

**Notes and Outline of the *Popol Vuh* (Anon. ? / 1550-1555)  
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Notes: The *Popol Vuh* (Book of Counsel) is the "sacred book of the Maya." It was written between 1550 and 1555 in Maya Quiché by a bilingual Mayan educated by Spanish priests in the town of Santa Cruz Quiché thirty years after the Spanish conquest of most of Guatemala. Composed in 8,584 lines of poetry, it is essentially a creation epic and a chronicle of the Kavek lineage that dominated the most powerful region of the Guatemalan highlands during the last two centuries before the Spanish conquest in 1524. Composed over many generations—indeed, most certainly over many centuries—it is written to aid memorization and oral recitation. Most of the discourses and the narration of origin stories and events such as wars are constructed in a three-part circular fashion: to wit, the narrator declares what will be told or spoken; the narration or the speech follows; and then the passage restates what has just been uttered. In fact, the overall plan is circular in the same way. In the first three lines, the compiler tells what he plans to set forth in the text:

This is the root of the former word.	Are, u xe 'oher tzih.
Here is Quiche by name.	Varal K'iche, u bi.
Here we shall write then,	Varal x chi qa ta'ibah vi,
We shall start out then, the former words,	X chi qa tikiba vi 'oher tzih,
The beginnings	U tikaribal,
And the taproots	U xenabal puch
Of everything done in the Quiche town,	R onohel x ban pa tinamit K'iche,
The tribe of the Quiche people.	R amaq' K'iche vinaq. <sup>1</sup>

The writer tells the listener or the modern reader that he will relate everything essential about the Quiche people who were centered in the newly organized Spanish-dominated town of Santa Cruz Quiché in the first half of the sixteenth century of the Common Era. He begins with creation stories, and then he concludes with the longest section of the book, the generations of the Kavek lineage of the Quiché people. As you can see in the form and content of the poetical couplets above, aspects of this seminal book of pre-Columbian Latin American humanities are presented in binary pairs. This feature serves a dual purpose: it highlights the Mayan worldview, and it is a standard device in oral literature.

Toward the end of work, after hearing cryptically of the Spanish conquest, the narrator concludes the work by closing the circle opened over eight thousand lines earlier:

Really this is the essence of Quiche,	Xere q'ut u q'oheyik K'iche
Which is because there is no longer a view of it.	Ri r umal ma ha bi chi 'ilobal r e.
There was formerly the first one for the lords,	Q'o nabe 'oher k umal ahavab
But is still lost.	Zachinak chik.
And really this finishes everything about Quiche	Xere q'u ri mi x utzinik chi k onehel K'iche

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<sup>1</sup> Munro S. Edmonson, *The Book of Counsel; The Popol Vuh of the Quiche Maya of Guatemala*. New Orleans: Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, 1971: 3.

## Outline of the *Popol Vuh*

### I. The First Creation (lines 1 – 820)

1. The original creator gods are revealed including Tepeu, Gucumatz (Quetzalcóatl), Huracan (Heart of Heaven), and the first grandparents, Xpiacoc (Grandfather) and Xmucane (Grandmother).
2. In the beginning all was silence and nothingness; then the first words were spoken by Gucumatz and Huracan and nature and animals were created.
3. Since these creature neither talked nor worshipped the creator gods, the divine pair made the first people out of earth and mud (*ulev xoq'ol*); unable to worship the gods they were destroyed.
4. Next the pair of creator gods make dolls of wood which looked like people and talked like people and reproduced like people, but they were dessicated and they had neither hearts nor minds; so the gods destroyed them in a great flood.

