

THE MEANING OF THE NAME **YUCATAN** AND THE IMPORTANCE OF **YUCA** IN EARLY COLONIAL TIMES

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.¹ In Chapter VI of his book *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, published in 1632,² he writes:

And the Indians³ showed them the mounds made of earth where they put the plants from whose roots the cassava bread was made, and which they called **yuca** in the island of Cuba, and the Indians said that they had them in their land, and they used the word **tlati** as they call it, for the earthen mounds in which they planted them, and that **yuca** combined with **tlati** makes the word **Yucatan**. The Spaniards who were talking with Diego Velasquez together with the Indians, said: “Sir, these Indians say that this land is called **Yucatlan**,” and so it kept this name even though in their language⁴ this is not what it is called.



Bernal Díaz del Castillo

¹ Born in 1496, died on February 3, 1584. The first time he arrived in Yucatan was with Captain Velasques on March, 1517.

² There is the 1904 publication which is supposed to be based on a transcript 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 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 deçir 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.

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.

³ From the context it would seem that by “Indians” what is meant is Taino speakers from Cuba or some other West Indies island who were on board the ship as interpreters and guides.

⁴ While this is an ambiguous statement one can presume that by “their language” what is meant is the language of the inhabitants of Yucatan, i.e. the Mayan language.



Images of *Manihot esculenta* plant and root
Wikipedia

Thus, as explained by Bernal Díaz, the name **Yucatan** is derived from a combination of two words meaning “planting bed in which the **yuca** is planted”.⁵

We know from reports like that of Landa that Yucatan was heavily populated at the time of first contact.⁶ Just as the case was in the 1960’s when I first went to Yucatan, the food supply at the time of contact was most certainly local and thus there would have been large plantations to supply the food necessary to sustain such a large population. The question is then: just what were the Maya growing at the time of contact to sustain this large population?

Landa, pp. 57v-58r, gives a list of crops which were being grown by the Maya. Not surprisingly, corn is the first item on the list.⁷ Further down the list of food crops mention is made of various root crops.⁸ The first on the list of root crops is

⁵ Note that here “**yuca**” means yuca-cassava: *Manihot esculenta*, often called manioc in English.

⁶ Landa, *Relacion de las Cosas De Yucatan*, p 7v: se multiplicaron tanto que toda la tierra parecia vn pueblo / Tozzer translation: they multiplied so that the whole land appeared to be but one town.

⁷ Landa, p. 57v: Las simientes que para la humana sustentacion tienen son muy buen maiz y de muchas diferencias de llo y colores, de lo qual cogen mucho y hazen trojes⁷ y guardan en silos para los años e sterileσ. / Tozzer translation: The seeds which they have for human sustenance are a very good maize of many varieties and colors and they gather a great deal of it and make granaries and keep it in underground places for the barren years.

⁸ tienē vna fruta amarauilla fresca y sabrosa q[ue] se siembra y la rayz q[ue] nace como nabo gordo y redondo es la fruta comē se crudas consal: la otra rayz que nace debaxo de tierra sembrandola que es grande mantenim[ien]to y es de muchas diferencias, ca ay moradas amarillas y blancaσ comense cozidas y asadas y son buena comida y tiran algo acastañas, y ayudan asadas a beuer. Ay otros dos generos de raizes buenas y son mantenimiento de los Indios. otras dos rayzes siluestreσ q[ue] separecen algo saladas q[ue] prim[er]o he dicho, y ayudan ent[iem]pos de necesidad de hambre a los Indios, ca sin ella no curan dellas. / Tozzer translation: They have a fruit which is wonderfully fresh and of good taste, which is planted and the root which grows like a turnip short and thick and the fruit is round. They are eaten raw with salt. The other root which grows below the earth by planting it is a great means of sustenance and is of many different kinds, for there are mulberry colored, yellow and

Pachyrrhizas crosus L. and the second on the list is *Ipomoea batatas*, L. The other two on the list are probably *Manihot esculenta*, Crantz. and *Xanthosoma yucatanense* Engl.⁹ Of the two wild root crops mentioned by Landa one is *Calopogonium caeruleum* (Berth.) Hemsl. This root is often mentioned in the Books of Chilam Balam as being the sustenance of last resort during times of famine and is often paired with *Brosimum alicastrum* Swartz.¹⁰



