

Popol Vuh Notes



The god Itzamná is the most important deity in the Mayan pantheon. Itzamná is the god of the heavens, the god of day and the god of night.

I. Manuscript of Uutatlán:

This is the original manuscript (MS). It is a hieroglyphic codex (or several codices). It involved the original oral histories of the Quiché people recited for over a 4,000-year period from 2500 BCE to 1500 CE. It was recited on ceremonial occasions. This original book had a section on divination, which is alluded to in line 8141 of the *Popol Vuh*. It also had sections on cosmology and the history of the Quiché. The words "popol vuh" are the name of the text we have in the text, but they also mean "former words" (*oher tzih*). The "popol vuh" was said to be the gift of Quetzalcóatl to the second generation of men (line 7315 to the end of section 70). In our text, the author/narrator refers to the Popol Vuh as "already lost") (line 8582, next-to-last in the text: "zachinak chik"). The original MS was written in a classical Maya Quiché language. It contained (and contains now) mythological stories along with a genealogy of the rulers of the Late Classic Mayan kingdom in the highlands of Guatemala. The book starts with creation stories (influenced by Catholic missionaries?) and then proceeds to tell the story of two heroic twin boys: Hunahpu and Xbalanqué.

II. MS of Quiché

This MS is now lost, but it existed as late as the 18th century. It constitutes the original of the present text; it was written in Santa Cruz Quiché in 1550 to 1555. The author was a Quiché from the Kavek lineage (tribe); his name is not known, but it may have been Diego Reynoso, who was a councilman in the town. He was also the author of the history of the Totonicapan people, and his guardian was trained by Spanish Catholic missionaries to write (Christian) religious literature and sermons in the Quiché dialect of the Mayan language. Note: the first missionaries to the Quiché in Guatemala arrived in the 1540's, but this region of Guatemala was conquered by Pedro de Alvarado in 1524-1525.

III. MS of Chichicastenango

The previous MS (MS of Quiché) was found at Chichicastenango (Santo Tomás Chichicastenango) is still known for its Maya culture. The Spanish conquistadors gave it

its name from the Náhuatl (Aztec) name used by their soldiers from Tlaxcala (México): Tzitzicastenango (i.e., place of nettles). This MS was copied and translated by a Dominican priest (Francisco Ximénez) in 1701 to 1703. The MS of Chichicastenango was known of from 1701 to 1855, when it disappeared.

IV. MS of San Carlos

Juan Gavarrete copied the previous MS (MS of Chichicastenango) 1845 to 1847. In 1855 Scherzer and Brasseur de Bourbourg examined this MS. The latter took both MSS (manuscripts) III and IV to Paris in 1857.

V. MS of Rabinal

Ximénez (see #III) wrote a history of the languages in Guatemala. This history included the text and translation of the Popol Vuh from the 18th century; this history became the property of a certain E. Chávez in Rabinal in 1734, and this is the text that has come down to us. Brasseur de Bourbourg got this MS from an Indian in Rabinal in 1855, and then he took this MS to Paris. It is now in the Newberry Library in Chicago, where it was recovered for the humanities by Walter Lehmann in 1828.

VI. General Considerations about the *Popol Vuh*

The *Popol Vuh* (Maya Quiché: book of the community) is a sixteenth-century edition, in Renaissance Spanish, of the oldest literary/religious work in Latin America. Its earliest form was as an oral text between 2500 B.C.E. and 1550 C.E. It belongs to the category of heroic literature, but it is not strictly speaking an epic poem because it does not feature one central protagonist. Instead, it is, as its title suggests, the story of a people, the Maya Quiché people of the Guatemala highlands. It is a religious book because it deals with creation stories and their gods. In fact, according to the book's narrator, the *Popol Vuh* is a "gift of Quetzalcóatl (i.e, Gucumatz) to humans". The book's time period goes from ancient, mythical origins to the sixteenth century of the Common Era. Significantly, the *Popol Vuh* is a prime work to consider in a course on Latin American humanities because it has (as described in our page on this course's selection criteria: see: => **Humanities Criteria**) "authority". That is to say that, despite its episodic structure, it has coherence, order, scope, unity, and high seriousness of meaning and purpose. Such "authority" derives in no small measure from the fact that it is the key sacred book of the Mayas. Specifically, the book comes from and narrates the prehistory and Maya history of the most powerful Mayan group in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Maya Quiché who were centered in the then Spanish-conquered town of Santa Cruz Quiché, Guatemala. The sacred place referred to in the text is Uatatlán, which constituted the center of their sacred geography: rivers, mountains, highlands, volcanoes, and valleys. In other words, the *Popol Vuh* attempts to express the sacred and historic totality of the Maya place on Earth and the Maya Epoch. According to the text, this Epoch was complete, it came to an end with the Spanish conquest, when the next epoch began, the Epoch of the Holy

Cross, according to the text. In the twentieth century the book was retranslated into Maya Quiché.

