The following is from The Human Work, the Human Design: 2,000 Years of Mayan Literature, translated and interpreted by Dennis Tedlock, to be published by the University of California Press. The author may be contacted at dtedlock@buffalo.edu.
The ancient gods of Yucatán continued to hear their names during the colonial period. Among those who invoked them were healers who treated a wide variety of illnesses, using combinations of herbs and words. At some point during the early seventeenth century, some of these practitioners used alphabetic writing to create collections of curative incantations. Today their works are known only from a single compendium that dates from the late eighteenth century, based on two or more earlier sources and written in two different hands.

Prominent among the deities named in the incantations are those of the directions, the kantul ti’ ku, kantul ti’ bakab or “Four Gods, Four Bacabs,” and for that reason the compendium has been given the title Ritual of the Bacabs. The manuscript itself carries no general title, but each incantation carries a preface that names the illness or illnesses in question and describes the incantation itself as an “oration” (t’anil) or “dialogue” (ya’labal), or else refers to its intended effect on the illness by calling it a “trap” (petz’il) or “destroyer” (pa’il).

Oral tradition may have been the only immediate source for the incantations, but since the surreptitious use of the indigenous writing system continued as late as the end of the seventeenth century, it is possible that hieroglyphic sources were consulted as well. Whatever the sources, the writers added instructions as to the proper use of the incantations.

It seems clear that the purpose of the writers was to create scripts that could be memorized in advance of a performance, or perhaps read aloud. By comparison, the ritual texts in the surviving hieroglyphic books are more in the nature of prompts or outlines for what might be said by a performer, and the only instructions concern the selection of appropriate dates for rituals.

First among the illnesses addressed by the incantations are various forms madness whose symptoms include a lack of judgment, spasms, frenzy, fury, and shameless lust. The common term for all of these illnesses is tankas (or tamakas), which is also a term for the Milky Way. The connection may lie in the contrast between the character of the Milky Way and that of the ecliptic, the narrow path followed by the sun, moon, and planets. The Milky Way lies at right angles to the ecliptic, and it is wider and has blurry edges. Running through much of its length is a dark rift, the Black Road that leads to the underworld in the Popol Vuh, whereas the ecliptic is the path followed by the sky’s brightest lights.

Illnesses are treated as sentient beings in the incantations. The process of overcoming them involves exposing their identities, addressing them by name and tracing them back to their birth at the beginning of the present world. Once this has been done they can be exorcised, which means not only removing them from the patient but also throwing them all the way out to the edges of the living world or down into the realm of death.

The incantation translated here mentions the divinatory dates hun ahaw and kan ahaw, or “One Lord” and “Four Lord.” One Lord is the Yucatec name for the hero named Hunahpu in the Popol Vuh, who survived his own death and (with his twin brother) overcame the lords of death itself. Four Lord, according to Classic inscriptions and the Dresden Codex, is the date that marked the transition between the previous world and the present one.
INCANTATION FOR JAGUAR MACAW MADNESS

The term *ch’ab*, translated here as “chaos,” refers to disturbances in the natural order such as earthquakes and tidal waves. In the present context it describes the state of flux that existed during the darkness that separated the destruction of the previous world from the ordering of the present one. The final end of the old world fell on a divinatory date whose name, *Kan Ahaw* or “Four Lord,” can also be taken to mean “Sky Lord.” In the present world, chaos may erupt not only in the form of natural disasters but in the madness of human beings as well. In the case of Jaguar Macaw madness it takes the form of behavior that is stupid, drunken, or lascivious.

The reference to the plucking out of the sun’s eye is probably an allusion to a Yucatec myth similar to the Quiché one about Seven Macaw, as told in the Popol Vuh. During the previous world he pretended to be the sun, but his shining eye was removed when that world ended. The noisy birds at the entrance to the underworld are also found in the Popol Vuh, but not the goddess invoked here as “Foreigner” and “Doorkeeper of the Earth.” The general Mayan term for the underworld, *xibalba*, is replaced by *metnal*, from Nahuatl *mictlan*, translated as “Hell.”

