POPOL VUH

Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya People

Translation and Commentary by
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(ca. 1575), Fr. Antonio de Ciudad Real (ca. 1590), Fr. Thomás de Coto (ca. 1656), Fr. Bartolomé de Anléo (ca. 1660), Fr. Tomás de Santo Domingo (ca. 1690), Fr. Benito de Villacañas (1692), Fr. Domingo de Basseta (ca. 1698), Fr. Francisco de Varel[a] (1699), Fr. Francisco Ximénez (ca. 1701-4), Fr. Pantaleón de Guzmán (1704), Fr. Damián Delgado (1725), Fr. Francisco Herrera (1745), and Fr. Angel (ca. 1775).

Translation is an art whose cloth is woven from a variety of threads. Any defects are solely the fault of the weaver. Its beauty is solely dependent on the threads themselves.

Allen J. Christenson
Provo, December 27, 2002

INTRODUCTION

Quiché History:

The Popol Vuh was written by anonymous members of the Quiché-Maya nobility, a branch of the Maya that dominated the highlands of western Guatemala prior to the arrival of Spanish conquerors in 1524. Their present population is something over half a million, spread thinly through a series of market towns and smaller agricultural villages in the modern Guatemalan states of Quiché, Totonicapán, and Quetzaltenango. Their homeland is some of the most beautiful country in the world, dominated by a range of high mountains, volcanoes, and steep-walled plateaus, wrapped in green pine forest, and watered by numerous rivers and waterfalls. Its high elevation keeps the climate comfortably cool in the summer, while its location in the tropics prevents the extreme cold temperatures usually associated with mountainous environments. Guatemala’s boast of being the “Land of Eternal Spring” is no exaggeration.

Although the highland Maya have lived in this area for more than two thousand years, the Popol Vuh suggests that they came to be dominated by a militaristic group of relative
newcomers, led by the Cavec-Quiché lineage, who claimed to have come from somewhere in the East where the sun rises (Popol Vuh, pp. 204-205), likely the Maya lowlands during the early Postclassic phase (ca. AD 900-1200). During this period of history, many of the most important Maya ruling lineages throughout the region were multilingual and heavily influenced by ideas from beyond their borders, particularly from Nahua speakers, the language of central Mexico. According to Bernardino de Sahagún, a Spanish priest who worked among the Aztecs soon after the Spanish conquest, the lowland Maya area was known as Nonoualcat (land of the dumb) because it was occupied by non-Nahua speakers, although he asserted that many could speak Nahua as a second language (Sahagún 1959-63, Book X, 170; cf. Carmack 1981, 46). Nahua, the language of the Toltecs and later Aztecs, had become a kind of lingua franca among elite groups throughout Mesoamerica by the last centuries prior to the Spanish conquest. The highland Maya in particular remembered the legendary Toltecs, the ruling class of central Mexico in the early Postclassic period, as the greatest of artists and sages (Popol Vuh, p. 80n.102) and adopted many Nahua words that reflect political as well as esoteric ceremonial concepts.

In the Terminal Classic (AD 800-900) and Early Postclassic (AD 900-1200) phases, central Mexican influence spread rapidly through much of Mesoamerica (Thompson 1970, 18-21; Fox 1978, 274). The most impressive center of Mexican influence in the Maya world during this time was Chichen Itza, located in the northern region of the Yucatán Peninsula. Diego de Landa, one of the first Spanish priests to work among the Maya of Yucatán, was told that the city was visited by a non-Maya priest-ruler who came from across the Gulf of Mexico named Kukulcan (Yucatec: “Feathered Serpent”). This legend dovetails well with similar myths recorded in Aztec sources concerning the Toltec priest-ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who sailed across the Gulf of Mexico toward Yucatán at approximately the same time (ca. AD 978 according to Aztec chronicles) (Landa 1941, 20-23; Coe 1987, 132). Yet central Mexican influences at Chichen Itza are much older than this legendary visit by
Kukulcan. The supposedly Toltec-inspired Great Ballcourt at Chichen was dedicated on a
date corresponding to November 18, 864, and current archaeological evidence indicates that all
of the principal buildings of the city were completed well-before AD 1000 (Schele and

Rather than the result of a single event, such as the arrival of Kukulcan, central Mexican
influence in the Maya world should be seen as a long continuum of mutual interaction
extending back to at least the third or fourth century with the arrival of merchants and
perhaps military invaders from the great central Mexican city of Teotihuacan. There is clear
evidence of the presence of armed warriors from Teotihuacan who arrived at the largest of
lowland Maya centers, Tikal, in AD 378. There the foreigners oversaw the establishment of a
new dynasty of heavily Mexican-influenced rulers, if not Teotihuacanos themselves (Martin
and Grube 2000, 29-36). That this was no isolated event is attested by the presence at about
the same time of Teotihuacan architectural, ceramic, and artistic influences throughout the
Maya world, particularly in the Guatemalan highlands centered at the major site of
Kaminaljuyu (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946; Sanders 1977; Michels 1979; Hatch 1997)
and in the Tiquisate area (Hellmuth 1975, 1987; Bove 1989).

Despite these influences from central Mexico, Tikal and its neighbors maintained their
fundamentally Maya character and within a brief time reestablished their own native
dynasties. Chichen Itza as well, notwithstanding its taste for central Mexican motifs and
concepts, was also likely ruled by native Maya lineages. Their claims to “Toltec” ancestry
were part of the political climate of the age where such legendary Mexican connections were
essential to establishing legitimacy based on ancient precedent. Schele and Mathews suggest
that the Itza-Maya rulers of Chichen Itza used central Mexican imagery as a means of
proclaiming themselves the legitimate inheritors of Toltec power in the same way that kings
throughout Europe declared themselves to be successors to the Holy Roman Empire,
regardless of their familial and social histories (Schele and Mathews 1998, 201). Indeed the
Cavec Quiché lineage that produced the *Popol Vuh* likely had Itza-Maya connections (Akkeren 2000). Chichen Itza dominated the Yucatán peninsula and southern Gulf Coast regions, establishing a tradition of Toltec-inspired power and spiritual mystique that persisted long after Toltec rule, centered at Tula Hidalgo, collapsed in approximately the twelfth century. By the time of the Spanish conquest nearly all Maya rulers prided themselves on their Nahua/Toltec heritage (Morley, Brainerd and Sharer 1983, 166).

The ruling lineages of highland Guatemala were no exception. The *Popol Vuh* claims that the divine creators who formed the first ancestors of the Quichés were *Aj Toltecat* (Toltecs) (p. 80n.102; line 568). The text also emphasizes that the Quichés were “brothers” with the Yaqui (a general term for Nahua speakers) of Mexico and that the Quichés’ principal god, Tohil, was in fact equivalent to the Mexican god Quetzalcoatl (Nahua: “Feathered Serpent”) (p. 231). This affinity for foreign Mexican culture helps to explain the many Nahua loan words in the *Popol Vuh* (Campbell 1970, 8; Carmack 1983, 17-18).

According to the *Popol Vuh*, the founders of the various Quichean lineages traveled a great distance eastward “across the sea” to an epi-Toltec city called Tulan Zuyva where they received their titular gods and tokens of kingship (pp. 209-212, 256-259). Tulan is a Nahua word meaning “place of reeds,” or more broadly “city,” in the sense that it is filled with a great multitude of people as reeds crowd the shores of a lake or river. Many major Toltec-influenced ceremonial and administrative centers were therefore called Tulan. As a result, it is difficult to identify precisely which Tulan the Quiché progenitors saw as the origin of their power, although it was likely located somewhere on the Yucatán Peninsula (Carmack 1981, 48; Akkeren 2003). Chichen Itza, or its successor Mayapan, are good possibilities for this Tulan.

