

THE SHAMANS OF YUCATAN, MEXICO

David Bolles

The Yucatecan shaman, called in the Yucatecan Mayan language **H-Men** (he who makes) or **H-Men Dzac** (he who makes medicine), is still a very important person in the Yucatecan folk culture. His rituals play a very important part in the agricultural cycle, especially in the growing of corn and the raising of bees. He also is still very frequently used for the curing of illnesses, since there are certain illnesses which in the folk mind can be cured only by him and not by the doctors which practice European type medicine. In this article the masculine form of the word shaman will be used, mainly because the majority of Yucatecan shamans are males, but it should be understood that **X-Men** (she who makes) is equally implied. While I personally do not know a **X-Men**, it is my understanding that **X-Menoob** are considered to be as powerful as, and in some cases more powerful than **H-Menoob**.

There are two ways in which a person becomes a **H-Men**. Either he is born to be one or he chooses by becoming an **idzat** (apprentice to a **H-Men**) to learn to be one. The born **H-Men**, all things considered, is thought to be the more powerful of the two.

A person becomes a born **H-Men** as follows:

When the baby starts kicking and moving about in the womb a mother who understands what movements are the sign of a born **H-Men** will recognize whether or not this child is destined to become a **H-Men**. If the child has a chance of becoming a **H-Men** and if the mother wishes this to happen then she will bury a **zaz tun** ("clear rock", a clear glass marble) or that lacking a regular marble in the back of the kitchen in the patio. When the child takes its first steps it will go directly to the place where the marble is buried and will dig up the marble. This is the sign that the child is indeed destined to become a **H-Men** and will need no further education but is born with the knowledge necessary. (It should be noted that the game of marbles is very common and lost marbles are in the muck of almost every patio!)

While the foregoing is the common explanation of what a born **H-Men** is, there are certain facts which should be noted. First, the child born in the above situation is born into a family already strong in the **H-Men** tradition even if there is no practitioner in the family. The family members know many of the general attributes of being a **H-Men**. Furthermore, the rituals which are used in agricultural ceremonies and the herbs and substances used in common home remedies are of common knowledge by those interested in such things. Thus the born **H-Men** will be surrounded by those factors which are basic to the **H-Men's** profession as he grows up. It seems safe to say that for those "born" **H-Menoob** who succeed that it is a case of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The person who chooses to become a **H-Men** generally does so as follows: The road for a person who chooses to become a **H-Men** by becoming an **idzat** (**H-Men** apprentice and helper) is much more difficult. First of all, since he is not born with the knowledge he must learn it, and that can and most often does take years as an **idzat** to a master **H-Men**. Besides this there are sacrifices which are required to show the sincerity of one's desire to become a **H-Men**. For a married person with children for example the life of someone in your family should be offered according to some **H-Menoob**. Others say that one does not really have to offer up one's own kin; a live turkey buried in the back yard would suffice. I have not been able to determine if the **H-Men** who takes the life of one of his kin, preferably of his first-born son, is any more powerful than the **H-Men** which buried the live turkey. Generally the **idzat** learns from his master both through example by taking part in helping with the preparations of medicines and performing of ceremonies and through conversations with his master. (I hesitate to use the word "lessons" because these conversations seem to take place as the occasion arises.) I have yet to learn at what point an **idzat** graduates from his position and becomes acceptable to his community as a **H-Men**.

There are many types of **H-Menoob** ranging from **H-Dzac Ya** (he who medicates pain) to **H-Pul Ya** (he who throws pain). There are **H-Dzac Yaob** who never do **pul ya** although of course they must have the knowledge of the powers of a **H-Pul Ya** in order to undo the damage inflicted by one. I have also heard that there are **H-Pul Yaob** who never do **dzac ya**, but this might have been said out of spite. Generally though the **H-Menoob** are capable of doing both, and it seems to rest on the character of the individual as to how much of which practice he will do. There are those who rarely do agricultural ceremonies and those who seem to prefer to specialize in doing them. Thus, just as there are many types of medical doctors ranging from the general practitioner to the various specialists so too there are various types of **H-Menoob**.

The **H-Dzac Yaob** have various ways of divining the sickness of a patient. The use of a **zaz tun** with the aid of chants is a common method. Also common is **padz** (massage) in which the **H-Men** tries to feel the site of the illness. There are also **H-Menoob** who use European divining methods such as the use of cards or dice. The truly powerful **H-Men** though will know the site and type of ailment even before the patient enters to see the **H-Men**. A common story relating to successful cures is that even before the patient has had the chance to speak and tell the **H-Men** what ails him the **H-Men** will say that the patient has such-and-such ailment and must undergo the following treatment.

