

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE WRITTEN BY JOSÉ SABINO UC
IN YUCATEC MAYAN IN 1871
by David Bolles, Milford, CT

The accompanying transcript and translation is an autobiographical note written in 1871 by José Sabino Uc, who was 14 at the time he wrote it. On the back of this note, in the hand of Karl Hermann Berendt, is written “Sabino’s Lebensgeschichte von ihm selbst erzählt in Maya Sprache, 1866”.¹ Sabino’s note is amongst the Berendt papers at University of Pennsylvania’s Museum Library. According to Brinton,² José was adopted by Berendt. Brinton met José while visiting Berendt during Berendt’s stay in New York during the years 1871 - 1872. His only mention of José is the following: “At that time he had with him a young Maya Indian, José Sabino Uc, whom he had adopted, and hoped to inspire with the love of study; but I have heard that the experiment turned out a failure, as is usually the case.” Needless to say, José seems to have been taught to write Yucatec Mayan by Berendt and this autobiographical note is, as far as can be determined, the only surviving fruit of Berendt’s efforts with José.



Photograph of José Sabino Uc
at the Smithsonian Institution
BAE No # 00811700

¹ “Sabino’s autobiography as told by him in the Mayan language, 1866”. It is not clear why Berendt wrote “1866” when the note itself clearly says “1871”.

² Brinton, 1884, page 207.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOSÉ SABINO UC

Aside from the above information by Brinton and that provided by the autobiographical note, nothing else has been found about José. A search through the Berendt material has yet to yield any more information, but this search has not yet been thorough. There are however a pair of exquisite line drawings in “Apuntes y Estudios sobre la lengua Zoque” done by Berendt at Tuxtla Gutierrez in 1869 - 1870 (Berendt Collection No. 111), the first of which shows a boy and the back of a girl with the caption “Juliana Vasquez lernt von Sabino” dated 1869,³ and the second one of which is of a girl with the captions “Juliana Vasquez” and “Ya estás acomodada, muchacha?”⁴ dated 1870. It should be mentioned that in April, 1866, Berendt was in Sacluk collecting linguistic data. It was in this town, now called La Libertad, that José’s father found a wet-nurse for José. There is a note in Berendt Collection No. 179 by Berendt on what he learned at Sacluk, but there is no mention of José Sabino Uc.



*Juliana Vasquez lernt von Sabino
Apuntes. Tuxtla 1869.*



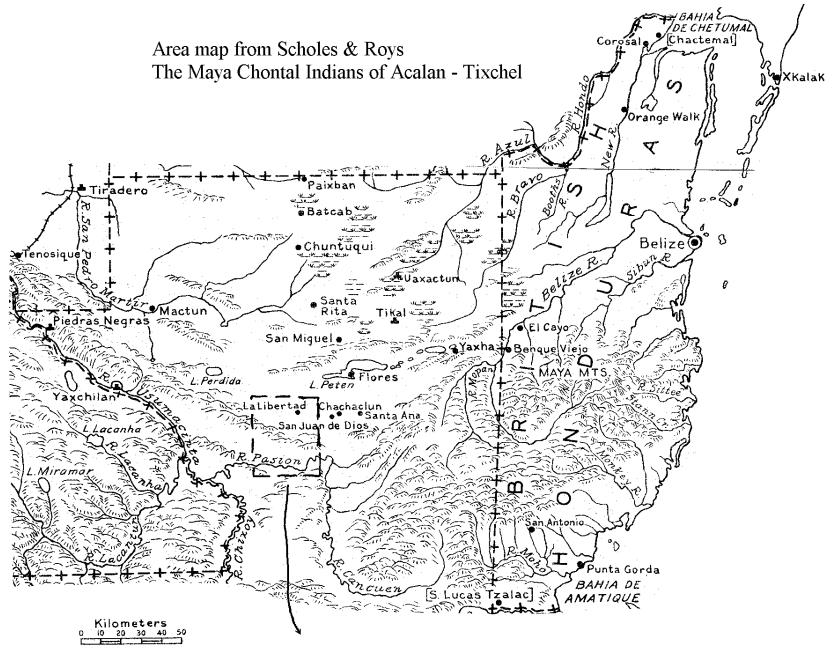
*Juliana Vasquez
Ya estás acomodada, muchacha?
Apuntes. Tuxtla 2 de 1870.*

³ “Juliana Vasquez learns from Sabino.”

