

Hum Batz

Recovering Pre-Hispanic Mayan Music



Elsie Montiel

[1] Conch shell; [2] *tunkul*; [3] *huehuetl*; [4] reed flutes; [5] tortoise shell; [6] clay ocarinas.

The Center for the Recovery, Research and Dissemination of Pre-Hispanic Mayan Music is headquartered in Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Its aim: to foster the appreciation and knowledge of Mayan art through the study of its musical instruments and the techniques for making them. Outstanding among them are the *tunkul*, one of the oldest known

Mayan instruments, and also the *zacatán* or *huehuetl* drum, the conch shell, the tortoise shell, reed flutes and clay ocarinas, or mouth organs.

Recovering these instruments includes handing on the secrets of making them and running a music and children's dance school. It was at this school that the group Hum Batz was formed;

since then, it has traveled to more than 40 cities nationwide to disseminate its research results. The important thing about these efforts is that the children at the school not only learn to make an instrument and play it, but they are also taught to recognize that they are Mayas, to be proud of their origins and to remember the philosophy, the history and the language of their ancestors. This project, directed by Ricardo Delgado, began more than eight years ago and has reached beyond the Carrillo Puerto community.¹ Today, five groups in five different surrounding communities are encouraged to preserve their own culture through music and dance workshops.

According to ancient wisdom, learning the art of making an instrument like a *tunkul* implies something more than just choosing the raw materials—making sure it has no defects, and that it is a single piece—and following technical instructions step by step. It can be made with different kinds of wood, soft or hard (ebony, *granadillo*, *palo rojo*, cedar, mahogany, pine), but since each kind of wood has its own “personality”, that personality will become part of the make-up of every *tunkul*. This is why each one will have a different sound, a different personality. Performers must realize that the *tunkul* does not give out the sound the musician wants: the wood always speaks for itself.



Mauricio Degollado

The exhibition department.

Once the wood is picked out, it’s time to think about the design; then the exact measurements have to be decided on as well as precisely where it will be bored out and where what Ricardo Delgado calls a keyboard (the slot on the top that determines the instrument’s pitch) will go. When the artisan starts to hollow out the piece, he or she has to make sure that the walls are all the same width, and that the tuning holes or “keys” and the *cabezales*, or round, head-shape ends, are all the same size. Corn or linseed oil should also be rubbed in so the wood does not crack and the desired sound can be made. The sticks used to beat the *tunkul* are tipped with rubber.

Besides these principles, the sound requires something else: when the artisan is working the wood, he or she must seek balance: the instrument must not vibrate. Today, a pitch pipe is used to know whether a *tunkul* is tuned appropriately, but in ancient times, it was placed on top of a gourd filled with water and if the water moved when the *tunkul* was beaten, it was a sign that it would make noise, not music. But if the water made little waves, it was a sign that it had the right sound; this was the way the ancient Mayas applied physics. If the *tunkul* is not ready, the artisan has to continue to carefully hollow it out, since a single blow can ruin it because it is “a precision instrument.”



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There are many stories about this *tunkul* with its *aluxe* face, and it has won prizes, but the most important thing is that it is the school-children's favorite, so much so that they've threatened Don Ricardo that if he sells it, "they'll sacrifice him to the gods."

The mood of the artisan as he or she works also influences the sound. You should work with joy if you want it to sing well. But, this does not mean that the *tunkul* does everything on its own; the student also has to learn how to get the sound he/she wants from it. Hum Batz's performances include eight *tunkules* singing at the same time.

The children attending this singular school learn all these principles. Their lessons even include learning how to recognize which kind of tree the wood their instruments are made of comes from; what mahogany is like, what cedar is like. But, as Delgado says, "Their grandparents have already taught them that. They have this knowledge of the Mayas in their blood. A Maya who doesn't know about trees or wood isn't a Maya. In a way of speaking, that's part of his or her cultural genetics."

They are also encouraged to learn more about Mayan philosophy by reading texts like the *Po-pol Vuh* and the *Chilam Balam*, and to study Mayan stelas. They are given information about the instruments' origins and the historical references to them in codices, stelas and murals. So, they know, for example, that the *tunkul* is of Mayan-Olmec origin and that it has been used for thousands of years. One of the famous murals still preserved in the Mayan city of Bonampak depicts a great fiesta where the instru-

Ricardo Delgado, head of the project.