Behind the various references to a lancet, the tip of the penis, and a needle for drawing blood is a ritual of sacrifice in which men of noble descent drew blood by piercing their foreskins. Judging from what the incantation reveals about this ritual, it was conceived as reenacting the myth whereby a patrilineage was founded, with the parental roles taken by the instrument of sacrifice and the foreskin, and the child emerging in the form of blood.

Incantation for Jaguar Macaw Madness, for the desire this madness brings:

“One Lord, one and only Four

Lord, Sky Lord would have been in chaos,

Sky Lord would have been dark when you

were born. Who are you, owner of chaos?

Who are you, owner of night? You are in

chaos, Great Lord of Days, the eye

of the sun was plucked out when you were born.

Who is your mother, what father begets you

when you do penance? She is Red

Rainbow, White Rainbow, she is

the point of the lancet, the tip of the penis,

this is your mother, your father, begetter, to-


gether behind the tree, together behind the monkey-throat tree when you were born, the desire in that chaos, desire in that darkness, the spitting snake was in the tree, the snake was on the rock when you were born, desire in the darkness. Master of Drunken Madness, you are the desire in the chaos, you are Master of Stupid Madness, you are Lascivious Madness, you are Jaguar Madness, you are Master of Macaw Madness, you are Deer Madness. Who is your tree? Who is your bush? What served as your bed, your bower when you were born?

The red tree of madness, white tree of madness, black tree of madness, yellow tree of madness, the red macaw acacia, white macaw acacia, black macaw acacia, yellow macaw acacia are your trees. These are your trees, you Macaw Madness. The red mamey, who is the white mamey? Who is the black mamey? Who is the yellow mamey? Who is the red viper tree? Who is white, black, yellow? The red frangipani, who is white, black, yellow? These are your trees, Lascivious Madness. Who is the madness? You are Stupid Madness . . .
you will be where she is, a needle
for drawing blood, a needle for gore,
respite comes for the chaos, respite comes
for the darkness, the bond is shaken loose
where she is, a needle for drawing blood, a
needle for drawing gore, the seizure
is shaken out, there where he vomited
water, only it wasn’t water flowing, it was gore
flowing, Master of Traveler’s Madness, Master
of Drunken Macaw Madness flowed out. What
about the desire of chaos, the illness of madness?
Drain them away then, you Four
Gods, you Four Who Pour the
Years. They will fall where she is,

Yellow Sun Face, Yellow Dripper of
Gore, where she is, the sole owner of the
accursed gore. Drain it away then, to the place
where she is, the sole owner of accursed gore,
drain it away then, you Four
Gods, you Four Who Pour the Years, it
will fall where she is, the star of Stupid Mad-
ness, it will lie four days in the place
where she is, the star of Stupid Madness. He bit
his arm, relieving the chaos, relieving
the darkness, and he also tasted the blood of the
monkey-throat tree, and he tasted the blood
on the foundation stone. Well then, throw
the desire of chaos there, desire of darkness, you Four Gods, you of the Four Directions, it will fall into the heart of Hell where its father sits, Ultimate Enemy of Fire, where she is, the Foreigner, Doorkeeper of the Earth. This is its mother, this is its lustful father when it arrives in the heart of Hell. Raucous, thunderous are the cries of the birds. What about this chaos, you Four Gods, you of the Four Directions?”

This will be the dialogue concerning the Ultimate Enemy of Fire when speaking to the Four Gods, the Four Directions. “Raucous are the

cries of the birds, the bringers of omens on her behalf, the Foreigner, Doorkeeper of the Earth, red-bellied birds, white-bellied falcons, red-bellied falcons, thrushes in the sky, thrushes in the clouds: these will portend your fall into the heart of Hell. What about stupid madness? What about macaw madness? What about jaguar madness? Well then, the desire of chaos is yours to level out, you Four Gods, you of the Four Directions. Aha! The water spreads thin, but what flows is not water but blood flowing, gore flowing from the
tree of Master of Macaw Jaguar Madness.”
This will be the dialogue when speaking to
the Four Gods, those of the Four Direc-
tions, concerning her, the Foreigner,
Doorkeeper of the Earth.