Carmack suggests that the founders of the Quiché ruling lineages arrived in Guatemala about the time of Chichen Itza’s collapse, which Yucatec Maya histories date around AD 1221. More recent archaeological evidence suggests that this date should be pushed back.
significantly in time, and that, in any case, the ultimate downfall of the city was preceded by
a long period of decline after the tenth century (Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1983, 167;
Schele and Mathews 1998, 197-255; Akkeren 2000, 314-315). Chichen Itza had been the
dominant force in the lowland Maya world. Its collapse disrupted the traditional politics and
interregional trade of the region, resulting in the displacement of numerous groups of people
seeking new power bases and economic opportunities (Fox 1978, 2). Many of these groups
claimed authority based on the old Mexican-influenced symbols of power and prestige (Roys
1967, 88-98; Schele and Mathews 1998). It is possible that elements of what would become
the ruling Cavec-Quiché lineage and related highland Maya progenitors were part of this
human wave.

Thus, at Tulan, the founding lineages of the various highland Maya kingdoms were given
their titular gods, as well as tokens of “Toltec” rule (many of which bore Nahua language
names) and commissioned to leave in search of places to conquer (pp. 213, 257-260).
Numerous highland Maya documents speak of this pilgrimage to Tulan as a means of securing
tokens of power and legitimacy. This account is from the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*:

> Then we arrived at Tulan in the darkness and in the night. Then we gave the tribute,
when the seven tribes and the warriors carried the tribute. We took our places in order at
the left part of Tulan.... And after the seven tribes had arrived, we the warriors came. So
they said. And commanding us to come, they said to us, our mothers, and our fathers:
“Go, my daughters, my sons. I will give you your wealth, your domain; I will give you
your power and your majesty, your canopy and your throne. Thus shall they pay tribute
to you.... Truly, your glory shall be great. You shall not be disparaged. You shall become
great with the wealth of the wooden shields. Do not sleep and you shall conquer, my
daughters, my sons! I will give your domain to you, the thirteen chiefs, to all of you
equally: your bows, your shields, your domain, your majesty, your greatness, your canopy,
and your throne. These are your first treasures.” Thus they spoke to the Quichés when
the thirteen groups of warriors arrived at Tulan. (Recinos and Goetz 1953, 50)

The authors of the *Popol Vuh* wrote that their brethren scattered in many different
directions after departing from Tulan (pp. 230-232). Indeed, the Quichés described their
ancestors more as refugees than as well-prepared and organized military colonists:

> This is what preoccupied their hearts as they passed through their great afflictions.
They did not have food or sustenance. They would only sniff the bottoms of their staffs
to feel as if they were eating. But they did not eat when they came. (p. 221)
As outlined in the text, the Quiché forefathers were gradually able to dominate most of western Guatemala and set up their own militaristic kingdom which ultimately extended from the Pacific Coast in the west to the borders of the Petén rain forest in the east. The Quichés soon adopted the language and traditions of the more numerous highland Maya inhabitants of the places they conquered, retaining only a few lowland Maya and Nahua words which had no local equivalent, particularly those related to military, political, and theological concepts.

The *Popol Vuh* account of a simultaneous mass migration of all the major Quichean lineage groups into the Guatemalan highlands should not be taken literally. Rather, this was more likely a slow process carried out over a period of several centuries involving a complex series of historical and social interactions (Carmack 1981, 43-74). Indeed, many of these lineages had always lived in the highlands, although their authority to exercise military or political authority may have been obtained from outside centers of power. The confederation of people known as the Quiché was more likely a complex and linguistically diverse group of lineages composed of native highland Maya, Mexicanized clans from nearby Pacific Coastal areas, and immigrants (particularly the Cavec) from the Maya lowlands (Akkeren 2000). The interrelationship between these groups was dynamic and changed significantly over time. The *Popol Vuh* does not contain what we would call “objective history.” It is instead a collection of traditions, partly based in historical fact and partly based on mythic interpretation, to describe the rise to power of their own ancestral lineages, specifically that of the Cavec who came to dominate the highland Maya region in the fifteenth century. This mixture of highland Maya, lowland Maya, and Mexican-influenced cultures ultimately gave birth to the traditions contained in the *Popol Vuh*.

The arrival of the Spaniards in the early sixteenth century resulted in the abrupt disruption of Quiché-Maya rule. Hernán Cortés, conqueror of the Aztec empire in Mexico, heard reports of rich lands to be had southward in Guatemala. He therefore sent one of his captains, Pedro de Alvarado, to subdue any resistance in that direction and claim the area for the
Spanish Crown. In his first letter to Cortés, Alvarado described Guatemala as “the wildest land and people that has ever been seen.... We are so far from help that if Our Lady does not aid us, no one can” (Alvarado 1979, 105). Following a brief, yet bloody campaign, Alvarado entered the Quiché capital at Cumarcah (also known by its Nahua name, Utatlan) without resistance on March 7, 1524, at the invitation of the lords Oxib Quieh and Beleheb Tzi. Once inside the city, Alvarado suspected a trap and ordered the arrest and execution of its rulers:

As I knew them [the Quiché lords] to have such ill will toward the service of His Majesty, and for the good and tranquility of the land, I burned them, and I commanded to be burned the town of Utatlan to its foundations, for it was dangerous and strong.... All they that were taken prisoners of war were branded and made slaves. (Alvarado 1979, 102-3)

During the early Spanish Colonial period, the population of Guatemala declined by as much as 85% as a result of war, forced labor, and disease. Fortunately, President Alonso López Cerrato, the successor to Pedro de Alvarado, was more tolerant:

During this year [1549] the Lord President Cerrado arrived.... When he arrived, he condemned the Spaniards, he liberated the slaves and vassals of the Spaniards, he cut the taxes in two, he suspended forced labor and made the Spaniards pay all men, great and small. The lord Cerrado truly alleviated the sufferings of the people. I myself saw him, oh, my sons! (Recinos and Goetz 1953, 137)

Christianity was formally established in Guatemala in 1534 under Bishop Francisco Marroquín, who sent out priests with portable altars to the various Indian towns and villages to baptize the Maya and destroy any remnants of “idolatry” and “paganism” which might have survived the Conquest. To aid in the process of conversion, missionary priests gathered the Maya into towns, each with a church to administer Catholic rites and instruct them in the Christian faith. Because Cumarcah had been all but destroyed during the war, the remnants of its population were moved to a new settlement nearby in ca. 1555, which the Spanish authorities called Santa Cruz del Quiché (Holy Cross of the Quiché). It was likely here that the Popol Vuh was compiled in the form that we have today.
POPOP VUH

PREAMBLED

THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF THE ANCIENT TRADITIONS of this place called Quiché.

HERE we shall write. We shall begin to tell the ancient stories of the beginning, the origin of all that was done in the citadel of Quiché, among the people of the Quiché nation.

1 lines 1-96

The Quiché word xe’ (root) is used here to describe the beginning or foundation of the authors’ words concerning the history of the Quiché people. The subsequent narrative is thus seen as growing like a plant from this “root” (lines 4-6).

The Popol Vuh manuscript does not utilize capitalization or punctuation to differentiate sentences. Capitalization is, however, used to mark the beginning of what the authors consider to be the major divisions of their story. In general, only the first word of each new section is capitalized. In this translation, I have marked these divisions by capitalizing the first word of the introductory line where appropriate. In two instances (lines 1 and 97), the entire introductory line is capitalized in the manuscript. Line 1 introduces the preamble of the text, while line 97 is the first line of the body of the story itself.

The authors at various times refer to the land, the nation, the capital city, and the people themselves as Quiché (K’iche’ in the modern orthography of the Maya languages), meaning “many trees” or “forest.” The homeland of the Quiché people in western Guatemala is mountainous and heavily forested.

The authors here state that they are “writing” this history. The people of ancient Mesoamerica (roughly the area of Central Mexico southward to Guatemala, Belize, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador) were the only literate Precolumbian cultures in the New World. Following the Spanish conquest, native Americans were discouraged from using their own ancient writing systems in favor of the Latin script. The manuscript of the Popol Vuh was thus written in the Mayan language of the Quichés, but with a European script. It is this set of circumstances that has preserved the Popol Vuh in a fully readable form when so many other native American texts were either destroyed or written in an as yet incompletely decipherable glyphic form.

