Nearly all contemporary highland Maya ceremonies and mythic tales focus on creation, or how things first came to be. How a thing began its existence determines to a large extent its purpose and relevance in the present. The world in which the Maya live is difficult, sometimes cruel. It is a source of great hope that through prayer, sacred ritual, and offerings, the world and its sacred guardians can return to the moment of their first creation in order to be reborn to new life in a pure, uncorrupted form. It is this periodic renewal that allows life itself to continue. If these rituals are not performed in the proper way and under the proper circumstances, the Maya believe that they, and all creation, will simply slip back into primordial darkness, chaos, and perpetual death.

For those who believe in this traditional worldview, these ceremonies are not metaphors for a theoretical conception; they are the expression of a present and tangible reality. As Stephen Houston and David Stuart note with regard to the ancient Maya, kings who performed sacred drama clothed in the garments of deity were not merely engaged in mummery, but shared in the divinity of those gods. They were not “theatrical illusion but a tangible, physical manifestation of a deity.”

Much of our knowledge of ancient highland Maya myth regarding creation derives from the Popol Vuh, a book compiled in the mid-16th century but based on a much older Precolumbian text. The early sections of the Popol Vuh focus on the gods’ search for beings that were capable of remembering the creator gods and performing the proper ceremonies necessary to maintain their life-generating power. For the highland Maya, deities are not omnipotent, nor are they capable of sustaining themselves indefinitely. Thus the Maya version of creation is essentially a search for “providers and sustainers” who will remember the gods and worship them properly through sacred ritual. Much of this ritual is dependent on the spoken word, for, as the creator gods declare in the Popol Vuh: “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.”
The original K’iche’ Maya word for sustainer is q’o’l, which refers to one who provides sustenance, primarily in the form of nourishment, but also nurtures in any other way. The wording of this passage thus implies that the authors of the Popol Vuh consider that human beings bear the burden of caring for the gods in much the same way as a mother nourishes and cares for her newborn infant.

In the myth of creation recorded in the Popol Vuh, the gods determined that it was necessary to create beings capable of proper worship through uttered speech. This speech was not in the nature of praise, but rather regenerative acts that would sustain the world and the very gods that created it. The creation itself is described in the text as “the first speech,” and is initiated by the utterance of words:

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, bringing together their words and their thoughts. Then they gave birth, heartening one another. Beneath the light, they gave birth to humanity…. 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.

The Attempted Creation of Human Beings

According to the Popol Vuh, the gods made several unsuccessful attempts to create beings who could sustain them with intelligible words. The first were the wild animals of the forest, including the deer, the birds, the puma, the jaguar, and a number of poisonous snakes:

Thus they considered and spoke together, and immediately were created the deer and the birds…. 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 therefore our names. Worship us, for we are your Mother and your
Of the numerous hieroglyphic books that once existed in the Maya lowlands all that escaped the Spanish purges of the 16th century are four incomplete codices. Of those written in the highlands of Guatemala, not a single Pre-Columbian book is known to have survived. But Maya literacy did not end with the arrival of the Europeans. Soon after the Spanish conquest of the region in 1524, Spanish priests taught members of the highland Maya nobility how to read and write the K’iche’ Maya language using a modified Latin script. The Maya in turn wrote a number of books based on the contents of the earlier texts. By far the most important extant example of such a book is the Popol Vuh. It is one of the world’s great works of literature, containing an account of the creation of the world, the acts of gods and heroes at the beginning of time before the first dawn, and the history of the highland Maya people themselves, without adding material from European sources.

By its own account it is a faithful record of the contents of the ancient Popol Vuh text which could no longer be seen. Although the traditions of the book were compiled after the Conquest, “under the law of God and Christianity,” its K’iche’ Maya authors venerated their traditional Maya gods as luminous, wise beings who brought life and light to the world through their creative works.

Such unapologetic reverence for the ancient gods would have been offensive to the Spanish missionaries. Those who were found in possession of such books were persecuted and even killed. As much as 200 years later, many ancient books were still kept in secret by the K’iche’s so that the Spanish authorities would not learn of them.