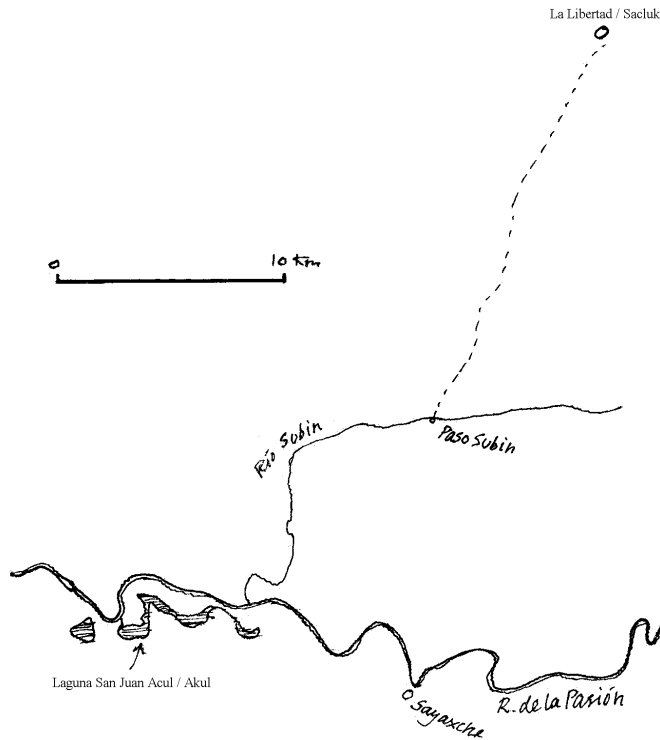
⁴ “Are you comfortable, girl?”

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOSÉ SABINO UC

Ian Graham has kindly sent me the accompanying map of the area talked about by José in his note. The route taken by José's father from José's birthplace on the lake of Akul, now called Laguna San Juan Acul, to the Pasion river, then up the Subim river and over-land to Sacluk can be followed.



Local map supplied by Ian Graham



José's autobiographical note, while very short, is interesting on two fronts: it provides us with a look at the Yucatecan Mayan language of the late 1800's, and it gives us some ethnographical information.

The Ethnography.

In this note there is an interesting insight into how the kinship system using the word "Na" works. In colonial times this was a common naming device. Some other examples, which are in such material as the books of Chilam Balam, are the names such as "Na Puc Tun", "Na Pot Xiu", and "Na Hau Pech". Unfortunately it is not clear from this note whether the "Na" refers to "mother" or to "House" or something of that nature, nor are there any dictionary entries which shed light on this matter.⁵ In the beginning of the text José gives the names of both his parents. He gives his father's name as being H- Na Menche Uc (line 8) and his mother's name as being X- Na Kin Couoh (line 9) and his own name as being H- Na Couoh Uc (line 4). Thus apparently the mother's last name is placed before the father's last name to give the child's name. The question is, does "Na" pertain only to the first word following it making the word "mother" or does it pertain to both words making the word "House"? The examples given do not clear up this point. It should be noted though that in this note and in the colonial literature in general the word "mother" is frequently spelled "naa", using the colonial convention of doubling the vowel to show a glottalized (clipped) vowel. The "na" of a name rarely appears as "naa". The implication of this is that the vowel is of normal length, and that the word therefore is derived from "house".⁶ (Incidentally, of the four family names given by José, only the name Couoh is registered by Schumann as being presently used amongst the Itzas.⁷)

It is interesting that José knew the date of his birth. Even today there are many people in Yucatan who do not know their date of birth and can only guess at how old they are. Equally interesting is the fact that José's father and older brothers were not baptized. Aside from the Lacandon, it would be rather uncommon for Mayans not to be baptized, at least at the present time.

⁵ Ralph Roys, quoted in Tozzer's translation of Landa's *Relación*, feels that "na" does refer to "mother". See footnotes 441 and 442.