Tikib’a’i is literally “to plant.” “The beginning,” also in this sentence, is therefore literally “the planting.”

Based on tinamit, a Nahua-derived word meaning “fortified town, citadel, or fortification wall” (Campbell 1983, 85). Although in modern Quiché, tinamit simply refers to a town or city, the word is used in the Popol Vuh text to specify fortified centers occupied by ruling lineages (Carmack 1981, 23). Here the citadel of the Quiché people is also called Quiché, apparently referring to the heartland region of their nation. This would include the capital city, Cumarcah, as well as its surrounding territory.
Here we shall gather the manifestation, the declaration, the account of the sowing⁹ and the dawning¹⁰ by¹¹ the Framer¹² and the Shaper,¹³ She Who Has Borne Children and

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⁸ *Amaq'* may refer to a geographic entity such as a town or region, as well as the group of people who occupy that territory. It may also describe a group of people unified by a common language and/or ethnic origin, such as a lineage, clan, or tribe (Hill 1996, 64; Akkeren 2000, 24). Thus Cook defines *amaq* as composed of endogamous landholding communities subordinate to the lord or patrilineage head centered at his *tinamit* (2000, 27). Hill and Monaghan identify the *amaq* as an alliance of confederated lineage groups (1987, 74). *Amaq'* also implies something that is permanent, fixed, stable, secure, or settled. I have chosen to use the word “nation” as this is the currently preferred term for Native American groups as well as their territorial possessions.

⁹ The manuscript reads *euaxibal* (obscurity, that which is hidden in darkness). This is likely a transcription error for *auaxibal* (sowing, that which is sown), a concept that is paired with “dawning” throughout the text as a metaphor for the creation (see pp. 71, 78-82, 110, 206-207, 227; lines 196-197, 209-210, 442-443, 543-544, 612-613, 1653-1654, 5091-5092).

¹⁰ The primary focus of the creation is to form humanity (cf. pp. 70-71; lines 213-218). The “sowing” and “dawning” of this couplet may refer in a literal sense to a new beginning, but may also be interpreted in human terms. In addition, *tz'uk* (germinate/sprout) is used as a metaphor for human birth (Coto). Among the Quichês, when a woman becomes pregnant, the event is announced by a respected elder of the community at certain lineage shrines. This ceremony is referred to as “the sowing” of the future child (B. Tedlock 1982, 80). In Santiago Atitlán, when an infant is born it is said that “he (or she) sprouted” (Carlsen 1997, 54). The “dawning” also refers to the dawn of humanity, as indicated by the reference to “anyone” rather than “anything” on p. 71. In the Quiché language, to give birth is “to dawn” or “to give light” (*ya'saq*). In Chichicastenango children are called *alaj q'ij* (little sun) or *alaj q'ij saj* (little ray of sun) when they are referred to in ritual contexts (Schultze-Jena 1954, 25).

¹¹ The following is a long list of deities, arranged in pairs, which the Quichês believed to have participated in the creation at the beginning of time. The list consists of not only the names of separate gods, but their titles and secondary names as well. It is thus difficult to distinguish how many gods are really involved. In some cases, titles are definitively assigned to individual gods later in the text. In other cases, gods can be assumed to be separate individuals when they appear simultaneously in different locations or when they engage in conversation as distinct entities. When these instances are taken into consideration, there appear to be only three pairs of gods who actively participate in the creation—the Framer and the Shaper, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, and Xmucane and Xpiyacoc. Without their titles, the same six names appear together planning the creation on p. 68 (lines 137-144) and again in connection with the creation of humankind on p. 197 (lines 4963-4968). Later in the account, yet another god, Heart of Sky, will be named as the presiding deity who oversees the work (pp. 70-72; lines 183-184).

¹² *Tzáqol* (Framer) refers to one who makes something by putting things together (i.e., a building from stone or adobe, a meal from various ingredients, or a woven cloth from individual threads).

¹³ *B'itol* (Shaper) refers to one who makes something by modeling (i.e., pottery from clay, or a sculpture from carved stone), thus giving shape to an otherwise amorphous substance. The Framer and the Shaper are the most frequently mentioned gods involved in the creation of the world and its inhabitants. Their names imply that the creation involved giving frame and shape to matter that already existed rather than conjuring something out of nothing. This pair of gods was so important that soon after the Spanish conquest, Father Domingo de Vico used their Quiché names to refer to the God of the Old Testament (Carmack and Mondloch 1983, 206).
He Who Has Begotten Sons, as they are called; along with Hunahpu Possum and Hunahpu Coyote, Great White Peccary and Coati, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, Heart of Lake and Heart of Sea, Creator of the Green Earth and Creator of the Blue Sky, as they are called.

14 These are titles for the divine couple, Xmucane and Xpiyacoc (see p. 80; lines 557-558). Ximénez translated their Quiché names, Alom and K'ajolom, as simply “Mother” and “Father.” A more accurate translation for Alom, however, is “She Who Has Borne Children,” from the perfect aspect of the root verb al (to bear children). The name of the male god, K'ajolom, specifically indicates his having begotten male offspring, thus “He Who Has Begotten Sons.” Fray Bartolomé de las Casas wrote in the sixteenth century that the people of Guatemala worshiped as their principal gods “the Great Father and the Great Mother that were in heaven,” apparently referring to this divine couple (Las Casas 1967, III.cxxiv.650).

15 Hunahpu Possum and Hunahpu Coyote are also likely titles for the gods Xpiyacoc and Xmucane (see pp. 79-80; lines 498-501). For a discussion of the etymology of the name Hunahpu, see footnote 163. Wuch’ is the opossum (Didelphis yucatanensis), which appears later in the text presiding over the moments immediately preceding the rising of the sun (pp. 173-174; lines 4144-4151). In the Dresden Codex (Lee 1985, folios 25-28, pp. 51-52), the aged deity Mam, likely a lowland Maya version of Xpiyacoc, is depicted as a possum presiding over the five days of the Uayeb prior to the beginning of the new year. Father Thomás Coto, who compiled a dictionary of the closely related Cakchiquel-Maya language in the seventeenth century, mentions under the Spanish word Escuridad, that vuch is the darkness of night just prior to the dawn (Coto 1983, 207-8).

16 Utiw is the coyote (Canis latrans), an animal also associated with the night.

17 Saqi Nima Aq (Great White Peccary). The word saqi may be translated as “light, bright, or white.” Later in the text (p. 98; line 1055), this same god is described as having very white hair due to his advanced age; thus “white” is the most likely translation here. In that same passage, “Great White Peccary” is given as one of the names or titles of the patriarchal creator god Xpiyacoc mentioned in the next paragraph. There are two species of peccary, or wild pig, living in Central America—Peccari angulatus yucatanensis (Collared Peccary) and Tayassu pecari (White-lipped Peccary). The latter is perhaps intended here because it is the larger of the two and is decorated with white facial markings.

18 This is another name or title for the female creator goddess Xmucane, mentioned in the next paragraph (see p. 62; line 1056). The coati, or coatimundi, which inhabits tropical Central America is Nasua narica yucatanica. It is a raccoonlike animal with a long tail and a long, pointed, flexible snout.

19 Tepew (Sovereign) is one of several words in the Popol Vuh that were borrowed from the central Mexican group of languages, Nahua, variants of which were spoken by both the epi-Toltec and Aztec nations. This word is the Quiché form of the Nahua tepeuh, meaning “conqueror” or “majesty” (Campbell 1970, 4). Coto and Basseta record that in the Colonial era, the Quichés recognized the word as referring to “majesty, dignity, lordship, power.” Tedlock and Recinos translate the word as “sovereign,” which I prefer to the more descriptive “majesty” used by Edmonson.

