

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE NAME YUCATAN

The name for **Yucatan** most probably comes from Nahuatl. The 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. The reason for supposing 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.

There is also the Spanish word **yuca** (one species is called **tuc** (agave) and another is called **dzin** (cassava) in Mayan) which is derived from some Native American language, although we have not been able to trace the exact origins. While the yucca-agave species is different from the various agave plants which grow and are cultivated in Yucatan (**ci** is the Mayan name for the cultivated henequen plant and **chelem** is the Mayan name for the smaller and hardier wild plant) the yucca-agave and agave plants share many visual characteristics. Alternatively, as explained by Bernal Díaz in the footnote below, it could be that the name **Yucatan** is derived from a name meaning “place of the yuca” (where “yuca” means yuca-cassava), but we have seen nothing in the Nahuatl dictionaries which would support this reading. To the contrary, the Nahuatl word for yuca-cassava is **quauhcamotli** (wood sweet potato). Perhaps though Bernal Díaz’s explanation of the derivation of the name of **Yucatlan** is correct. Note that Bernal Díaz states that **Yucatlan** was not the name given to the land by the local inhabitants.¹

¹ According to Bernal Díaz, the word **yuca** is the native word for cassava in Cuba and Jamaica. Note that the word **tlati** in his explanation is transformed into **-tlan** in the last instance of the mention of **Yucatlan**. The Nahuatl vocabularies do not give **tlati**, so either this is a mis-transcription of the original text or perhaps alternatively there was some other language involved here. However, there is the Nahuatl word **tlalli**, meaning cultivated ground or garden bed, and as that fits the description attributed to **tlati** we could assume that **tlati** was written in error. See page 24 of the 1904 edition of his book: y ansi mismo les mostravan los montones donde ponen las plantas de cuyas rraizes se haze el pan caçabe, 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 decir yucatan, y para declarar esto dezianles los españoles questavan con el Velasq[uez] 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.

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.