Once the illness has been determined the **H-Men** tries to alleviate it either through medicines (today both home-made remedies and commercial

remedies such as penicillin are used) or through chants or through a combination of both. The medication is sometimes administered by the **H-Men**, but frequently directions are given to the patient on how to take or use the medicine. In some cases the **H-Men** does not even prepare the medicine but instead tells the patient what herbs and minerals must be gathered and how to prepare and apply the medicine at home. If chants such as "santiguar" are to be part of the treatment then of course that must be done by the **H-Men**. A **H-Men** will frequently go to the home of his patients if they live near him to carry out these chants.

The **H-Pul Yaob** are approached by patrons who want to do harm to some individual. Often the motive is to even the score or to get revenge for some harm done by that individual to the patron, be it real or imagined. That is, many Yucatecans, both Mayans and the acculturated Spanish speaking people, take offense very easily, and sometimes in cases where no offense was intended.

Once the magnitude of injury has been determined by the patron and the **H-Pul Ya** then the **H-Pul Ya** will take what he considers to be the appropriate action. Some of the more talked about methods are:

1) making of an image, for example of wax, of the individual to be harmed or killed, and then to inflict the damage upon this image. Sticking needles into the region in which the damage is to be done is the method most talked about.

2) taking a **X-Tun** (described below) and ritually "throwing" it to pierce some organ of the victim, thereby causing pain or death depending on the intent is also a practice of common knowledge.

(In both of the above methods, one of the favorite sites for inflicting damage, at least in the folk mind, is the genital parts, especially the male's testicles.)

3) making incantations such as, I have been told, that given in the Chilam Balam of Chumayel on page 2 (**Chac Ix Chuuah-cabob ti lakin**; The red wild bees are in the east: see Roys, 1967, page 16 (transcript) and 65 (translation)) are also employed. In the case of this chant Plumeria flowers are placed in a circle on a path in which the victim is sure to travel while the chant is being said. In addition to the chant as given the name of the victim is mentioned and the method by which he will die.

While these are mystical methods by which the victims are supposedly inflicted with some sort of illness, what in fact seems to be going on is that the **H-Pul Ya** manages in some way to make suggestions which work psychologically on the victim or in some cases even gets various types of poisons or objects into the victim's system, mainly through ingestion. (What I haven't figured out is how the **H-Pul Ya** gets access to the person's food in

order to accomplish this.) Ingestion of large quantities of hair or metal objects such as needles by **pul ya** victims has often been talked about, although I do not personally know a person who has suffered this form of **pul ya**.

It must be noted that there are diseases and psychological situations and resulting deaths which are ascribed to **pul ya** even when no **H-Pul Ya** was actually involved. For example a young neighbor of ours in Kom Cheen began to feel very poorly shortly before he was about to get married. We happened to see him and his mother at one of the hospitals in Merida and I asked what the problem was. The mother's answer was that the doctors mentioned something about the kidneys. I said to my wife that if it is kidneys he will be dead within the month. Well in fact he did die as I mentioned. (My wife later mentioned that at the time she thought I might have some powers of a **H-Pul Ya** because I had predicted this death.) In any case, it was decided by the parents of the boy that in fact their son had been witch-crafted, and the suspected patron was a girl who the boy had recently jilted for the girl to whom the boy was about to get married. The police were called in to investigate, but much to the disappointment of the parents no charges were brought against the jilted girl. The parents still believe though that this girl had employed a **H-Pul Ya**. In another case with a neighbor across the street from our house in Kom Cheen is that his daughter found a freshly unearthed human skull in the backyard. For some reason the neighbor, who was in his seventies, decided that the skull was meant for him, and this was a sign that **pul ya** was at work. The day after the skull was found his whole family formed a procession to carry the skull back to the cemetery which is only around the corner from our house. At the head was the father carrying the skull in a box and chanting as he went. The next day he commented to me, "I don't understand why anyone would want to do me harm." About a month later he was dead. His daughter told us that her father just laid down in the hammock and gave up. Later one of our other neighbors mentioned that he thought that skull belong to his father, whose remains had only recently been disinterred following the custom, because of lack of burial space, of taking the bones out of the grave after two years and supposedly placing them in a bone box. As often is the case, the family members of this neighbor hadn't gotten around to making the bone box, and so the father's bones were left tied up in a cloth in the little preparatory house which is in the cemetery. This neighbor said that he went to check on his father's remains one day soon after the event of our other neighbor marching back to the cemetery and that the package of the remains was missing the skull. How the skull might have gotten to where it was found is hard to know. Maybe a dog had carried it or worse maybe somebody had played a cruel practical joke. In any case, our neighbor's death is placed as being the result of **pul ya** even though it seems clear that no such action had actually taken place.