20 Q'ukumatz may be translated as “Quetzal Serpent” or, less accurately, as “Feathered Serpent.” Q'uq’ refers to the quetzal bird, Pharomacrus mocinno, one of the most beautiful birds in the world. It inhabits the cloud forests of southern Mesoamerica between 3,000 and 4,000 feet in elevation. Both male and female have brilliantly colored iridescent blue/green feathers on their wings, tail, and crest, while their breasts are a bright crimson. The shade of blue or green depends on the angle of light striking its feathers.
These collectively are evoked and given expression as the Midwife and the Patriarch, whose names are Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, the Protector and the

The male quetzal’s tail feathers were highly prized by Maya royalty for their beauty and size, often reaching three feet in length. The unique coloration of the bird carried profound religious significance for the Maya. Its predominant blue/green feathers represented sky and vegetation, both symbols of life. Its red breast represented fire, the force that quickens life. Kumatz is a general term for “snake” or “serpent.” The serpent was a common Maya symbol for regeneration or rebirth because of its tendency to periodically shed its skin to reveal a newer and brighter one. The combination of an avian lord of the skies with a serpentine lord of the earth and underworld gave this god power over all levels of the Maya universe. He is undoubtedly related to the well-known god Quetzalcoatl (Nahua for “Quetzal Serpent) worshiped by the Aztecs of Central Mexico.

These are likely titles for Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, who are associated with water (see p. 68; lines 140-143; Recinos and Goetz 1953b, 76). K’ux may refer to either “heart” or “spirit.” This pair of deities thus embodies the inward powers of large, standing bodies of water. The Popol Vuh states that prior to the creation the world consisted of a vast expanse of placid waters from which all things emerged (p. 67; lines 129-136).

These are likely titles for Xpiyacoc and Xmucane (see p. 80; lines 565-566). They literally mean “blue/green plate” and “blue/green bowl.” The Quiché language has only one word, räx, for both blue and green. When distinguishing between the colors, modern Quiché people are forced to say “räx like the sky” for blue, or “räx like a tree” for green. This same type of dichotomy appears here. The “blue/green plate” refers to the green surface of the earth covered with vegetation, and the arch of the sky is envisioned as an inverted “blue bowl.” The earth is specifically likened to a plate on p. 71 (lines 205-206).

Midwife and Patriarch are titles for Xmucane and Xpiyacoc (see p. 80; lines 536-537). I’yom may be literally translated as “She Who Has Had Grandchildren,” but the word is also commonly used as an affectionate title for a midwife. I have chosen this interpretation here. The title of the goddess implies that she assists in the “birth” of the world.

Mamom may also be translated as “He Who Has Had Grandchildren.” In this case, it is more likely a title of respect for the god as a grandfatherly patriarch who oversees the creation. In modern Quiché society, mamom is a title used on occasion to refer to the head of patrilineage groups. They are often consulted on important family matters. They also participate directly in the rituals of marriage, the blessing and naming of children, and the consultation of dead ancestors to determine their will. Tedlock translates Mamom as “Matchmaker,” since one of the intercessory tasks that such individuals have is to petition for the hand in marriage of a prospective bride on behalf of a member of his lineage (D. Tedlock 1996, 63, 217). This translation seems somewhat limited in its scope, however, considering the range of responsibilities held by the lineage patriarch.

The names of the Midwife and Patriarch are given here as Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, but in reverse order. Throughout the Popol Vuh, female deities are listed before male deities when paired in parallel couplets. It thus makes little sense that Xpiyacoc, the name of the grandfather god, would be written before that of Xmucane, his female counterpart. This is an example of chiasmus, a form of reverse parallelism in which the first element of a strophe parallels the last, the second element parallels the next to last, etc. This arrangement, rather common in the text (see introductory section on poetics), tends to focus attention on the central elements, thus asserting their importance. The passage is thus arranged in the following way in lines 32-35 of the literal translation:

Midwife, I’yom,
Patriarch, Mamom,
Xpiyacoc, Xpiyakok,
The name of the “Midwife” in line 32 is Xmucane, which appears in line 35. The name of the “Patriarch” in line 33 is Xpiyacoc, which appears in line 34. Edmonson, who believed that the Popol Vuh is arranged entirely in paired couplets, was confused by the order of the names Xpiyacoc and Xmucane: “It is odd that this frequent couplet places the male first, the reverse of the usual Quiché order; indeed, if the reconstructed forms are correct, they would make better sense reversed” (Edmonson 1971, p. 5, n. 35). Recognition of the chiasmic nature of this passage clears up the confusion (see also p. 80; lines 538-541 for a repetition of this arrangement with regard to Xpiyacoc and Xmucane).

Xpiyacoc is the male deity, while Xmucane serves as the divine female principal that brings about the creation. The derivation of the name Xpiyacoc is problematic. Edmonson suggests that it is based on the Nahua yex-pa-ococc(an-e), which he reads as “thrice in another two places,” and relates it to the next phrase of the text in which this deity is referred to as “twice patriarch.” Tedlock prefers that it should be read as a Quiché name, and that it is based on the verb yekik/yakik, which his Quiché collaborator interpreted as “to be put in order, to be lifted up” with regard to the problems of clients who are under treatment by aj q’ij priests. Perhaps the most likely derivation of this name is found at Rabinal where there is a design woven into textiles which locals call piykok and identify as a turtle (Akkeren 2000, 207, 261-264). Kok is “turtle” in both lowland and highland Maya languages, making this an intriguing possibility. At Chichen Itza as well as Mayapan (both post-Classic sites likely contemporary with the early history of the Quichés), the aged grandfather earth deity (God N, Pauahtun, Bacab, Mam) wears a turtle carapace and bears up the sky (Taube 1992, 92-99; Schele and Mathews 1998, 214-218). Among the contemporary Kekchi and Pokomchi, this god is identified as the Mam (Grandfather), an earth deity who oversees the five day Uayeb period prior which precedes the beginning of the new year in the ancient calendric system. It is possible that Xpiyacoc is the Quiché version of this deity. Ultimately, a definitive etymology is impossible to determine. When proper names are passed down through generations of time, they often tend to become altered in their pronunciation, and perhaps their original meaning as well. If Xpiyacoc is derived from a Nahua original, it had certainly become mangled to the point where an Aztec envoy at the Quiché court would have had a difficult time coming up with an obvious meaning for it in his language. The same is true for Yucatec, Cholan, or Mam derivations for the name. There are similar-sounding words in each of these languages, although none are a precise fit. It is thus possible that the Quichés of the sixteenth century preserved the archaic spelling because they saw it simply as a proper name, without necessarily preserving memory of its original derivation (see also footnote 163 with regard to this phenomenon). I have chosen to leave such names untranslated.

26 The name Xmucane may be derived from x- (feminine marker, diminutive) plus muqik (to bury, to cover, plant in the ground), thus giving a possible reading of “She Who Buries or She Who Plants,” referring to the planting of a seed in the earth or a developing child in the womb. Ximénez wrote that native priests in his day called upon Xmucane and Xpiyacoc for inspiration, particularly concerning the birth of infants and midwifery (Ximénez 1929-31, I.i.6). Alternatively the name may be derived from the verb muqunik (to see, look). Xmucane and Xpiyacoc are referred to as seers several times in the text (see pp. 79-80; lines 511-517; 522-23). Akkeren suggests that the name should be derived from Yucatec and read as “Curved/Buried is your Tail.” He associates her with a scorpion deity based on the name of a scorpion textile motif at Rabinal—muqje (tail in highland Maya languages is je, however its lowland Maya equivalent is ne), as well as an entry in the Ritual of the Bacabs referring to a scorpion entity as bul moc a ne (well-curved is your tail) (Arzápalo Marín 1987, 385-386; Akkeren 2000, 262-264). It may be fruitless to seek for a single meaning for such deity names as these. Particularly with regard to names and archaic words used in ceremonial contexts, Quichés derive a host of meanings from them, including puns and other word plays. Thus Barbara Tedlock points out that each named day in the traditional highland Maya calendar has a range of potential meanings, all of which are equally valid depending on context. For example, in interpreting a divinatory outcome, the meaning of the day C’at may be derived from c’atic (to burn), pa c’at (in nets), or c’asaj c’olic (to be in debt) (B. Tedlock 1982, 110). This is one reason I prefer to leave such names untranslated. Xmucane is likely the Quiché version of the grandmother goddess of the Maya lowlands (Goddess O, Chac Chel, Ix Chel). Like God N, the grandmother Goddess O is associated both with the forces of destruction and creation. On folio 74 of the Dresden Codex she is shown pouring...
Shelterer, twice Midwife and Twice Patriarch, as they are called in Quiché traditions. They gave voice to all things and accomplished their purpose in purity of being and in truth.