Once the piece is finished, there is one last vital thing: when a *tunkul* does not want to sing, it just doesn't. Don Ricardo Delgado has seen innumerable instances: in the center he directs, there are *tunkules* of different sizes, designs and kinds of wood. One of them seems to detest being close to the sea or salt, so when it goes with a musical group to Cancún or Playa del Carmen, its sound is different, dull. But when it is in Carrillo Puerto or drier places, it sings beautifully. Don Ricardo assures us that when they went to Zacatecas, another *tunkul* "sang like never before." The wood in some *tunkules* gives them "a very thin, shrill" voice, and others made of soft wood that transmit that quality in their sound, softness. The group has a very special *tunkul* with the face of a small *aluxe*.² Don Ricardo took more than a month to finish it because it didn't want to sing, until one day he thought it was ready and he finished.



Mauricio Degollado

like the tortoise shells and conch shells, which are very difficult to play. It is known that the ancient Mayas used conches as forms of communication, something still frequent in jungle communities today.

Delgado says that very few people can identify the sound of the *chirimiya* even though it is commonly used for background music in documentaries and period films. Much less do they know what it looks like. The *chirimiya* “is nothing more than a kind of drinking straw that our ancestors made with material they got from the rubber tree.” Today, this tree is disappearing. In Carrillo Puerto, there are only 14 left, and for that reason, the instruments are now made with simple straws, even though the sound is different.

Mayan music does not base its sounds on the diatonic do-re-mi scale. It is duatonic, with only two notes. In performances, a single blow may be repeated up to 20 times, but does not,

ment is seen being played by musicians who are livening up the celebration. The mural also shows the *zacatán* (a large drum), the *chirimiya* and small mouth organs known as ocarinas.

The *zacatán* or *huehuatl*, the natural accompaniment to the *tunkul*, is a hollowed-out trunk made into a drum, perforated from side to side and wrapped with deerskin. Its versatility made it indispensable in pre-Hispanic music. The Aztecs used the *huehuatl* only for mass dancing. Its strong, virile sound complements the *tunkul* qualities very nicely and accompanies it perfectly. Other complementary sounds are made by using clay pots with deerskin tops; when they are struck, the sound reverberates through the clay and is another form of accompaniment.

The wind instruments, in addition to the *chirimiyas*, the reed flutes and the clay ocarinas, include what are called “the natural ones,”

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however, stop having musical value. Delgado says that Mayan music has its own rhythm and harmony and that “when Gregorian chants were only just beginning, the Mayas were already holding fabulous bashes with *tunkules*.”

Ricardo Delgado arrived in Quintana Roo more than 15 years ago in search of science and art not taught in universities. His first contact with indigenous cultures was with the Hui-chols; from there, he went to Tulum to learn from a Mayan teacher, Pablo Balam. He has both had Mayan teachers and done his own research, but his aim from the very beginning was to disseminate and perpetuate the authentic musical values of the region. Several classes have already graduated from his school, and they come back to teach the new students. The idea is to create a dynamic whereby the older students teach the younger ones, so that the recovery, research and dissemination work is never interrupted.

The current members of the musical group Hum Batz are between 9 and 14 years old; they are all regular students at Felipe Carrillo Puerto municipal schools. The group has performed Mayan dance and music in practically all Quintana Roo’s cities, as well as other states, like Veracruz, Chiapas, Tabasco, Zcatecas, Aguascalientes, Campeche and Yucatán. They receive funds from the municipal and state governments, but they have also recorded a CD, they sell instruments, and they give courses and do private performances to finance their activities.

The center’s facilities are no more than a little four-by-five-meter cabin in the Mayan village recently built in Felipe Carrillo Puerto



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The *tunkul* with the *aluxe* face, the children’s favorite.

to hold the Expo-Maya. Nevertheless, everything fits in it, say the children who go there: it has its workshop, its exhibition department, its research department and even its systems department. More than anything, though, it is big enough to show the world a little part of the immense wealth of Mayan music. ■■

NOTES

¹ The information used in this articles and the quotes all come from a *Voices of Mexico* interview with Ricardo Delgado in the city of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, June 4, 2008.

² *Aluxes* are the Mayan equivalent of a mischievous sprite; they live in the jungle and people should be wary of them and not be tricked by them. They also often watch over corn fields and frighten away thieves who try to steal ears of corn.