A planting of **yuca** in raised mounds

Studies have shown that **yuca** as a domesticated plant has its origins in Amazonia.¹¹ There are indications that domestication of **yuca** occurred at least 8,000 years ago and perhaps even earlier. Throughout tropical America, including the West Indies islands, **yuca** continues to be an important food source and the growing of **yuca** has expanded to tropical areas throughout the world.

white varieties. They are eaten boiled and roasted and are good eating and resemble chestnuts somewhat and, roasted, are good for beverages. There are two other kinds of good roots and (they) form the sustenance of the Indians. There are two other wild roots, which when salted somewhat resemble the first one I spoke of and they help along the Indians in time of need and famine, for if it were not for that they would not care about them.

⁹ The common names for these root crops are: *Pachyrrhizas crosus* L., **jicama** in Spanish and **chicam** in Mayan, *Ipomoea batatas*, L., **camote** in Spanish and **iz** in Mayan, *Manihot esculenta*, Crantz., **yuca** in Spanish and **jin** in Mayan, *Xanthosoma yucatanense* Engl., **taro** in Spanish and **macal** in Mayan, *Calopogonium caeruleum* (Berth.) Hemsl., **jicama cimarron** in Spanish and **cup** in Mayan

¹⁰ *Brosimum alicastrum* Swartz., **ramon** in Spanish and **ox** in Mayan. Example: oxil uah u uah, cupil uah u uah / Breadnut tortillas are its tortillas, jicama cimarron tortillas are its tortillas.

¹¹ *The origin of Manihot esculenta* Crantz (*Euphorbiaceae*), Antonio C. Allem, 1994.; *The History and Domestication of Cassava*, K. Kris Hirst, Updated on January 20, 2019.



Yuca in the early growing stage



Yuca ready to harvest

Research has shown that **yuca** was grown in the Maya area at least 6,000 years ago. While in terms of iconographic representations, corn and its deification is a long-standing iconic feature in the Maya area, there are indications that corn was only one of many plants which were grown in the Mayan gardens. As pointed out

in one study about Mayan agricultural practices, “Manioc grows well in a wider range of soils than maize does—from fertile to quite infertile. And it produces many times the harvest weight of maize, and greater calories per unit area than maize.”¹² Given that corn quickly depletes the soil, which is especially true of soil in Yucatan, it only makes sense that large portions in Mayan gardens were once dedicated to more productive and forgiving plants such as **yuca**.



Kauil,¹³ the young corn god

Concerning how the **yuca** came to Yucatan from Amazonia, several recent studies have shown that there was a south to north migration. Jim Reed in his presentation “The Importance of the Early Preclassic Trade Routes over Land, River, and Sea” showed how trade up the Pacific coast from the Peruvian area was one possible route for migration. Added to this there was February IMS newsletter article “South-to-north migration”. In this article there is the statement, “Maya people today show the greatest affinities to both South Americans and Indigenous Mexicans, suggesting the potential for further episodes of population movement and admixture in this region during the past 7300 years.”

Another possible route was up the chain of West Indies islands. The research report “Reconstructing the Population Genetic History of the Caribbean” has the following comment: “Interestingly, Mayans are the only group showing substantially higher contributions from the native Venezuelan components.”

¹² *Manioc Cultivation At Ceren, El Salvador: Occasional Kitchen Garden Plant Or Staple Crop?*, Payson Sheets et al, 2011.

¹³ The name Kauil is derived from the words kaa = abundance and uil / uuil = sustenance / corn. See CMM: Kaa: lo que sobra. ¶ bahunx va v kaa lo: quanto sobra? ¶ yan v kaa hun heb: vna pierna de manta ay de sobra. ¶ Item: abundancia y sobra tener de alguna cosa. ¶ kaa v cah voch ixim, voch buul: mucho maiz y muchos frisoles tengo en abundancia. ¶ ma kaa voch ixim: poco maiz tengo. / BMTV: Comer pan: viil. viiah vii .l. viib. ¶ Sentóse a comer pan: culhi vijl. / Sementera o siembra segunda: ca vil .l. ca vil nal. ¶ Sementera tengo así: yan in ca vil nal.