This account we shall now write under the law of God and Christianity. We shall bring it forth because there is no longer the means whereby the Popol Vuh may be seen, the means of seeing clearly that had come from across the sea—the account of our

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28 Edmonson translated matzanel as “shelterer,” while Tedlock translated it as “defender.” A more literal translation would be “embracer,” but with the implication that this embrace is meant to be protective in nature.

29 The root verb, ch'uq, means “to cover.” Thus, the translation “shelterer” refers to a deity who provides a protective shelter or cover.

30 The phrase is saqil k'olem, saqil tzij. Saqil is a word laden with implied meanings in the Quiché language. These include “light, clarity, whiteness, brightness, and purity.” K'olem is “existence, being,” as well as the “nature or essence” of a thing. Saqil tzij is literally “white word, or truth,” but it may also refer to “posterity, generation, or dynastic succession within a royal family.” As a verb it means “to light” a fire or candle.

31 U ch'ab'al Dios (his speech/language God). This phrase is often used in Roman Catholic sermons to refer to the doctrine, or preaching, of the Christian God. It also has a legalistic interpretation (law, declaration, proclamation), without religious overtones. The latter reading seems preferable as the Popol Vuh text is not written as a Christian doctrinal treatise.

32 Here, the authors of the Popol Vuh confirm that they are compiling the ancient traditions of their people under the law of Christianity, imposed following the Spanish conquest. Surprisingly, Dios (God) and Christiano (Christianity) are the only examples of Christian or Spanish-derived words in the Popol Vuh until the end of the text, where the arrival of the Spaniards is described. This lack of intrusive Spanish words argues for the purity of the text as an accurate record of Precolumbian cosmology and history. The Popol Vuh therefore stands in marked contrast to other post-Conquest highland Maya texts such as the Annals of the Cakchiquels and the Título Totonicapán, which contain numerous biblical and European cultural allusions using borrowed Spanish words. Although this passage acknowledges that the Quiché nation is subject to Christianity, the authors unabashedly describe the glory and wisdom of their ancient gods. Page 63 of the text (lines 44-45) declares that the Quiché gods act “in purity of being and in truth,” perhaps indirectly contradicting the Christian missionaries of the time, who characterized such Maya deities as devils or demons.
obscurity, and the means of seeing life clearly, as it is said. The original book exists that was written anciently, but its witnesses and those who ponder it hide their faces.

Great is its performance and its account of the completion and germination of all the sky and earth—its four corners and its four sides. All then was measured and staked out into four divisions, doubling over and stretching the measuring cords of the womb of sky and the womb of earth. Thus were established the four corners, the four

33 Vuh refers to Maya books, or codices painted on deerskin or bark paper. Popol is derived from the root pop, meaning "mat." Thus a literal translation would be "book that pertains to the mat." Within ancient Quiché society, a woven mat was used as a royal throne from which the king gave counsel to his people. The mat symbolized the power not only of the ruler, but also of his subjects. In this sense, the interlaced fibers of the mat represented the unity of the members within the community, linked inseparably in a common purpose. Thus Ximénez translated popol as "community," and the Motul Dictionary glosses popol na as a "community house." Popol Vuh might then be interpreted as "Book of the Community" or "Counsel Mat Book." I have chosen to leave the title untranslated, because no literal English equivalent could convey adequately its full meaning. I have kept the traditional spelling of the book’s name, Popol Vuh, rather than the more modern orthographic spelling, Popol Wuj, since it is the original form used by the Quiché authors in the sixteenth century manuscript.

34 This line apparently refers to a painted version of the Popol Vuh written prior to the Spanish conquest, which served as the inspiration for the text that survives today.

35 B'isonel is generally "one who mourns or is unhappy." Coto notes that it may also refer to one who "ponders, considers, or has compassion."

36 It is significant that this passage affirms that it is the "witness" and "ponderer" of the ancient book who "hide their faces," not the book itself. The authors of the Popol Vuh were anonymous, perhaps out of fear of persecution should the manuscript be discovered by the Spanish authorities. Edmonson suggests that the "witness" who hides his face may have been the author himself (Edmonson 1971, 7 n. 56). This reading also suggests that the Precolumbian version of the Popol Vuh may have still existed when the Quiché authors were compiling their alphabetic version.

37 Pe'oxik refers to something which has been hired or rented. Dennis Tedlock convincingly suggests this refers to the hiring of persons to perform the text of the Popol Vuh as a drama (D. Tedlock 1996, 219, n. 63).

38 Tz'uk is a term used for any type of birth (Coto), although it most often refers to the "birth" of plants in the form of germination or sprouting (Basseta, Varea).

39 The gods thus laid out the extent of their creation by measuring its boundaries, driving stakes to mark its four corners, and stretching a measuring cord between the stakes. Andrés Xiloj, a modern Quiché aj q’ij priest who worked with Tedlock on his translation of the Popol Vuh, recognized the terminology of this passage and explained that the gods were measuring out the sky and earth as if it were a maizefield being laid out for cultivation (D. Tedlock 1996, 220). Vogt quoted a Tzotzil-Maya from Zinacantán as saying that the universe is "like a house, like a table," representing that which is systematic, and well-ordered (Vogt 1993, 11). Wisdom also recorded that the Chortí-Maya of Guatemala considered both the squared maize field and the shamanic altars on which traditionalist Maya priests conduct their divination rituals to be the
sides," as it is said, by the Framer and the Shaper, the Mother and the Father of life and all creation, the giver of breath and the giver of heart, they who give birth and give heart to the light everlasting, the child of light born of woman and the son of light born of man, they who are compassionate and wise in all things—all that exists in the sky and on the earth, in the lakes and in the sea.

world in miniature (Wisdom 1940, 430). By laying out the maize field, or setting up a ritual table, the Maya transform secular models into sacred space. With regard to the maize field, this charges the ground with the power of creation to bear new life. In a similar way, the divinatory table provides a stage on which sacred geography may be intimately studied, and even altered. Note that on pp. 81-82 (lines 565-623) the creator deities carry out a divinatory ceremony in an attempt to create the first human beings. A prominent Quiché priest, named Don Vicente de León Abac, described his work to me in this way: “When I am seated at my table, I am aj nawal mesa [of, or pertaining to, the spirit essence of the table]. My body is in the form of a cross just like the four sides of the world. This is why I face to the east and behind me is the west. My left arm extends out toward the north, and my right arm points to the south. My heart is the center of myself just as the arms of the cross come together to form its heart. My head extends upward above the horizon so that I can see far away. Because I am seated this way I can speak to Mundo [World].”

When paired together, chuch-qajaw (mother-father) is the title for the highly respected head of a patrilineage group or the patriarchal founder of a patrilineage. If this couplet is meant as a single title, then the Framer and the Shaper are being addressed as the great founders of the family of all living. In modern Quiché society, traditionalist priests may refer to deity and ancestors as chuch tat (mother fathers) in their ritual prayers (Schultze-Jena 1954, 99).

This word is a gerund derived from the verb winaqirik, which may be translated “to create or to generate.” The root, winaq, means “people”; therefore a more literal translation would be “to people.” The creation is thus seen as similar to the way people come to be, a natural process of giving birth.