Most **H-Menoob** do not live by their profession alone but also make up part of the local work force. As a result they have much more contact with the rest of the town populace than does the average western medical professional. This in part might explain the ability of a **H-Men** to know a patient's illness before the patient actually comes to him. Because **H-Menoob** must often work at other things it has become a custom to have Wednesday and Friday designated as **H-Men** days. That is, these are the two days of the week in which people feel that the **H-Menoob** will be found at home. This might not actually be the case as I have found out on occasion. For "emergency" cases at any other time of the week **H-Menoob** will usually make themselves available. (Once true in our culture as well, but no longer!)

H-Menoob typically have an assortment of objects (**nucul**) which they use for various purposes. The following list includes some of the more common items:

1) **zaz tun** ("clear rock", a glass marble about 2 to 5 cm in diameter). It is common to have several **zaz tunoob**, and some **H-Menoob** always carry these with them in a little pouch called **pauo**. Aside from being used to divine the sickness of a person **zaz tunoob** are used to forecast events and to view a stranger's personality and intentions.

2) **Balam** ("tiger". Clay figurines, mostly pre-Columbian pieces). The **balamoob** are frequently called on, especially in agricultural chants. It has not been explained to me why it is good to have these clay representations nor have I received a clear explanation of what powers these **balamoob** have although they are frequently called upon in ceremonies, but in any case if a **H-Men** should have some they are placed on the table (alter) during a ceremony. The English translation "tiger" or more exactly "jaguar" is the meaning which the word had in colonial times, but it seems that today this would not be a proper equivalent for the word. "Sacred being" would be a more appropriate equivalent translation for **balam** today.

3) **X-Tun** ("stingray stinger", but may be a shin bone which has been sharpened to a point about 10 to 15 cm from the joint end of the bone, forming what appears to be a awl. There are pre-columbian examples of the sharpened shin bones and it seems that the purpose of these were to aid in shelling corn.). This is used by **H-Pul Yaob** to throw pain into a person's body. In theory the **H-Pul Ya** is able to mentally locate the victim and then "throw" the **x-tun** and pierce the target organ (heart, lungs, genitals, leg, etc.)

4) **Cruz** (a wooden cross with floral decorations and usually the letters INRI at the crossing point. These crosses are often referred to as "foliated crosses" in anthropological literature). The cross is the focal point of table arrangements when a table is being set up for a ceremony. The powers of the

cross have never been explained to me.

5) **Homa** (a small drinking gourd usually less than 10 cm. across made from the fruit of the **luch** tree (*Crescentia cujete*)). These gourds, which are smaller than the ones normally used for household purposes (the normal sized ones ranging up to about 20 cm. and are called **luch** when used for household purposes), are used to contain whatever potions or liquids the **H-Men** may prepare. Most prominently the **homa** are used as containers of the mead called **balche** (see next entry) and are set upon the table during the various agricultural ceremonies. Another frequent purpose is to hang a pair of them in **chuyub** (hanger), one on either side of the main doorway into a room of a sick person. Each **homa** contains a potion which is to aid either in curing the sick person or in keeping out the **kakaz ikoob** (bad winds) which are making the person sick.

6) **Balche**, called ritually **Maben** (ark, box), is a mead made by steeping the bark of the **balche** tree (*Lonchocarpus longistylus*) in a mixture of honey (preferably the honey of the native bee) and water. The mixture takes a couple of days to ferment. Everyone present at the ceremony drinks some **balche**, although nowadays this is often supplemented by a stiff belt of "aguardiente" (a clear sugar cane liquor produced locally in Yucatan).

7) **Zip Che** (*Bunchosia glandulosa*). Five to ten sprigs, about 50 cm. long, of this shrub are picked and bundled to make a small broom. This broom is then used to "sweep" and "dust" the sickness from a person during a santiguar. Depending on the predilection of the **H-Men** performing an agricultural ceremony sprigs of the **Zip Che** are also placed on the table in a decorative fashion. Aside from the cleansing and healing powers of the **Zip Che** I am not sure the use of the plant has some special significance when used for decoration.

8) **Zuhuy Veladora** (virgin vigil candle). The lighting of vigil candles is a common feature of Yucatecan rituals and ceremonies, and is not limited to being used by **H-Men** alone. Almost any spiritual act requires the lighting of at least one vigil candle.