⁶ Compare with Landa (1966:41): Los nombres de los padres duran siempre en los hijos; en las hijas no. A sus hijos e hijas los llamaban siempre por el nombre del padre y de la madre; el del padre como propio, y el de la madre como apelativo; de esta manera, el hijo de Chel y Chan llamaban Nachanchel (**Na Chan Chel**), que quiere decir hijos de fulanos y esta es la cause (por lo cual) dicen los indios que de un nombre son deudos y tratan por tales.

⁷ Schumann, 1971, pages 125-126.

Pah keyem (sour corn gruel), which is carried about in a “pauo” (a shoulder bag woven out of fiber such as sisal) is still a common sustenance carried on long trips. Keyem becomes sour very quickly in the high heat and humidity in any case, with an orangish colored mold growing on it, but the Mayans have long since learned to live with this. Keyem, both fresh and sour, is a very important part of everyday life today, and is part of the “work tools” taken to the work place. Today, keyem, which is mixed with water and may be flavored by salt, chili, honey, or whatever might be at hand or brought along, is consumed in the late morning.

Infants who lose their mother or whose mother loses her ability to give milk are taken in by someone else who is nursing. This is as true now as it seems to have been in José’s case. Frequently the child will stay with the nursing mother even after nursing has come to an end - especially if the nursing mother happens to be of the same family - and grow up in the adopting household. This is because the child’s feelings are generally respected. The child of course has become accustomed to its surroundings with the wet-nurse and feels that that is home. Usually the real parents ask at the end of the nursing period if the child wants to return to them, though I gather this is more a question of form and courtesy than of an expectation that the child would return to them, because, at least at the present time, there is little doubt in anybody’s mind that the child will probably want to stay with the wet-nurse. In José’s case we do not know what happened.

The Language.

It is interesting to note that the language of the autobiographical note is completely indistinguishable from Yucatecan Mayan with the exceptions noted below. It seems that José was born a Lacantun, as he calls his tribal group. It seems almost certain that “los Mayas de esta provincia del Peten” referred to by Berendt in his note on Sacluk were either Itza, Lacandon, or just possibly Mopan. The word “Lacandon” is a hispanicization of “Lacantun”. In the 1960’s it seems from Schumann’s work that Sacluk was within the sphere of Itza influence.⁸ At the moment I do not have enough information to know what tribal group was in Sacluk in the 1860’s. Of course it could well be that José had made a switch to the Yucatec dialect some time before writing this autobiographical note, and so there is certainly no guarantee that we are looking at José’s original language.

It should be noted that for what are referred to as “Lacandon” which live near Lacanha there are in fact two distinct dialects, that of those from Na Ha which has many differences from standard Yucatecan Mayan and

⁸ Schumann, 1971, page 127.

perhaps is that listed in the following linguistic map as “Chol Lacandon” and that of those who live near the ruins of Bonaan Pak who speak standard Yucatecan Mayan with some regional variations. If José Sabino Uc is from either of these two groups of Lacandon linguistically it would have to be the latter.

As noted, there are some exceptions to standard modern Yucatec in both grammatical and vocabulary usage in this autobiographical note. These exceptions are the following:

1) Line 36. There is no use of demonstrative grammatical phrase “le (noun or phrase)V”.⁹ The word “lay” is used in line 36, being spelled in the older colonial manner. The manner in which this “lay” is used is in keeping with the colonial style in which the meaning is “so” or “thus” and is positioned at the beginning of a phrase. The “le (noun or phrase)V”, as a demonstrative grammatical phrase (i.e. “this/that/the other (noun or phrase)”), is very common in modern Yucatec and in fact it is difficult to imagine a conversation being carried on without this grammatical turn. This demonstrative grammatical phrase does not appear in early colonial material such as the books of Chilam Balam. The demonstrative grammatical phrase does occur with regular frequency in the medical recipes which Roys dates to the 1700’s, and there it is fully equivalent to the modern usage.

2) Lines 15, 22. “Ma yan” is used in place of “minaan”/“minaaam” of modern and colonial usage or “manaan” of colonial usage.