“Breath” is also a metaphor for “spirit,” or that which constitutes a person’s life force.

K’uxlanel (literally “heartener”). The heart is the central defining essence of a person, or what might be referred to as the soul. Thus the creators are those who ensoul living things. In addition, the Quichés use “hearten” to refer to someone who provides for, looks after, tends to, or counsels someone. The verbal form of this word also has the sense of “to remember.” In English this would be “bear in mind,” but for the Quichés this would be conceived as “bear in heart.”

Amaq’il, when used as an adjective, is something that is “eternal, perpetual, everlasting.”

These are likely metaphors for the living. Thus in modern Quiché prayers, priests refer to the dead as may k’ij may sákj, “they who are hidden from the sun, hidden from the light” (Schultze-Jena 1954, 52).

This is the same term, aj b’is, used to describe the “ponderer” of the Popol Vuh text in line 59. Coto notes that it not only describes one who ponders, but who does so with sympathy or compassion.
THE PRIMORDIAL WORLD

THIS IS THE ACCOUNT of when all is still silent and placid. All is silent and calm. Hushed and empty is the womb of the sky.

THESE, then, are the first words, the first speech. There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock, hollow, canyon, meadow, or forest. All alone the sky exists. The face of the earth has not yet appeared. Alone lies the expanse of the sea, along with the womb of all the sky. There is not yet anything gathered together. All is at rest. Nothing stirs. All is languid, at rest in the sky. There is not yet anything standing erect. Only the expanse of the water, only the tranquil sea lies alone. There is not yet anything that might exist. All lies placid and silent in the darkness, in the night.

All alone are the Framer and the Shaper, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, They Who Have Borne Children and They Who Have Begotten Sons. Luminous they are in the water, wrapped in quetzal feathers and cotinga feathers. Thus they are called

48 lines 97-154

49 The authors place the following description of the primordial world in the present tense, thus painting a picture of the stillness that existed prior to the creation as if in vision before their eyes.

50 In the sixteenth-century Cakchiquel-Maya dictionary compiled by Francisco de Varea, silee refers to the calming of the wind after a storm (Varea 1929).

51 Lolinik refers to hushed, undifferentiated sounds such as the rustling of leaves in the wind or the soft hum of insects in the night.

52 This description of the world prior to the first creation is similar to Mixtec tradition as recorded by Fray Gregorio García in his Origen de los Indios del Nuevo Mundo e Islas Occidentales: “In the year and in the day of obscurity and utter darkness, before there were days and years, the world being in deep obscurity, when all was chaos and confusion, the earth was covered with water, there was only mud and slime on the surface of the earth” (León-Portilla 1980, 145).

53 In his Vocabulario de lengua quiche, Domingo de Basseta interprets zaktetoh as “the brightness that enters through cracks.” Thus the brightness of the gods is seen as shining between the feathers that envelop them.
Quetzal Serpent. In their essence, they are great sages, great possessors of knowledge. Thus surely there is the sky. There is also Heart of Sky,⁵⁶ which is said to be the name of the god.⁵⁷

THE CREATION OF THE EARTH⁵⁸

THEN came his word. Heart of Sky arrived here with Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent in the darkness, in the night. He spoke with Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent. They talked together then. They thought and they pondered. They reached an accord,⁵⁹

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⁵⁴ “Quetzal Serpent,” whose Quiché name is traditionally written Qucumatz in colonial documents, is associated with water in most ancient highland Maya texts. According to the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, a group of highland Maya called themselves Qucumatz because “they said that there was salvation only in the water” (Recinos and Goetz 1953, 59). Gagavitz, a legendary ancestor of the Cakchiquels, transformed himself into Qucumatz by throwing himself into a lake, thus causing a storm to agitate the water and form a whirlpool (Recinos and Goetz 1953, 76). Nuñez de la Vega wrote that the Quichés believed that Qucumatz is a serpent with feathers that moves in the water (Recinos 1950, 81 n. 2). The ancient Maya generally associated standing water with the underworld. Thus, the god Quetzal Serpent combines the contrasting powers of a celestial bird with a terrestrial serpent, the darkness of deep waters with the light of the upper world. Thus he transcends all levels of existence.

⁵⁵ The *räxon* (*Cotinga amabilis*), commonly known as the Lovely Cotinga, is a dovelike tropical bird with turquoise-blue plumage and a purple breast and throat. According to the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, the highly prized feathers of the Lovely Cotinga were given as tribute by the Cakchiquel clans to the lords of Tulan in the East (Recinos and Goetz 1953, 48).

⁵⁶ *U K’ux Kaj* (Heart of Sky—also called Huracan, cf. p. 70; lines 183-189), appears to be the principal god in the *Popol Vuh* account. He is the only deity to appear in every phase of the creation, as well as throughout the mythologic and historical portions of the text. *K’ux* refers to the heart as the source of the “vital spirit” of a thing, or that which gives it life. According to Coto’s dictionary, it is also believed to be the center of thought and imagination. This deity, therefore, combines the powers of life and creativity, which are believed to exist in the midst of the heavens. During each creative period, Heart of Sky is the deity who first conceives the idea of what is to be formed. Other deities then carry out his will by giving it material expression.

⁵⁷ *K’ab’awil* (god) refers to the general concept of deity in the *Popol Vuh*. The word is used to refer to ancient gods such as Heart of Sky, as well as to the wood or stone effigies carved to represent them. Soon after the Spanish conquest, Dominicans chose the word *k’ab’awil* to refer to the Christian “God.” Franciscans, on the other hand, rejected this usage of the word because of its earlier association with Precolumbian religion. This difference was a frequent point of contention between the two missionary orders during the early Colonial Period.

⁵⁸ lines 155-274

⁵⁹ Literally “they found themselves.”
bringing together their words and their thoughts. Then they gave birth, heartening one another. Beneath the light, they gave birth to humanity. Then they arranged for the germination and creation of the trees and the bushes, the germination of all life and creation, in the darkness and in the night, by Heart of Sky, who is called Huracan.

First is Thunderbolt Huracan, second is Youngest Thunderbolt, and third is Sudden Thunderbolt. These three together are Heart of Sky. Then they came together with Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent. Together they conceived light and life:

60 The creation is described as a unified effort by a number of gods, all acting in concert with one another after careful deliberation and planning. None can act alone without the direction and assistance of other deities. In Quiché society, lack of unity is seen as one of the chief causes of misfortune and failure. Disagreements are therefore quickly resolved through direct discussion or mediation by a respected elder.

61 Winaqirik. The root of this verb is winaq (people), making it something like “to people.” It is used however, to refer to the creation not only of humanity, but the earth, vegetation, animals, etc. Tedlock translates it as “generation” (D. Tedlock 1996, 65).

62 The etymology of this god’s name is too complex and obscure to give a definitive translation. In its simplest interpretation, Juraqan means “One Leg.” Belief in a one-legged god was widespread throughout Precolumbian Mesoamerica. An important example was the Maya god K’awil (God GII of the Palenque Triad, who was often depicted with one anthropomorphic foot and the other a serpent), associated with kingship and the sky. Raqan, however, may also refer to the length or height of an object. The following line uses the name to refer to a bolt of lightning as a long flash of light. Coto interprets raqan as something “long or gigantic in size.” According to Dennis Tedlock’s Quiché collaborators, “leg” may also be used as a means of counting animate things, in the same way that we refer to the counting of “head” of cattle. “One Leg” might therefore mean “one of a kind” (D. Tedlock 1983a, 138). The god’s name would thus refer to his unique nature as the essential power of the sky. In addition, the homophonous word huracán was used along the Gulf Coast of Mexico and the West Indies to refer to powerful swirling winds. The modern English hurricane may be derived from the Taino version of this word (Recinos 1950, 83 n. 7; Hunt 1977, 242; D. Tedlock 1996, 223). This interpretation is consistent with the god’s nature as the “heart of the sky,” the eye of the hurricane forming the divine axis around which time and creation revolve in endless repetitive cycles of birth and destruction.