Elsewhere I have read that there is the hypothesis that the people from the Orinoco Basin populated the Antilles and Caribbean islands and entered Yucatan through the "backdoor", i.e. the Cancun / Cozumel region.



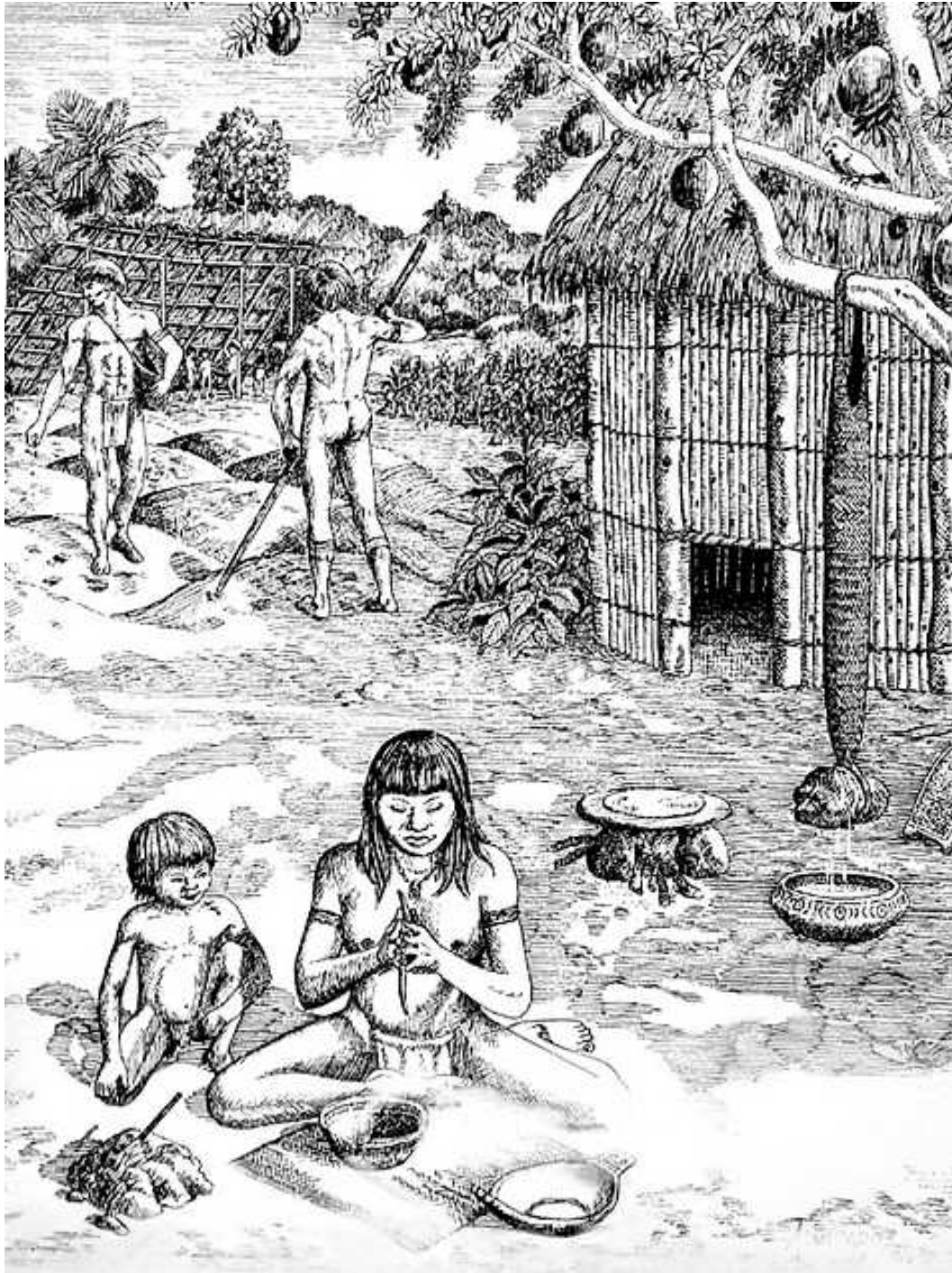
Root and lower stems of the harvested **yuca**