### II. The Second Creation (lines 821 – 1674)

1. Before the sun exists (it's created in the fourth section, the Fourth Creation), a proto demigod, Vuqub Kaqix (7 Parrot) glorifies himself and projects brightness on the (Mayan) earth. He is exceedingly proud and boastful.
2. The Hero Twins, Hunapú (Hunter) and his brother Xblanaqué (Jaguar Deer), whose birth and exploits are narrated in the Third Creation, set out to defeat Vuqub Kaqix.
3. Vuqub Kaqix marries Chimalmat, and they have two sons: Cipacná (Alligator) and Cabracán (2 Leg). Cipacná specializes in the great mountains (of Guatemala), and Cabracán specializes in earthquakes.
4. The Twins attempt to kill with their famous blowguns at Vuqub Kaqix's "great tree," but Vuqub Kaqix tears off Hunapú's arm, which he hangs up in his house; during the skirmish, however, Vuqub Kaqix's jaw was broken and his teeth were damaged; he felt his aching teeth were killing him.
5. The Twins' grandmother (Xmucané) and grandfather (Xpiacoc) decide to help their grandsons.
6. The grandmother offers to cure Vuqub Kaqix by giving him false teeth; she uses white corn, which she poisons; when she removes his teeth, Vuqub Kaqix's "pride went out of him," and he died; the Twins take all his precious possessions.
7. Next, Cipacná, the "maker of mountains," is bathing in a river when 400 boys walk by carrying a post for their house (these poetical lines contain cosmological references, as we discover later in this Second Creation):

And they had cut  
A great tree  
For the cross-beam of their house.

8. Cipacná carries the post, which the 400 boys say is too heavy for them, and then they ask him to dig a hole for it; they plan to kill him when he's at the bottom of the hole by throwing the post down on him; but he digs a side cavity in the hole to escape death; they throw the pole down, but ants gather and eat Cipacná's hair and fingernails, which makes the boys think Cipacná has been killed; the boys get drunk celebrating; then Cipacná kills all 400 boys; the boys ascend to the sky and become a group of stars (i.e., the Pleiades).
9. In terms that also have cosmic correlatives, the Hero Twins kill Cipacná by deceiving him with a giant fake crab, which, with fish, was the only thing Cipacná would eat: they tell him there's a giant crab hiding in the river that they had failed to catch, but that surely Cipacná could catch and which they would cook for him; when he leaned into the water to grab the fake bright red crab, a mountain of the bank fell on him killing him; Cipacná became a giant stone.
10. Next, the Hero Twins set out to destroy Cabracán (Kaab r Aqan; 2 Leg; the destroyer of mountains). The Twins tell him they are hunters of birds in the mountains so that they can accompany him, and that in a certain mountain there are two birds they had failed to catch with which they would prepare a delicious meal for him; the mountain is "right there at the sunrise" (a cosmological reference); with their blowguns they kill two birds and roast them on a fire, but they poison the birds; he eats and them come to the mountain, but he was too weak to destroy the mountain; they tie him up, knock him down and bury him.

### III. The Third Creation (lines 1675 – 4709)

1. This section centers on the Hero Twins, Hunapú (Hunter) and his brother Xblanaqué (Jaguar Deer), their parents and grandparents; and the conflict between the Hero Twins (magical forces of good) and the evil lords of Xibalbá (Mayan hell).
2. Xpiacoc and Xmucané are the first couple, the grandparents. They have two sons, Hun Hunapú (1 Hunter), and Vucub Hunapú (7 Hunter). The first son, Hun Hunapú, marries Cipacyalo, and they have two sons, Hun Baatz and Hun Ch'oven. Meanwhile Vucub Hunapú has two (illegitimate) sons by X'qik (Blood Girl): Hunapú and Xbalanqué.
3. The lords of Xibalbá want to destroy the grandparents sons and grandsons by luring them below the earth into their domain of hell in order to play a ball game.
4. Interestingly, Hun Baatz (1 Monkey) and Hun Ch'oven (1 Howler) become (unheroic) artisans, craftsmen, and musicians.
5. The lords of Xibalbá become enraged when the two sons Hun Hunapú and Vucub Hunaphú make too much noise while playing ball over the evil lords' heads. These brothers accept the invitation to play ball in hell, but first they tie up their ball at the top of the center post in their parents' house (a cosmic symbol). After undergoing the five trials of Xibalbá, these

brothers are killed and sacrificed. Hun Hunapú's head is hung up in a gourd tree (*Crescentia cujete*; source of gourd water jars).