63 Ch’i’p refers to the youngest member of the family or the smallest member of a group.

64 Räxa (green, new, fresh, sudden). This is a sudden flash or bolt of lightning (Coto 1983, 479). It may also refer to the lightning’s ability to renew or regenerate. In Santiago Atitlán, traditionalists believe that it is lightning that splits open maize seeds to allow them to germinate and bear new life (Christenson 2001, 72-74, 134).

65 These three gods comprise the powers of the sky, symbolized by various aspects of the thunderbolt. Thunderstorms combine the elements of water (rain) and fire (lightning), which Quichés see as essential to all life. Lightning is also considered the force that fertilizes the earth and promotes the growth of crops. In modern Quiché society, lightning is believed to be the inspirational force of the sky. Modern aj q’ij priests take note of sensations within their bodies, which they call “lightning in the blood,” and interpret them as
“How shall it be sown? When shall there be a dawn for anyone? Who shall be a provider?66 Who shall be a sustainer?67

“Then be it so. You are conceived. May the water be taken away, emptied out, so that the plate of the earth may be created—may it be gathered and become level. Then may it be sown; then may dawn the sky and the earth. There can be no worship, no reverence given by what we have framed and what we have shaped, until humanity has been created, until people have been made,” they said.

Then the earth was created by them. Merely their word brought about the creation of it. In order to create the earth, they said, “Earth,” and immediately it was created. Just like a cloud, like a mist, was the creation and formation68 of it.

Then they called forth the mountains from the water. Straightaway69 the great mountains came to be. It was merely their spirit essence,70 their miraculous power,71 that

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66 Tzuqul is a provider of any kind, although generally in the sense of food. Barbara Tedlock notes that one of the names for priest-shamans in Momostenango is tzuqnel (feeder) because he symbolically “feeds” the Mundo [Spanish “World,” the principal earth deity] and his own ancestors with their ceremonies (B. Tedlock 1982, 114). A fundamental aspect of indigenous highland Maya religion is the belief that human beings stand as essential mediators between this world and that of their patron deities and ancestors. Sacred ritual, performed at the proper time and in a manner established by ancient precedent, is necessary to maintain this link or all creation runs the risk of collapse.

67 Q’o’l is one who provides sustenance, primarily in the form of nourishment, but also nurtures in any other way, such as a mother caring for an infant.

68 There is no English equivalent for the verb pupuje’ik. According to the colonial era dictionary compiled by Fr. Domingo de Basseta, the word means “the way in which clouds rise up from mountains.”

69 Ju suk’. Basseta translates this as “quickly, instantly.” It literally means “one straight,” somewhat like our English phrases “straightaway,” or “directly.”
brought about the conception of the mountains and the valleys. Straightaway were created cypress groves and pine forests to cover the face of the earth.

Thus Quetzal Serpent rejoiced:

“It is good that you have come, Heart of Sky—you, Huracan, and you as well, Youngest Thunderbolt and Sudden Thunderbolt. That which we have framed and shaped shall turn out well,” they said.

First the earth was created, the mountains and the valleys. The waterways were divided, their branches coursing among the mountains. Thus the waters were divided, revealing the great mountains. For thus was the creation of the earth, created then by Heart of Sky and Heart of Earth, as they are called. They were the first to conceive it. The

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Nawal also has no English equivalent. In Quiché theology, all things, both living and inanimate, have a spirit essence which they call nawal. This spirit essence is believed to give them power to act or communicate on a supernatural plane, for example, to transform their usual form into that of a powerful animal or force of nature. Father Coto ascribes this power to the devil, defining the word nawal as “the magical means whereby the devil spoke to the Quichés through their idols. Thus they would say that the life of the tree, the life of the stone, of the hill, is its nawal, because they believed there was life in these objects. If a man asks his wife for something to eat or drink when there is nothing in the house, the wife would reply, xa pe ri tin naualih? (Do you expect me to perform miracles?)” (Coto 1983, 328, 369).

Although nawal is borrowed from the Nahua language, where it means “to transform” (Campbell 1983, 84), the Quiché interpretation of the word is derived from the root na’, meaning “to feel” or “to know.” Thus the creation took place by means of the power of the gods’ spirit essence or divine knowledge rather than by physical action.

Puś is a loan word from ancient Mixe-Zoque (Campbell 1983, 83), likely the language of the Olmecs who dominated the Gulf Coast region from ca. 1500-400 BC. It refers to the cutting of flesh, and specifically to the practice of human sacrifice. In Colonial period Quiché texts, the word is often paired with the word nawal to describe the supernatural power of deities to accomplish what ordinary humans cannot. In the first years after the Spanish conquest, Roman Catholic missionaries adopted the word to describe the power of the Christian God to forgive sins and offer his body as a sacrament (Coto 1983, 424). This use of the word was soon abandoned, however, because of the word’s association with ancient Maya gods and their ceremonies. Father Coto thus defines puś as “magic, enchantment, necromancy, or witchcraft,” thereby associating the people’s belief in the power of the Quiché gods with evil and sorcery (Coto 1983, 74, 180, 328, 369).

Juyub’-Taq’aj (Mountain-Plain) is an example of merismus, the expression of a broad concept by a pair of complementary elements that are narrower in scope. This pairing is commonly used among present-day Quichés to refer to the earth as a whole. This not only comprises the physical contrast of elevations versus valleys, but also the notion of wilderness versus cultivated land (Cook 2000, 75).
sky was set apart. The earth also was set apart within the waters. Thus was conceived the successful completion of the work when they thought and when they pondered.

THE CREATION OF THE ANIMALS

THEN were conceived the animals of the mountains, the guardians of the forest, and all that populate the mountains—the deer and the birds, the puma and the jaguar, the serpent and the rattlesnake, the pit viper and the guardian of the bushes.

She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons then asked:

“Shall it be merely solitary, merely silent beneath the trees and the bushes? It is well that there shall be guardians for them,” they said.

Thus they considered and spoke together, and immediately were created the deer and the birds. Having done this, they then provided homes for the deer and the birds:

73 lines 275-339

74 Quichés believe that the wild animals of the forest serve as guardians and caretakers for the god of the earth, who is usually referred to as Juyub’-Taq’aj (Mountain-Plain) or Dios Mundo (Spanish for “God Earth). He is often described as a kindly, old, white-haired man who lives in the uninhabited forests. When hunting deer, drinking from a mountain stream, or clearing a field for planting crops, permission must first be obtained from the earth god and appropriate payment made in the form of prayers and offerings. If the proper offerings are not made, the earth god might send one of his wild animals to attack the ungrateful person or to raid his property.

75 Most likely the white-tailed deer (Odocoileus americana toltecus).

76 The Central American mountain lion or cougar (Felis concolor).

77 Panthera onza.

78 This may refer to the boa constrictor (Constrictor constrictor) or the venomous bushmaster (Lechesis muta).

79 Crotalus durissus.

80 K’an Ti’ (Yucatec or Cholan: “Yellow Mouth”) is a pit viper, likely the cantil or fer-de-lance (Trigonoccephalus specialis), which is extremely poisonous (Cook 2000, 166). Its name is perhaps derived from the yellow markings around the mouth of the fer-de-lance (D. Tedlock 1996, 228 n. 66). Basseta records that it may be any venomous serpent and lists specifically the coral snake. I have used pit viper which covers the range of venomous vipers living in the Maya region.
“You, deer, will sleep along the courses of rivers and in the canyons. Here you will be in the meadows and in the orchards. In the forests you shall multiply. You will walk on all fours, and thus you will be able to stand,” they were told.

Then they established the homes of the birds, both small and great.

“You, birds, you will make your homes and your houses in the tops of trees, and in the tops of bushes. There you will multiply and increase in numbers in the branches of the trees and the bushes,” the deer and the birds were told.

When this had been done, all of them received their places to sleep and their places to rest. Homes were provided for the animals on the earth\(^\text{81}\) by She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons. Thus all was completed for the deer and the birds.