A conclusion from the above discussion could be drawn that this south - north migration was responsible for the introduction of **yuca** into the agricultural practices of the Maya, and further, at the time of contact that **yuca** was visually an important part of the Yucatecan landscape. A similar situation was true in the 1960's when I first visited Yucatan, except that the predominant crop was sisal which was planted everywhere in northwestern Yucatan, and the roadways leading out of Mérida were lined with sisal fields.

Today, **yuca**, called **jin** or **jim** in the Mayan language of Yucatan, is of minor importance in terms of being planted in Mayan crop fields. There is some variation concerning the frequency of its use, in part depending on the region and on the predilection of the farmer. However, in certain areas it still figures into the "garden mixture",¹⁴ i.e. the combination of plants which are planted in a standard Mayan garden. In northwestern Yucatan where deep soil deposits are rare, in order to plant root crops planting beds called **am tun**¹⁵ have to be built up so that there is sufficient soil depth for the tubers to develop. In contrast, east and south of the area around Mérida there are terrains where soil deposits are deep enough for the planting of root crops without the extra labor of creating planting beds specifically for root crops.

¹⁴ Called **u xak col** in the Mayan language.

¹⁵ BMTV: Eras de güerta do ay ortalıça: am tun .l. v muc cabil pakal.



Various stages of the preparation of **yuca** to make cassava bread
Note the net-like tube hanging in the tree
which is used to squeeze out the water in the ground **yuca**.
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Taino women preparing cassava bread
Wikipedia

One of the reasons why **yuca / ñin** and other root crops are included in the “garden mixture” today is because these root crops are much less susceptible to the vagaries of nature, be it lack of rain, crop infection or a plague of locust, than is the case with corn. Just this last year, for example, as noted in the article by Antonia Poot Tuz in the January issue of IMS, “*Last Year in My Father’s Garden*”, the rains did not begin when they were supposed to resulting in the loss of the corn crop. Other crops, including the root crops, made it through the dry period and they became the main supplier of sustenance for the family. Of course, today this is not a fatal problem because food stuffs, including corn, albeit of a very inferior quality, are imported to the Yucatecan peninsula, but imagine what a blow this would have been back at a time when the importation of food was out of the question. My wife’s grandmother grew up at such a time and her memories of the famine which swept through the Yucatan in the 1890’s were still fresh in her mind. People were reduced to having to cut down palm trees to split the trunks open in order to scrape out the more tender inner part, to collecting the nuts of the **ox tree**¹⁶ so that they could boil the nuts and make a dough out of them from which they made tortillas, and to digging up whatever roots they could find.

¹⁶ As mentioned earlier: *Brosimum alicastrum* Swartz. As a side note: abandoned villages in Yucatan

In short, the Mayan farming strategy is, and apparently always has been, to hedge one's bets with a variety of crops with the hope that if one of crops fails some of the others will make the difference between life or death. **Yuca** was one of those alternative crops and recent excavations of agricultural sites have shown that it was one of the more important components of this strategy.



Salivas Indian women making cassava. Again, note the net-like tube hanging from the house beam which is used to squeeze out the water in the ground **yuca**. Here, instead of a heavy rock being tied to the end of the tube, the woman sits on a pole to apply pressure on the tube.

Library of Congress

can be located by the presence of **ox** trees. Due to the prolonged dry season in Yucatan, the **ox** tree needs to be nurtured in the first years of its life so that it can establish a root system which reaches down into a layer of soil which does not dry out. Especially in northwestern Yucatan, this can only happen if people water the young trees during the dry season. While today the **ox** tree is mainly prized for the fodder which its leaves supplies for the household livestock, memory of the **ox** being a lifesaver in times of famine lives on.