6. A maiden in Xibalbá enters the story: X Kiq' (Blood Girl). She heard about the delicious fruit in the gourd tree; Hun Hunapú's skull speaks to her; then spits on her hand; and miraculously she conceives a child:"

And immediately she conceived a child in her womb just from the spittle,  
And thus were created  
Hunahpú  
And Xbalanqué (ll. 2288-2292)

7. X Kiq' returns home to Xibalbá and the evil lords, accusing her of fornication, condemn her to be sacrificed; messengers take her out to be sacrificed but Hun Hunapú creates fake substitute heart from a Cochineal Red Tree (*Croton sanguifluus*); she presents the fake heart to the lords; they test it by burning it in a fire; it seduces them with its fragrance; they bend over to smell the fumes; meanwhile she climbs "up through a hole to the earth" (l. 2417).
8. X Kiq' goes to Cipaclayo (see III, 2, above) and Xmucané (grandmother), and X Kiq' convinces her that Cipaclayo's son is the father of the twins she is bearing; X Kiq' gives birth to Hunapú and Xblanaqué.
9. The Hero Twins' cousins (Hun Baatz and Hun Ch'oven; 1 Monkey and 1 Howler, respectively) become violently jealous to the Twins; as humanists (singers, painters, carvers) they felt they were substitutes for their father who had died in hell; the Hero Twins avenge the mistreatment by their cousins by turning them into spider monkeys; the Hero Twins then replace their monkey cousins by becoming new dancers and singers; they also become farmers; but their "true vocation" was in the ball game.
10. A rat (Rat) who had been eating their produce helped them recover the "gaming things" that their father and uncle had hidden in the peak of the rafters in their grandmother's house (a cosmic reference).
11. The Hero Twins play on the ball court; the lords of Xibalbá are upset again and invite the boys to play ball against them in hell—planning to kill the boys, of course; the message is sent to the boys via a series of embedded animals.
12. Guided by Mosquito (Xaan), the Twins must undergo life-threatening trials in Xibalbá: the House of Darkness, the Knife House, the House of Cold, the House of Jaguars, the Fire House, and the House of Bats; in the last trial, Hunahpú is decapitated by Death Bat while trying to see the dawn (a cosmological reference; see the Fourth Creation).
13. Hunapú's head rolls onto the ball court; a pumpkin becomes transformed into Xbalanqué's real head; the ball game begins; a fake second ball bounds into a tomato patch; the lords of Xibalbá rush into the tomato patch looking for the ball; meanwhile Xbalanqué kicks the Hunapú-Pumpkin head on the ball court to win the game; the pumpkin splatters seeds everywhere (cosmological reference), and the Hero Twins defeat the lords of Xibalbá.
14. The Hero Twins prophesy their death; the lords of Xibalbá make a great stone over; the Twins grasp hands and plunge into the over (cosmological reference) where they die; but they

reappeared on "the fifth day" as beggars; they perform a dance before the lords of self-destruction and resurrection; the lords are fascinated by these two dancing beggars who destroy and recreate all sorts of things including themselves.

15. In the very textual center of the *Popol Vuh*, the lords of Xibalbá ask the Hero Twins to sacrifice them (the lords) and to resurrect them; The Twins sacrificed the evil lords of the Underworld, but they don't resurrect them: "And thus were defeated / The rulers of Xibalbá" (ll. 4523-4524); the Twins extol the fact that the evil lords' sun will never be great again (former cosmic age), and they order the end to human sacrifice (but see all the human sacrifice in the Fourth Creation).
16. Grandmother discovers the good destiny of her grandsons and she worships "The Center of the House / The Center of the Court / Living Corn" because they had conquered hell.
17. Hunapú and Xbalanqué become the sun and the moon, respectively, and the 400 boys become the Pleiades.

#### IV. The Fourth Creation (4710 – 8584)

1. This last part of the *Popol Vuh* focuses on the idea of mankind, on the creation of humans, and on the lineages of the Kavek lineage of Quiché.
2. Tepeu and Gucumatz combine forces in the new creation, that of men (and women) out of yellow corn ears and white corn ears; in ll. 4823-4827 the first four men are named: Jaguar Quiché,<sup>2</sup> Jaguar Night, Nought, and Wind Jaguar. They existed by means of magic alone; they were not created by Tepeu, Gucumatz, or any other gods; they had "perfect understanding;" they foresaw the four creations and the four attendant destructions; because of their godlike powers, though, the supreme gods took away their superhuman abilities; once they had limited powers, the gods gave them wives, who are also named. At lines 5041-5042: "And this was the root of us / Who are Quiché people" (p. 154).
3. Three divisions of 13 tribes (lineages) come from the offspring of Jaguar Quiché. These people recite a beautiful prayer to Former and Shaper (ll. 5163-5204), then they go to "a city," to their first city: Tula (Tulan: reeds, *estero*), which was Quetzalcóatl's home and the capital of the Toltecs.
4. At Tula the Kavek Quiché people's language becomes diversified, and they go in search of fire, but they feel lost without having the same unified language.
5. A messenger from Xibalbá teaches them blood-drawing sacrifices as a way to obtain fire; while fasting the people continue to wait for the arrival of the sun; Venus appears as a sign that the sun will (re-)appear soon (cosmological event).
6. The people make a pilgrimage to a mountain (in Guatemala) belonging to the god Fire Peak (Haka Vitz) where they name themselves the Quiché; the mountain's name is Tohil (Storm); here they wait for the dawn, whose arrival is narrated in lines 5909-5912.