THE FALL OF THE ANIMALS\(^\text{82}\)

THEN it was said to the deer and the birds by the Framer and the Shaper, She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons:

“Speak! Call! Don't moan or cry out. Speak to one another, each according to your kind, according to your group,” they were told—the deer, the birds, the pumas, the jaguars, and the serpents.

“Speak therefore our names. Worship\(^\text{83}\) us, for we are your Mother and your Father. Say this, therefore: ‘Huracan, Youngest Thunderbolt, and Sudden Thunderbolt, 

\(^{81}\) No animals other than the deer and birds are mentioned as having received their homes and sleeping places. Thus the deer and birds represent all the animals of the earth, indicating their symbolic importance as the primary guardians of earth and sky.

\(^{82}\) lines 340-433
Heart of Sky and Heart of Earth, Framer and Shaper, She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons. ’Speak! Call upon us! Worship us!” they were told.

But they did not succeed. They did not speak like people. They only squawked and chattered and roared. Their speech was unrecognizable, for each cried out in a different way.

When they heard this, the Framer and the Shaper said, “Their speech did not turn out well.”

And again they said to each other:

“They were not able to speak our names. We are their Framer and their Shaper. This is not good,” said She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons to each other.

They were therefore told:

“You shall be replaced because you were not successful. You could not speak. We have therefore changed our word. Your food and your sustenance, your sleeping places and your places to rest, that which belonged to you, shall be in the canyons and the forests.

“Nevertheless, because you have not been able to worship us or call upon us, there will yet be someone else who may be a worshiper. We shall now make one who

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83 *Qʼjarisaj* (to worship) is derived from the root *qʼij* (day or sun) in a transitive imperative verb form (cause to be). If such a word existed in English, it might be something like “dayify” (to honor their day, perhaps through calendric ceremonies) or “sunify” (to glorify the gods like the glory of the sun). The gods’ purpose in carrying out the creation seems to be to provide beings who will be able to speak intelligibly. Only in this way could the gods be worshiped properly—through the articulation of their names with human speech. Page 80 (lines 534-535) emphasizes that “words” are the gods’ support.

84 Literally “not appeared its face their speech.”

85 Literally “try again their day.” *Qʼij* (day, sun) has a host of associated meanings. As Barbara Tedlock writes, ‘each day has ‘its face,’ its identity, its character, that influences its events; a person’s luck of the moment, or even his fate in general, is called ‘the face of his day’ (B. Tedlock 1982, 2).
will give honor. Your calling will merely be to have your flesh eaten. Thus be it so. This
must be your service,” they were told. Thus were commanded the animals, both small
and great, that were upon the face of the earth.

Then they wanted to test again their fate. They wanted to make another attempt.
They wanted to try again to arrange for those who would worship them.

The speech of the animals could not be understood. Because of the way they were
made, they were not successful. Therefore their flesh was brought low. They were made
to serve. The animals that were on the face of the earth were eaten and killed.

THE CREATION OF THE MUD PERSON

THUS there was another attempt to frame and shape man by the Framer and the
Shaper, by She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons:

“Let us try again before the first sowing, before the dawn approaches. Let us
make a provider, a sustainer for us. How shall we then be called upon so that we are
remembered upon the face of the earth? We have already made a first attempt with what
we have framed and what we have shaped. But we were not successful in being
worshiped or in being revered by them. Thus, let us try again to make one who will honor
us, who will respect us; one who will be a provider and a sustainer,” they said.

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86 Patan in this context is a required service, the same word being used for tribute payments.

87 Nuk’ is to arrange for something, but it also means “to experiment or test,” implying a level of
uncertainty that matches the previous two phrases, forming a triplet.

88 The principal reason for the downfall of the first created beings was their inability to communicate in
human speech, so the gods could not be worshiped with intelligible words. Each subsequent unsuccessful
creation will be destroyed for the same reason.

89 lines 434-517
Then was the framing, the making of it. Of earth and mud was its flesh composed.

But they saw that it was still not good. It merely came undone and crumbled. It merely became sodden and mushy. It merely fell apart and dissolved. Its head was not set apart properly. Its face could only look in one direction. Its face was hidden. Neither could it look about. At first it spoke, but without knowledge. Straightaway it would merely dissolve in water, for it was not strong.

Then said the Framer and the Shaper:

“We have made a mistake; thus let this be merely a mistake. It cannot walk, neither can it multiply. Then let it be so. Let it be merely left behind as a thing of no importance,” they said.

Therefore they undid it. They toppled what they had framed, what they had shaped.

Then they said again:

“How then will we truly make that which may succeed and bear fruit; that will worship us and that will call upon us?” they asked.

Then they thought again:

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90 *Lub’anik* refers to vegetables that have been boiled so long they have become soft and mushy.

91 The fact that the head was not placed apart from the body indicates that it did not have a neck with which to turn its head.

92 When the first Spanish missionaries arrived among the Maya they vigorously suppressed Precolumbian documents such as the *Popol Vuh* and replaced them with doctrinal treatises based on the Bible. Many of these, such as the *Theologia Indorum* by Domingo de Vico, stressed the creation account of Genesis. I can’t help but wonder if the first Maya to hear these sermons found it strangely logical that these foreign priests, who burned their books and did not speak their language, were declared to be “formed from the dust of the ground,” made soft by a mist that “watered the whole face of the ground” (Genesis 2:6-7). Did the Maya think, “Ah, they’re mud people. They speak but without knowledge and understanding.”

93 *Lab’e* is a “mistake, fault, defect, deformed child, or monster.” It is also used to indicate a bad omen.

94 According to Coto, *na’oj chi ri’* means “leave behind; of little importance.”
“We shall merely tell Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, Hunahpu Possum and Hunahpu Coyote, ‘Try again a divination,95 a shaping,’” said the Framer and the Shaper to each other.

Then they called upon Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, and in this manner were the seers96 addressed: “Grandmother of Day, Grandmother of Light!” In this way, they were addressed by the Framer and the Shaper, for these are the names of Xpiyacoc and Xmucane.

THE CREATION OF THE EFFIGIES OF CARVED WOOD97

HURACAN, along with Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, then spoke to the Master of Days98 and the Mistress of Shaping, they who are seers:

“It shall be found; it shall be discovered how we are to create shaped and framed people who will be our providers and sustainers. May we be called upon, and may we be remembered. For it is with words that we are sustained, O Midwife and Patriarch, our Grandmother and our Grandfather, Xpiyacoc and Xmucane. Thus may it be spoken. May

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95 Q’ijixik, which might be translated “dayification,” refers to a divinatory ceremony in which a handful of tz’ite beans or grains of maize (cf. 573-574) are cast and then interpreted by a sequential counting of the days of the Quiché ritual calendar. Thus the outcome of the creation is to be ritually determined through a divinatory “counting of days.” This practice was apparently widespread in ancient Mesoamerica. The Codex Borbonicus from Central Mexico depicts two aged deities casting seeds of maize or tz’ite in a divinatory ceremony (folio 21). Calendar divination is still a common practice among the highland Maya.

96 According to Basseta, nicvachinel refers to a “soothsayer, diviner, fortuneteller,” based on the root verb nicoh (to see, or look ahead). Coto adds that a niq vachinel is one who sees well, or divines by means of lots, which, in fact, Xpiyacoc and Xmucane practice on pp. 81-82 (lines 583-623). The implication is that Xpiyacoc and Xmucane were able to see with divine foresight.

97 lines 518-679

98 Aj q’ij is still the title used by Quiché priests who divine the will of deity through a ritual counting of the days in the sacred calendar. The title means literally “he/she of days,” or “master of days,” although modern ethnographers often refer to them as “daykeepers.” Because Xmucane and Xpiyacoc assisted in the creation of the universe at the beginning of time, thus setting in motion the endless cycles of day and night, birth and death, sowing and harvest, they stand as the ideal interpreters through divination of these cycles.