The book narrates the mythology and legends relating to the four cycles of the creation in the Mayan world. The first cycle refers to the wood men puppets (ending on line 820). The second cycle ends on line 1674 and ends with the destruction of 7 Parrot (Vucub-Caquix) and his two sons (Zipacná and Cabracán). The third cycle ends when the hero twins become the sun and the moon (up to line 4708). And the fourth cycle covers half of the entire text. It deals with humans (i.e., men) learning who to pray and to worship the Heart of Heaven. This last cycle covers the period from the first Fathers to the present (i.e., the year 1550).

Interestingly, scholars can detect Toltec and Aztec influences in the text, especially regarding military and religious terminology. In fact, the Toltecs and Aztecs did exert significant influence among the Mayas of Guatemala and the Yucatán from tenth century (900) to the Spanish conquests in the first half of the sixteenth century. According to their legends, the Quiché people originally came from Tula, the heart of the Toltec people.

VII. The text of the Prologue and Chapter 1 through Chapter 9: link here: => [Popol Vuh](#).

VIII. The opening lines of the Popol Vuh in Maya Quiché

These opening lines of the Popol Vuh are taken from: 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, pp. 3 – 6. This version, like most sacred texts, is in verse form, which gives it incantatory, evocative power and the utility of facilitating memorization. Note that, like the origins of many of the world's sacred texts, this work was passed down from generation to generation for several thousand years before it was written down during the early Latin American Christian era. Notice the reference to the book itself in the last line of these introductory lines below.

Notes on the languages: the *Popol Vuh* is written in the Latin-derived alphabet ("i" for "y"; "v" for "w"). Vowel length in Quiché is phonemic (double vowels in the text); Quiché has glottal consonants (' b, ch', k', q', t', tz'). The palatal stop is ("k") different from the uvular stop ("q"). Quiché Maya has been studied for almost 500 years. It is rich in adverb-like uninflected particles. Tense and number are not as specific as in English. Moreover, the *Popol Vuh* text did not separate words carefully, which has made interpretation hard, to say the least. The stress is usually on the final syllable.

The glottal stop series (see above) is one of the richest and most distinctive elements in the language.

<p>This is the root of the former word. Here is Quiche by name. Here we shall write then, We shall start out then, the former words, The beginnings And the taproots Of everything done in the Quiche town, The tribe of the Quiche people. So this is what we shall collect then, The decipherment, The clarification, And the explanation Of the mysteries And the illumination By Former, And Shaper; Bearer And Engenderer are their names, Hunter Possum And Hunter Coyote, Great White Pig And Coati, Majesty And Quetzal Serpent, The Heart of the Lake And the Heart of the Sea, Green Plate Spirit And Blue Bowl Spirit, as it is said, Who are likewise called, Who are likewise spoken of As the Woman with Grandchildren And Man with Grandchildren, Xpiacoc And Xmucane by name, Shelterer And Protector, Great-Grandmother And Great-Grandfather, As it is said In Quiché words. Then they said everything And did it furthermore,</p>	<p>Are, u we 'oher tzih. Varal K'iche, u bi. Varal x chi qa tz'ibah vi, X chi qa tikiba vi 'oher tzih, U tikaribal U xenabal puch R onohel x ban pa tinamit K'iche, R amaq K'iche vinaq. Are q'ut x chi qa qam vi U k'utunizaxik, U q'alahobizaxik, U tzihoxik Duch Evaxibal, Zaqiribal R umal Tzakol, Bitol; Alom, Q'aholom, ki bi, Hun Ah Pu Vuch' Hun Ah Pu 'Utiv, Zaqi Nim Aq, T'ziiz, Tepev, Q'uq' Kumatz, U k'ux Cho, U k'ux Palov, Ah Raxa Laq, Ah Raxa Tzel, ch uch'axik, R ach' biixik, R ach' tzihoxik ri, Iyom, Mamom, Xp[iacoc,m Xmucane, u bi, Matz'anel, Ch'uquenel, Ka mul Iyom, Ka mul Mamom, Ch uch'axik Pa K'iche tzih. Ta x ki tziho r onohel R uq x ki ban chik</p>
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<p>In the bright existence And bright words. This we shall write already withing the word of God Already in Christianity. We shall save it Because there is no longer A sight of the Book of Counsel,</p> <p>[... the Part I concludes with references to cosmic creation and the "four creations"]</p>	<p>Chi zaqil a'oolem, Zaqil tzih. Vae x chi qa tz'ibah ch u pam chik u ch'aabal Pa Christionoil chik. X chi q elezah R umal ma ha bi chik Ilobal r e Popol Vuh,</p> <p>[... U kah tzuquxik...]</p>
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