

Module 01: Demographic Catastrophe — What Happened to the Native Population After 1492?

Evidence 1: A Health Paradise?

A

Introduction

The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel is one of several Maya Indian texts, probably written in the seventeenth century in the Mayan language but using Spanish script. The *Chilam* were native shamans or prophets; *Balam* is translated as "jaguar" and likely refers to the high status or rank of the priest (although *Balam* is also a family name and could refer to the author). *Chumayel* is the name of the town to which this particular book belonged. Though written after the fact, the books contain a great deal of information about the culture of those living on the Yucatàn Peninsula prior to and during the years of colonial rule. The excerpt below describes the changes in tribal life following the arrival of the Spaniards.

Questions to Consider

- How does the text describe life before the arrival of the Spaniards?
- What social and cultural changes occurred after the Spaniards subjugated the Mayans?
- In particular, how was health affected by the appearance of the Spaniards? Why do you think chroniclers adhered to the era as a Golden Age?

Document

"Memoranda Concerning the History of the Yucatan"

In the year 1519, after seven score and eleven years, occurred the agreement with the foreigners [the agreement with the Spaniards was reached in 1542 or 1543], according to which we paid for the war between the foreigners and the other men here in the towns. It was the captains of the towns < who made war >. It is we who pay for it today. . . .

They [the people of Chumayel] did not wish to join with the foreigners;

they did not desire Christianity. They did not wish to pay tribute. . . .

Then [before the Spaniards arrived] they adhered to < the dictates of > their reason. There was no sin; in the holy faith their lives < were passed >. There was then no sickness; they had then no aching bones; they had then no high fever; they had then no smallpox; they had then no burning chest; they had then no abdominal pains; they had then no consumption; they had then no headache. At that time the course of humanity was orderly. The foreigners made it otherwise when they arrived here. They brought shameful things when they came. They lost their innocence in carnal sin. . . . No lucky days were then displayed to us. This was the origin of the two-day chair (or throne), of the two-day reign; this was the cause of our sickness also. There were no more lucky days for us; we had no sound judgment. At the end of our loss of vision, and of our shame, everything shall be revealed. There was no great teacher, no great speaker, no supreme priest, when the change of rulers occurred at their arrival. Lewd were the priests, when they came to be established here by the foreigners. Furthermore they left their descendants here at Tancah (Mayapan). These then received the misfortunes, after the affliction of these foreigners. . . . Three times it was, they say, that the foreigners arrived. It was because of this that we were relieved from paying tribute at the age of sixty, because of the affliction by these men. . . . It was not we who did it; it is we who pay for it today. However there is at last an agreement so that there may be peace between us and the foreigners. Otherwise there will be a great war.

From "The First Chronicle." Here, the chronicler is attempting a timeline of events, although the events are not necessarily in chronological order.

4 Ahau was when the pestilence occurred; it was when the vultures entered the houses within the fortress.

2 Ahau was when the eruption of pustules occurred. It was smallpox. . . .

11 Ahau was when the mighty men arrived from the East. They were the ones who first brought here to our land, < the land of > us who are Maya, in the year 1513 [once again the Spanish calendar year is incorrect].

9 Ahau was when Christianity began, when baptism occurred. It was in this katun [the Mayan unit of time] that Bishop Toral arrived here also. It was when the hangings ceased in the year of our Lord 1546.

7 Ahau was when the Bishop of Landa died [April 29, 1579].

5 Ahau.

3 Ahau.

Source:

Ralph L. Roys, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 81-84; 138.

Internet Source:

Internet Sacred Text Archive, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*,
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/nam/maya/cbc/cbc10.htm>.