁶ tah popol kayum zac tah ik,
tah popol kayum ik,⁷ zac lahun kayum ik⁸
zanzamal in than hun zac tah ik, top kay ik, kah ik⁹
top kay tu zac lahun kayum ik u xibil yetel u mop kabil¹⁰

⁴In the source text there is a continuous collection of letters “pokigiucun” which in itself is meaningless. Since this is preceded by “hun”, the number “one”, it seems most obvious that at least part of the “word” must be a number classifier, and “pok” is such a classifier, indicating that birds and animals are being counted. The “word” ends with “ucun” which was been edited as “ucum” (dove), the “n”-“m” shift being consistent with other such incidences in this chant (kayun - kayum for example). This leaves the three letters “igi” or more properly “ihi”, there being no “g” (as in “gana”) in Yucatec and the “g” (as in “gente”) was normally transcribed as “h”. Since “ihi” does not result in any known word I have attached the first “i” to “pok” resulting in “poki”. Grammatical parallels for this are found in such present day expressions as “hunppeli le macobo” (one of the men). This leaves the particle “hi” and this has various translations: tierra para hacer loza; seria, diria, fuera, dijera, hiciera; no se, tal vez, quiza; estirar entresacando; piedra de afilar. Probably “hi” is a sign of uncertainty, although it is poorly positioned contextually speaking to take on this meaning.

⁵“Ik” really means “air, wind” but when applied to spiritual entities the best translation is “spirit”.

⁶“Chac” (red) and “zac” (white) are common pairs (more than 100 occurrences in the Bacabs). Most frequently “chac” comes first, but there are some occurrences in which “zac” comes first. In any case, the second clause in the original text lacks any color modifier but one seems to be called for.

⁷“Pop” means “mat made of reeds”, but “ah hol pop” is a town official who among other jobs was responsible for organizing the town's fiestas. The materials for these fiestas were kept in a house called “popol na”. While I have used the word “mat” in the translation, I feel that the word “popol” goes beyond this meaning and is somehow related to the sub-meaning as outlined here.

⁸The word “huyum” is an unknown word. I have taken the liberty of transforming the word to “kayum” since there is a parallel for this in line six. I have also taken the liberty of adding the word “ik” (spirit) since that would fit with the two lines, one immediately above and the other immediately below.

⁹“Kah” (bitter) could be a misspelling on the scribe's part.

¹⁰“Mop / mob” is a word meaning “penis”, especially that of an animal. “Kab” can be either “hand” and those things pertaining to it or “juice, fluid”, as in “u kab im” (the fluid of the teat; i.e. milk). It is fairly certain that something pertaining to the penis is meant here, mainly because this clause is surrounded by two clauses which indicate that the penis is being talked about. (i.e. “u xibil” (miembro viril, Motul Mayan-Spanish dictionary) and “u yulcib u hole” (the polished part of his/its head). The problem is that grammatically speaking the clause is incorrect, or should I say that in translating I should put “the fluid's penis”. The clause, in translating it the way I have, should be “u kabil mop”. However, while there are no dictionary entries substantiating this, it could be that mopkabil is a composite word meaning semen.

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yetel u yulcil u hole¹¹
zamal in kay hun haul kayum
noh ik lay ci man ti ceh
 a toppzic bin u nictel u cichpamil ax may
 hinci tah okol utzil ax may tac lahun taz metnal
dzeh ik lay ca man ti ceh
 a toppzic bin u nictel u cichpamil ax may
 hinci tah okol ax may tac lahun taz metnal
yalan man ti ceh
 a toppzic bin u nictel u cichpamil ax may
 hinci tah okol ax may tac lahun taz metnal
yabac nenum lay man ti ceh
 a toppzic bin u nictel u cichpamil ax may
 hinci tah okol ax may tac lahun taz metnal¹²
ti hun molahi hun haul kayum
amen

¹¹“He/she/it” and “his/her/its” (“u”) are indistinguishable in Yucatec. I am not sure if “u hole” refers to the spirit's head or the penis's head.

¹²This line at the end of page 213 contains the elements of the triplet of phrases which occurred three times before, and so it seems reasonable to assume that in fact the same phrasing is meant here as well even though some words are missing in the original text.

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Translation:

The words to call deer thus:

At dawn¹³ then a dove appears to arrange its feathers¹⁴
white strong chanter spirit, red strong chanter spirit,
strong mat chanter white strong spirit
strong mat chanter spirit, white ten chanter spirit
daily I speak to one white strong spirit, carnal song spirit, bitter spirit
carnal song to white ten chanter, his penis and his semen
and his glans penis
tomorrow I sing to one stopping chanter
great spirit which nicely passes through the deer
you will open the flower of the beautiful warty cloven hoof
thrown forcefully over good warty cloven hoof until the tenth layer of hell
fractured spirit which passes through the deer
you will open the flower of the beautiful warty cloven hoof
thrown forcefully over warty cloven hoof until the tenth layer of hell
it passes under the deer
you will open the flower of the beautiful warty cloven hoof
thrown forcefully over warty cloven hoof until the tenth layer of hell
smoky mirror bird passes through the deer
you will open the flower of the beautiful warty cloven hoof
thrown forcefully over warty cloven hoof until the tenth layer of hell
it gathered itself together on its own one stopping chanter
Amen

¹³The normal expression for “dawn” in the Colonial literature is “yahal cab” (awaken the earth). It is not clear why here “caan” (sky) is used instead of “cab” (earth). (I make the presumption that “caan” and not “can” (conversation, snake, four) is actually intended even though in the source the word is written “can”.) This is the only example of the phrase in the Colonial literature which I have so far worked on.

¹⁴“Silim” should most probably be written “silom” which would be a prophetic future intransitive verb form of the verb “zil”. (It could also be some yet undefined verb form.) The position within the phrase is proper for such a verb form. While the overwhelming meaning attributed to “zil” is to tuck or fold or lift up clothing, a meaning which is current today as well, the Vienna Dictionary according to the Diccionario Cordemex gives “sil; regalarse” and the Vienna itself gives “Regacarse zil” on folio 277r. I gather that “regalarse” means something like to entertain one's self or to regale oneself and this would also seem to be an acceptable verb in this context.

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