3) Line 34. “Talez” was used first, then corrected to “talzic”. “Talez” is found in the Chilam Balam material, whereas “talzic” is used in the medical recipes and in modern usage. In any case, it seems that the first impulse was to use the older colonial form “talez”.

⁹ The vowels represented by V are a, o, and e. Examples of the “le (noun or phrase)V” are as follows:

For the word “xunan”, woman;

le xunana	this woman
le xunano	that woman
le xunane	the woman over there (usually out of sight)

For the phrase “baax cu betic”, what he/she/it does;

le baax cu betica	this which she does
le baax cu betico	that which she does
le baax cu betice	that which she does

The last phrase is more remote in time or space than the middle phrase. It is, perhaps for that reason, the more common of the three constructs.

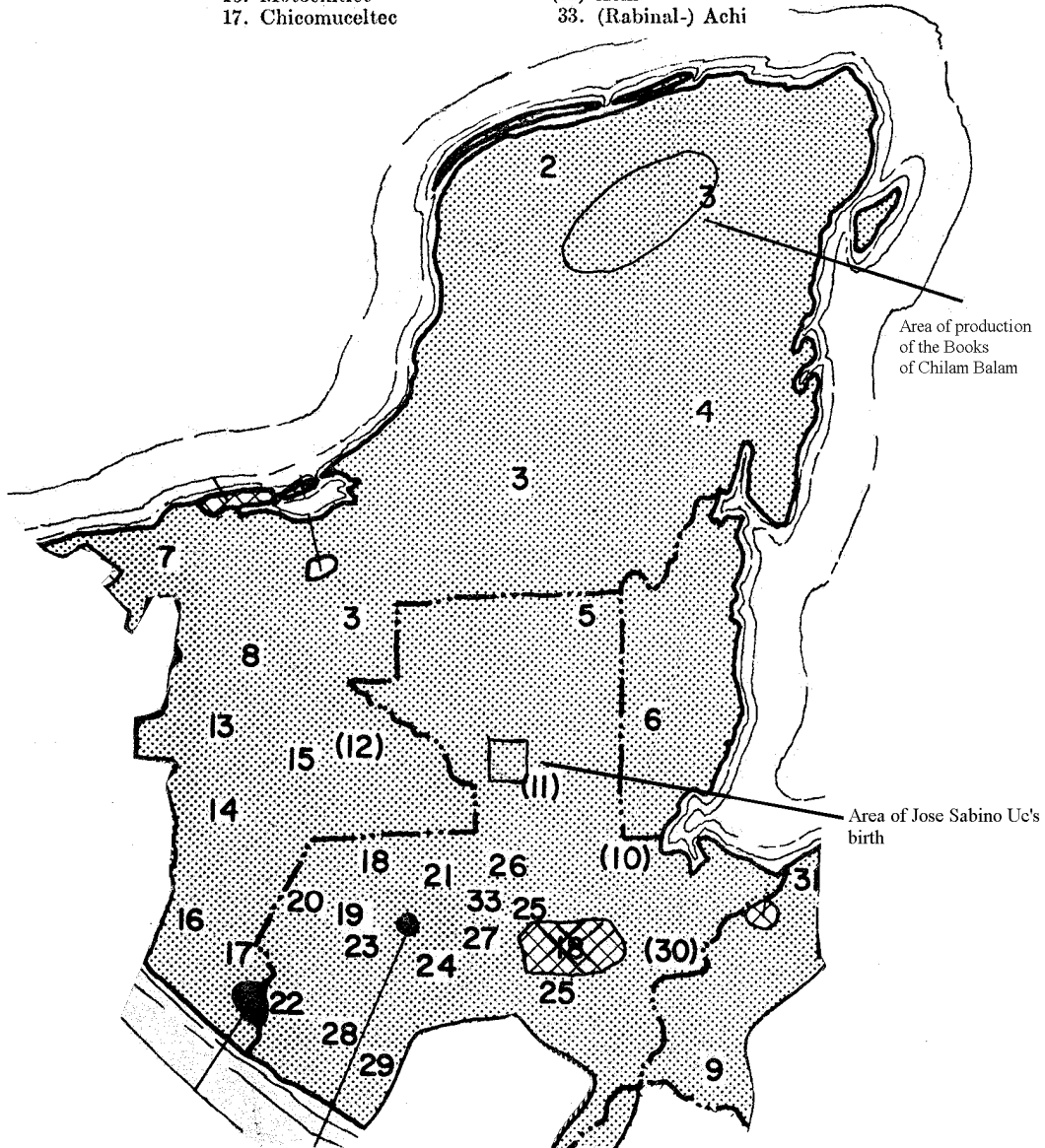
4) Lines 24, 25, 27, and 30. “Caix” is a common introductory phrase (it is really composed of “ca” - “then”, and “ix” - in this case a conjunctive) in the colonial literature but does not appear in modern conversation. Today “ca” is used alone. “Caix” was still a feature of the medical recipes, and I am not sure when this phrase went out of use.