The fact that the contents of the now lost, original Popol Vuh predated the Spanish Conquest gave them an aura of mystery and power. Its authors referred to the ancient book upon which the Popol Vuh was based as an ilb’al, meaning “instrument of sight or vision.” The word is used today to refer to the clear quartz crystals that K’iche’ priests use in divinatory ceremonies. Thus, the rulers of the K’iche’s consulted the Popol Vuh in times of national distress as a means of seeing the future:

They knew if there would be war. It was clear before their faces. They saw if there would be death, if there would be hunger. They surely knew if there would be strife. There was an instrument of sight. There was a book. Popol Vuh was their name for it.

Two hundred years after the Conquest, a Spanish priest named Francisco Ximénez living in Chichicastenango, Guatemala, in the early 18th century wrote that the people of that town possessed many ancient books, including the manuscript of the Popol Vuh. Far from being forgotten tales, he found that these texts were “the doctrine which they first imbibed with their mother’s milk, and that all of them knew it almost by heart.”

He was able to convince the elders who kept the Popol Vuh manuscript to allow him to borrow it for the purpose of making a copy. Ximénez transcribed the K’iche’ text of the Popol Vuh, and added a Spanish translation of its contents. It is unknown what happened to the 16th century manuscript, although presumably Ximénez returned it to its K’iche’ owners. Today we in the Western world know of this great book only through Ximénez’s transcription, which has become one of the principal resources used by European and American scholars who study Maya history and theology. It is also a sublime work of literature, comparable with other great epic poems of the ancient world such as the Iliad and Odyssey of Greece, and the Ramayana and Mahabharata of India.
Father. Say this, therefore: ‘Huracan, Youngest Thunderbolt, and Sudden Thunderbolt, 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.

In modern K’iche’ Maya communities, the traditionalist priest will begin his prayers and ceremonies with a long litany of names referring to gods, Roman Catholic saints that have been adopted into the Maya pantheon, and deceased ancestors. The utterance of their names calls upon these individuals to participate in the ceremony, or to accept the ritual prayers and offerings of a petitioner. In doing so the Maya priest is not calling upon far-distant, transcendent beings. He conceives the presence of otherworldly personages to be much more immanent and tangible. Stories are common in which such gods or ancestors manifest themselves in visible form, or appear soon thereafter in dreams. Words have power.

In the Popol Vuh account, wild animals were the first attempt by the gods to create beings that could utter the names of the gods, and thus sustain their continued existence. In this they failed miserably. That is why we eat them.

The creator gods’ next attempt was the mud person:

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.

The mud person could utter intelligible words, but it did so without “knowledge” or understanding. Its face was “hidden.” In K’iche’, “face” means far more than a place to hang the eyes and nose. It is a reflection of the essential being or condition of a person. Thus when a K’iche’ asks how you are, they ask “is your face good?” If I do not like something, it “falls badly on my face.” If I say that “my face is red,” I mean that I am angry or envious. For the mud person to have a hidden face, it means that he is a false person, incapable of truth and sincerity. Such persons cannot exist for long and do not have the capacity to regenerate divinity.

Having failed in two attempts to create beings that would sustain and provide for them, the gods lamented, “How then will we truly make that which may succeed and bear fruit; that will worship us and that will call upon us?” It is the spoken word that is most wanted by the creators. Their next attempt resulted in the wood people, again formed miraculously as a result of the spoken word:

And when they had spoken, straightaway the effigies of carved wood were made. They had the appearance of people and spoke like people as well. They populated the whole face of the earth. The effigies of carved wood began to multiply, bearing daughters and sons. Nevertheless, they still did not possess their hearts or their minds. They did not remember their Framer or their Shaper. They walked without purpose.