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<sup>2</sup> "The leading lineage of the Quiche in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was called *Qavek*. The name is obscure, but may be related to *qav* 'ancestor, kinsman,' and perhaps also to the old man of the 19<sup>th</sup> day, *qavok*, associated with rain, lightning and thunder. The probable meaning of the name was something like 'Fathers'" (Edmonson, p. 155).

7. At dawn the people weep with pleasure, dance, and burn incense; with the sun's arrival, however, everything becomes hot, dried out, and petrified.
8. Tohil, Gucumatz, and Quetzalcóatl, identified concretely as the "god of the Mexican people (l. 6074), are considered the same rattlesnake god, whom the Quiché people worship on this mountain.
9. At line 6369, the people are being attacked and murdered (flayed and cut) by Lord Jaguar (Avilix); i.e., they lost a number of battles and were being decimated.
10. Two maidens appear and go meet the three storm gods (cosmological/geographical event); they fashion three mantles as signs, and then the people obtain spears and shields.
11. All of the tribes are defeated in war by the first four supermen (see #2 above), after which these four die, whose deaths are recounted in lines 7066-7178. A cosmological change of epoch is being referenced in this passage: "Our sun is complete (l. 7128)." Jaguar Quiché left a shroud (Shrouded Glory) as a talisman or sign for his people. At the end of this sun epoch human sacrifice is begun.
12. The four supermen go east toward the sunrise, while three sons of theirs remain to lead the remnant of the Quiché people to Nacxit, which is also one of the Náhuatl names of Quetzalcóatl.<sup>3</sup> At this time the "Tula scripture" is brought back from Tula to the Quiché people at Nacxit.
13. In a continuing migration, the people abandon the "town called Fire Peak" and go in search of mountains; they settle on a mountain called Beard ('Izuma); a series of wars with human sacrifices ensues.
14. Next the people move to Uatatlán and then, finally, to the town of Quiché (l. 7590; Uatatlán was burned down by Pedro de Alvarado, 1524, and then moved to present-day Santa Cruz Quiché before 1550 C.E.); the narrator says that these people belonged to the "fifth generation of men / Under light" (l. 7597-7598); Together at Uatatlán / Quiché the people create 24 great houses; the first Spanish words in the text (Señor Obispo) appear in this context (l. 7642).
15. The glories of the town of Quiché are related and are said to be due to the intervention of Gucumatz; the fifth and sixth generations, which reach into the 16<sup>th</sup> century, are referred to, and then a series of wars are narrated; the people, in disarray and fear, prepare for a giant battle to come (i.e., the conquistadors) by fasting (260 days), reorganizing, relying on the words of the Popol Vuh, and praying; the prayer at lines 8118-8268 is eloquent.
16. In the last two hundred lines, the narrator lists the succession of the last thirteen lords of the Quiché; then "The Sun" (*Tonatiuh*) came, and the last lords of the 13<sup>th</sup> generation were "hung by the Castilian people" (l. 8412); among the dead was their heroic leader, Tecum u Mam, who continues to be revered as the major resistance hero of the Maya, who is compared to Cuauhtémoc of the Aztecs.
17. The "lords" of the 14<sup>th</sup> generation are named as "Don Juan de Rojas / Don Juan Cortés."
18. The *Popol Vuh* ends with a list of the glories of the Kaveks' Great Houses and, finally, recognition that all is lost because they are at present living under the Holy Cross.

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<sup>3</sup> One researcher (Wauchope, 1948, p. 39) said the date of this event was the year 1383 C.E.