In fact, the autobiographical note as a whole has a very colonial feeling as far as the use of words and grammatical style is concerned. This similarity to older colonial Yucatec might be in part due to the frequently noted phenomenon of the language of a relatively small splinter group such as José’s tribal group changing less than that of the parent group. Of course it may well be that there were once several dialects in Yucatan and Peten as intimated in the “Linguistic Map of Middle America” in Handbook of Middle American Indians, Vol. 5. On this map one dialect is shown as being located along the northwest coast and is called “Itza” and a major dialect is shown to cover a good portion of the rest of the northern Yucatecan peninsula and is called “Yucatec”. From the linguistic evidence that we have seen in José’s autobiographical note it seems that the tribal group that José grew up in belonged to the latter dialect. From various population reports on the peninsula of Yucatan it seems that the mortality rate amongst the western and particularly the northwestern Maya during the early colonial period was relatively low when compared to the mortality rate of the Maya living in the wetter eastern and southeastern areas where entire communities were wiped out in the years following the conquest by European-introduced diseases. Contrary to an opinion which I have held previously because of the relative uniformity of the present Yucatecan Mayan language throughout the Yucatecan peninsula, perhaps there were at one time different dialects in the Yucatecan peninsula, but because of the drastic toll European-introduced diseases took on the eastern and southeastern populations the dialect of northwestern Yucatan has been spread by emigrants from this area resulting in this apparent uniformity of the Mayan language in the Yucatecan peninsula today.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOSÉ SABINO UC

Map of the Mayan Dialects & Languages from the
Linguistic Map of Middle America in the
Handbook of Middle American Indians, Vol. 5

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 2. Itza | 18. Chuj |
| 3. Yucatec | 19. Jacaltec |
| 4. Icaiche | 20. Kanjobal |
| 5. Yucatecan Lacandon | 21. Ixil |
| 6. Mopan | 22. Mam |
| 7. Chontal of Tabasco | 23. Aguacatec I |
| 8. Chol | 24. Quiche |
| 9. Chorti | 25. Pokomam-Poconchi |
| (10) Manche | 26. Kekchi |
| (11) Acala | 27. Uspantec |
| (12) Chol Lacandon | 28. Tzutuhil |
| 13. Tzeltal | 29. Cakchiquel |
| 14. Tzotzil | (30) Cholti |
| 15. Tojolabal | 31. Toquegua |
| 16. Motocintlec | (32) Achi |
| 17. Chicomuceltec | 33. (Rabinal-) Achi |



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOSÉ SABINO UC

Here in the big town of Merida
today on the 10th day in the month of February in the year 1871
I, José Sabino Uc being my name,
he of the house of Couoh Uc,
I am going to write the story of my life.
There at the mouth of the big water (lake) of Akul,
there I was born in the land of Peten Itza its name.
He of the house Menche Uc was my father.
she of the house Kin Couoh was my mother,
both descendents of the forest people of this land,
Lacantun was their name.
There died my mother on the very day that I was born,
on the 30th day in the month of December in the year 1856.
My mother being dead
there wasn't another women in the house of my father,
just three small children, my older brothers.
Then came to the Peten the priest Brother Pedro
with other Capuchins.
There were baptized my father with my older brothers.
José Uc was the name of my father;
Juan and Lorenzo and Juan José the names of my older brothers.
There wasn't nearby a woman to give me breast milk.
My father wrapped me, he put me in a big basket.
Then he got into a boat,
then they boated to the big river Kancuen,
Pasion is its name.
Then they went up also the little river, Subim is its name.
Two days we traveled.
Sour corn gruel was my drink.
Then we traveled in the forest,
then we arrived in the town of Sacluk.
Then my father went to the house of the chief:
"Lord, here is my motherless small child.
Alive I bring him to you, I give him to you.
I am going to give my child into your hand to be amongst you."
So were the words of my father, so he spoke to the chief.