The wood people were also capable of human speech, but what they lacked was the capacity for memory. They did not “remember” the gods who created them. The K’iche’ word for memory is na’bal, a concept that includes the capacity to understand, to know...
something with certainty. It also refers to the sense of touch—the capacity to feel something in a tangible way. In Maya understanding, animals do not have na’b’al. It is a distinguishing characteristic of human beings. Anthropologist John Watanabe, referring to the Mam-Maya of Santiago Chimaltenango, writes that although animals may have a kind of awareness, they lack na’b’al, a concept that the Mams link with the larger concepts of soul, socialization, learning, and conventions of morality. Thus the effigies of wood lack awareness and understanding, which are essential for properly honoring the gods. As a result the wood people were destroyed in various gruesome ways. The specific reason for this destruction was because “they were not capable of understanding and did not speak before their Framer and their Shaper, their makers and their creators.”

The Power of Speech, the Power of Blood

Another thing that the wood people lacked was blood:

At first they spoke, but their faces were all dried up. Their legs and arms were not filled out. They had no blood or blood flow within them. They had no sweat or oil. Their cheeks were dry, and their faces were masks. Their bodies were rigid. Thus they were not capable of understanding before their Framer and their Shaper, those who had given them birth and given them hearts.

Notice that the authors of the Popol Vuh link the power of speech directly with the fact that the faces of the wood people were dry, lacking blood, and were mere masks. Blood for the Maya bears the most powerful sense of their ancestors, and, to an extent, the gods who engendered them. Memory and understanding, the na’b’al of a person, is seated in the blood. Without blood, there can be no memory and thus no link to the creators. The faces of the wood people are masks because they are false people. A young traditionalist Maya priest refers to this aspect of blood when referencing the ancestors who continue to operate through him during divination ceremonies:

As the old people say, when the Spaniards came they broke off many of our branches. They even burned the trunk. But we will never die because the roots have power. We draw strength from the ancestors who live in our blood. If we as a people ignore our roots, we will all die.

Because of the power of blood to regenerate life, it is the object of ancient Maya sacrifice. Thus in the Popol Vuh, the Lords of Death—One Death and Seven Death—call upon their owl messengers to sacrifice a mother deity in order to obtain her blood-laden heart, for “truly delicious was the smell of the blood to them.” But the Lords of Death did not deserve true blood because of their falseness and malignity. Therefore the mother deity tricked the Lords of Death by having the owls give them the red-colored sap of the croton tree as a burnt offering instead of the blood from her heart.

The heart will no longer be theirs…. Only the true fornicator will be subject to One Death and Seven Death. Mere croton tree sap will be theirs henceforth. Thus be it so. It will be this that you shall burn before their faces. It will not be this, the heart, that you will burn before their faces. Thus be it so.

The patron god of the K’iche’ people was Tohil, and the offering that he demanded was human blood, given by the first ancestors as a means of maintaining the gods who created them. For this reason, the principal titles of the ancestors of the K’iche’ people, repeated numerous times in the text as a
paired couplet, were “bloodletters and sacrificers.” This auto-sacrificial blood was then placed in the mouth of the stone images of Tohil and other creator deities. The implication is that the gods were “fed” in this way, or that the blood gave to the gods the power of regenerative speech:

Then they pierced their ears and their elbows before the faces of their gods. They scooped up their blood and rubbed it inside the mouths of the stones. Yet they had not truly become stones. Each of them appeared as young boys when they came. They rejoiced for the blood of the bloodletters and sacrificers.

This practice continues in a number of highland Maya communities today, although the blood is generally that of chickens or turkeys. An ancient stone head called Paxcual Ab’aj is venerated in the hills above Chichicastenango. It is regularly given blood offerings, along with flowers, candles, incense, libations of alcohol, and sugar. The sacrificial blood is smeared into the mouth area of the image. I was told that this gives the god power to speak and give blessings.

