

## A MAYA LEGEND IN THE MAKING

BY EDWARD HERBERT THOMPSON

LONG years ago, Prof. T. E. N. Eaton, then a teacher of higher mathematics at the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, was accustomed to impress upon the minds of his pupils the necessity of accurate nomenclature, that is, the used word must convey exactly the same meaning to both teacher and pupil.

As one of those pupils, this idea has remained with me to the present day and prompts me to give the concise definition of the word "legend," as used by me in the paper that I now present, to be that of a seemingly marvelous narrative brought down from periods more or less remote.

Sometime before my last return to the States from Yucatan, I chanced upon what seemed to be, and was, a perfectly good Maya legend in the making. The narrator was a pure blooded Maya, young, very intelligent, and he spoke in the Maya tongue. The listener was—myself. The place of the telling was the Temple of the Jaguars in that silent City of Stone, Chichen Itzá, the once great Capital and Sacred City of the Maya race on the peninsula of Yucatan. At the time of the telling, I was sitting on the stone-carved seat of the Jaguar in the chamber known to the Mayas as the Chamber of the X'Tolob,<sup>1</sup> and the young Maya was sitting, native fashion, on the stone paved floor beside me.

The actors in a certain dramatic ceremonial, a kind of rhythmic dance, were in ancient times, and still are, called by the Mayas X'Tolob or the X'Toles. None but men are allowed to take part in this ceremonial

<sup>1</sup>X'Tol is pronounced Sh'Toles.

and they form a kind of brother-hood, in ancient times important but now decadent and fast dying out.

I had known the father of this young man before his death. He was, like myself, a X'Tol brother and in a way a dependable man. The young Maya, his son, knew me to have been not only a friend of his dead father and, like him, a X'Tol brother but also the HolPop, the Keeper of the Sacred Drum, the Tunkul of the X'Toles.

"To you," he said, "I feel that I can open my heart and speak freely as one talks to a friend that he can trust." Then he went on to say, "That which I now tell you about the bearded white one who came to Chichen Itzá are not my words or those of my father. They are the words of my father's father, my yeyem (grandfather), spoken when the two were together before the Koben (the three-stone fireplace) of an evening, talking. I, the young son of my father, stood by his knee listening to the words of my father's father. Listening, I remembered and remembering, later I understood." Then he went on to say, "My father's father told my father that one day the bearded white one came from 'Who knows where' and made his home in the Sacred City. He chose my father's father to be one of those to do his bidding. One day the bearded white one rose, thinking deeply and plucking at his long beard, then he said to my father's father and those with him, 'Come with me' and they went ready to do his bidding. He stopped before a mul (artificial mound made by the ancient people) and pointing to the mul, said 'Dig.' They cleared away the brush and trees and then the earth and stones until the big stone figure of a chacmool rose up from the mul as if to greet the bearded white one.

"Another day came and again the bearded white one said to my father's father and those with him, 'Come with me' and they went. He said, 'Dig' and as they dug the figures of Bacabes (minor gods) rose out of the ground as if to meet the bearded white one.

He looked at them long and thoughtfully, plucking at his beard, and as he looked at the Bacabes, we saw that his lips were moving. Then we who saw these things said to each other, 'Doubtless he is speaking to them.'

"Another day my father's father told my father that the bearded white one stood beside the figure of a god carved on the walls of the temple and we saw that the face of that god was a bearded one, and then we saw that the faces of the two were as the face of one. Then we said one to the other, 'Doubtless they are one.'

"My father's father told my father that one day he climbed the pyramid and entered the temple of Kukulkan, the god, and there he saw the bearded white one standing in front of an earthen vessel, the kind that the ancient ones used in burning incense before their gods. And then he said, 'Came the day when the bearded white one was seen no longer in Chichen Itzá.' Who knows where he went or when? Then my father's father, bending, speaking close to my father's ear, said slowly 'Are not all these things the acts of a god?' My father, thinking deeply, nodded his head and said 'Ah ha na! Bey Ani! Aye! It can be so!'"

This ends the narrative of the old Maya as repeated by his grandson.

The old man told of climbing the pyramid and entering the temple of Kukulkan the god. Modern research has brought out some interesting facts and near-facts concerning this legendary Kukulkan, god of the later Mayas.

A Toltec chieftain, said by tradition to have been fair skinned and bearded, entered Yucatan as invader, became its culture hero and finally was worshipped as a god under the name of Kukulkan and with the name symbol of a feathered serpent, apparently a rattlesnake. Leaving Yucatan he appeared in Mexico where, under the Nahautl name of *Quetzalcoatl* and also with the name symbol of a feathered serpent, he was

received as a culture hero and worshipped as a god by the Aztecs and kindred peoples. Leaving Aztec Mexico mysteriously he reappeared in Yucatan where he remained until he died and, it was said, was buried in Chichen Itzá. If our calculations are correct these activities of Kukulcan culture hero and god, took place in the twelfth century of the Christian Era.

The narrative as told by the old Maya to his son is not merely a retelling of the legend of Kukulcan but it is a fairly accurate recital of certain events, as seen by Maya eyes and digested in Maya minds,—that occurred during the activities of the late Doctor Augustus Le Plongeon in Yucatan. In this narrative of the Maya, the habitual gestures and even the unconscious mannerisms of Le Plongeon, so familiar to those who knew him, are accurately portrayed.

The results of these activities of Le Plongeon are embodied in the several papers written by him and published in the Proceedings of this the American Antiquarian Society during the years 1877–1879.

Accompanying this paper, and to be filed in the Society's archives, is an enlarged drawing made by my daughter from a heliotype print published in one of the Proceedings of this Society.<sup>1</sup> In this drawing can be seen Le Plongeon wearing the flowing beard, beside the figure of the chacmool that he exhumed, both of which so excited the imagination of the natives who saw them.

If those who are interested in this subject care to look up these communications from that earnest student and tireless worker in the field of American Archaeology, Dr. Augustus Le Plongeon, and those of his devoted wife, Alice Le Plongeon, they will find in them much food for thought and also for discussion.

<sup>1</sup>*Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, April 1877, page 78.

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