Uay ¹⁰ti noh cah ti Ho,
helel tu lahunil kin ichil yuil Febrero ti haabil 1871,
ten José Sabino Uc in kaba,¹¹
H-Na Couoh Uc,
cin bin]ibic u tzolan bey in cuxtal.
Te tu chi¹² noh ha Akul
t[i] zihen¹³ ichil u luum Peten Itza¹⁴ u kabá.
H-Na Menche Uc in yum,
X-Na Kin Couoh in naa,
kaxil¹⁵ uinicoob (tu cahmatil) tu cabil¹⁶ u cobol,
Lacantun u kaba.
T[i] cimi in naa tu hahil kin ci[m] t[i] zihen,¹⁷
ti lahuncakal kin ichil yuil Diciembre, tu haabil 1856.
Cimen in naa,
ma yanhi ulak¹⁸ x-chuplal tu yotoch¹⁹ in yum;
chen hali oxtul mehen, in zucunob.
Ca tali²⁰ ti Peten ah kin Fray Pedro
yetel ulak Capuchinoob.
T[i] oci ha tu hool in yum yetel in zucunob.
Jose Uc u kaba in yum,
Juan yetel Lorenzo yetel Juan José u kabaob in zucunob.
Ma yan na]aan²¹ x-chuplal utial u]a ten chuuch.²²
Tu tooahen in yum, tu]ahen ti boxaac
caix oci ti c[h]em.²³

¹⁰The word **Helel** is crossed out here.

¹¹The words **in kaba** are added in smaller letters.

¹²The word **chi** is added above the line.

¹³The words **t zihen** are added above the line.

¹⁴The word **Itza** is added above the line.

¹⁵The word **kaxil** is added above the line and **lacantun** is crossed out.

¹⁶The words **tu cabil** are written above **tu cahmatil**.

¹⁷The text reads **cintzihen**.

¹⁸The words **ma yanhi ulak** are written above **ma yan**.

¹⁹The words **tu na** and **ich na** are written above **tu yotoch**.

²⁰The words **ah kin Don Pedro** are crossed out and written again after **ti Peten**.

²¹The word **na]an** is written above the line.

²²The words **u]a chuuch en** are written above.

²³The text reads **cheem**.

caix u c[h]emul²⁴ ximbalna²⁵hoob ti noh yoc ha Kancuen,²⁵
Pasion u kaba.
Caix nacoob xan²⁶ ti chichan yoc ha, Subim u kaba.
Cappel kin ca ximbalna²⁷hoon,²⁷
pah keyem in uukul.^{28 29}
caix c' ximbalna²⁸hoon ti kax.
Ca kuchoon ti cah Sacluk.
Ti³⁰ bini in yum tu yotoch batab:
Yume, hela in h[-]ma³¹ naa mehen paal.³²
Cuxaanto in talez³³ tech, in kubic tech.
Bin in kube in paal ta kab ich a uicnal.³⁴
Lay u than in yumé, beyó tu alah ti batab.

²⁴The text reads **chemul**.

²⁵The word **Kancuen** is added above the line.

²⁶The words **nacob xan** are added above the line.

²⁷The verbal pronoun suffix **oon** is added above the line.

²⁸The leading **u** is added above the line.

²⁹The words **Ca kuchoon ti kax** are crossed out.

³⁰The word **Ti** is added above the line.

³¹The letters **km** are crossed out and corrected to **hm** above the line.

³²The following words **lay u than** are crossed out.

³³The word **talzic** is written above.

³⁴The words **ich a uicnal** are written above the line.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOSÉ SABINO UC

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