Until relatively recently, an obsidian blade kept in the Cofradia of San Nicolás (a religious brotherhood) in Santiago Atitlán was used to draw human blood in penitential rites, as well as in curative bleedings to heal illness. The blood was gathered in a gourd cup and then smeared on the mouth of a large stone idol located in the foothills east of the town’s Colonial era Roman Catholic Church. This stone image has since been destroyed by an indignant Roman Catholic priest. The practice is undoubtedly related to the Precolumbian ritual of smearing sacrificial human blood on the mouth of the Tz’utujil-Maya god Saqibuk prior to the Spanish Conquest.
The most powerful offering in the Precolumbian era, however, was not just blood, but the entire heart, obtained through the sacrifice of captives. This is described in the *Popol Vuh* as a “rain” of blood:

Thus the nations gave their breasts beneath their shoulders and beneath their armpits. This, then was the breast-giving spoken of by Tohil—all the nations were to be sacrificed before him. Their hearts were to be carved out from beneath their shoulders and armpits…. They gave their blood, which flowed from the shoulders and the armpits of all the people…. Then was given the breast at the place called Pa Zilizib. And behind it came blood, a rain of their blood as an offering for Tohil.

This practice follows ancient Classic Maya precedent, as well. Several of the stone lintels from the Classic Maya site of Yaxchilan clearly show the burning of sacrificial blood as a precursor to the manifestation of deified ancestral beings. Lintel 15, in particular, depicts such a deity in the gesture of speaking.

**The Creation of True Human Beings**

Ultimately, the creator gods described in the *Popol Vuh* were able to create true human beings capable of uttering divine speech by forming their bodies from maize dough and their blood from maize water:

Thus was found the food that would become the flesh of the newly framed and shaped people. Water was their blood. It became the blood of humanity. The ears of maize entered into their flesh by means of She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons.

The first attribute ascribed to the newly created maize people was the power of speech:

Their frame and shape were merely brought about by the miraculous power and the spirit essence of the Framer and the Shaper, of She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons, of Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent. Thus their countenances appeared like people. People they came to be. They were able to speak and converse. They were able to look and listen. They were able to walk and hold things with their hands. They were excellent and chosen people.

Once created, the first human beings successfully addressed the gods that formed them, calling them by name and thanking them for their existence. Again, the first attribute that they gave thanks for was the power of speech:

Truly we thank you doubly, triply that we were created, that we were given our mouths and our faces. We are able to speak and to listen. We are able to ponder and to move about. We know much, for we have learned that which is far and near. We have seen the great and the small, all that exists in the sky.
and on the earth. We thank you, therefore, that we were created, that we were given frame and shape. We became because of you, our Grandmother, and you, our Grandfather.

Subsequent passages from the text describe these first ancestral progenitors as persons of “esteemed words,” “Masters of Speech,” who pray that their “word be given for as long as there is sun and light.” The god Tohil is described as “one before whom we may speak.” The Popol Vuh states that a primary responsibility of the lords of the K’iche’ people was to name the gods in their prayers and offerings. By so doing they were able to give them power to manifest themselves and bestow their blessings. For the K’iche’s, to remember a god is not only to recall an image in the mind—it is to feel and make manifest the presence of that divine being in the blood. If the blood is then offered in sacrifice, the god is brought tangibly into this world. A portion of the prayer offered by the ancient lords of the K’iche’ refers to this responsibility to sustain the gods through the utterance of remembered divine names. In turn, the gods are given regenerative power to create new generations of maize people to continue the cycle:

Pleasing is the day, you, Huracan, and you, Heart of Sky and Earth, you who give abundance and new life, and you who give daughters and sons. Be at peace, scatter your abundance and new life. May life and creation be given. May my daughters and my sons be multiplied and created, that they may provide for you, sustain you, and call upon you.

While working with me on the translation of the episode of the wood people and their failure to remember the creator gods, an elderly traditionalist Maya priest named Vicente de León Abac said:

Perhaps this refers to all people. The creators made the animals, the mud people, the wood people before they finally formed true people that could remember them properly. But don’t we all go through the same stages. When infants are born they are like animals. They can’t speak more than grunts and squawks. Toddlers learn to say words, but there is no true thought behind their speech, just like the mud people. I think wood people are like teenagers. They can talk and reproduce, but they don’t really understand what’s important. They don’t listen to their parents or their own blood. But we are the maize people. It is our burden to carry out the proper rituals and prayers needed to keep the world alive. Only we can do it. We remember.

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For Further Reading


