

POPOL

The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life

REVISED EDITION

Translated by

DENNIS TEDLOCK

with commentary based on the
ancient knowledge of the modern Quiché Maya

VUH



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Are k'u wa' nu tak'alib'al, nu presenta
chikiwach ri nantat, comon chuchkajawib'
much'ulik ulew, much'ulik poqlaj, much'ulik baq.



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PREFACE

The Popol Vuh tells the story of the emergence of light in the darkness, from primordial glimmers to brilliant dawns, and from rainstorms as black as night to days so clear the very ends of the earth can be seen. A revised edition of this translation of the Popol Vuh has become necessary because the world of Mayan studies is itself a constantly brightening one. Advances in the understanding of Mayan languages, literature, art, history, politics, and astronomy have required changes in the introduction, notes, commentaries, glossary, and illustrations. There are also changes in the translation itself, some of them subtle refinements and others that readers of the previous edition may find surprising. And finally, an index has been added.

Newly available sources on Mayan languages have made it possible to give meaning to proper names that were left untranslated before. For example, Xbaquiyalo, the wife of Seven Macaw, now becomes Egret Woman. The temptresses Xtah and Xpuch are now Lust Woman and Wailing Woman, and they stand revealed as the predecessors of a dangerous phantom known all the way from Guatemala to northern New Mexico by her Spanish name, La Llorona. And Tecum, Keeper of the Mat in the ninth generation of Quiché lords, becomes Black Butterfly.

In other cases new sources have made it possible to correct errors of translation that were caused by imprecise spellings or slips of the pen in the Popol Vuh manuscript, which often leave words and phrases open to multiple interpretations. What was once "the emergence of all the sky-earth" now becomes "the lighting of all the sky-earth," a reference to the astronomical aspect of the story. The name of the first human woman, given as Celebrated Seahouse in the previous edition, now changes to Red Sea Turtle. The term for the rubber used by the hero twins to heal a falcon's eye is no longer "sorrel gum" but rather "blood of sacrifice." And the image of the god Hacauitz is no longer located "above a great red river" but rather "at the top of a great pyramid."

Other refinements have resulted from discussions with Quiché linguist and literary scholar Enrique Sam Colop, who recently completed his

dissertation on Mayan poetics. For example, he has conclusively shown that various translators (including myself) have misread the phrase *saq petenaq ch'aqa palo,* which is one of several titles of the Popol Vuh. My previous version was "The Light That Came from Across the Sea," but the actual meaning of *ch'aqa,* in the present context, calls for the rendition given in the present edition, which is "The Light That Came from *Beside* the Sea." Corrected in this way, the phrase becomes one of a number of clues that converge to indicate that the east coast of Yucatán was the region where Quiché ancestors acquired the hieroglyphic Popol Vuh, or some part of it, on a pilgrimage.

Advances in the understanding of ancient Mayan art have made it clearer than ever that many of the characters and events in the Popol Vuh have a very deep past and were well known among the lowland Maya. This has made it possible to add more than forty new illustrations to the new edition, using images from carved reliefs in stucco and stone, from engraved bones and shells, and from painted vases and books. Now we can see Blood Gatherer sending away his pregnant daughter; we can see Hunahpu and Xbalanque talking things over, or Hunahpu playing ball with a lord of Xibalba, or a lord of Xibalba playing ball with the head of Hunahpu, or Xbalanque playing the role of the moon.

The continuing decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphic texts is another source of new light for the Popol Vuh, including the astronomical aspects of the story it tells. At times the astronomy is quite explicit, but the narrators often content themselves with allusions whose meaning is left to knowledgeable readers. Such is the case with their account of the cataclysm that ended the world preceding this one, where they mention that hearthstones came shooting out of a kitchen fireplace. Mayan fireplaces have three hearthstones arranged in a triangle, and we know that the contemporary Quiché have a hearthstone constellation consisting of a triangle of three stars in Orion. The authors of the Popol Vuh might well be telling us the origin story of this constellation, but they never come right out and say so. This is where their Mayan predecessors come to the rescue, writers who worked at Palenque and Quiriguá many centuries before them. Those writers clearly state that at the end of the world before this one, three hearthstones marked out a new place for themselves in the sky.

Some of the earthly places whose locations remained uncertain in the previous edition have emerged from the mists to take their places on the map. There is growing evidence that for at least a part of Quiché history, the great eastern city that figures in Part Four of the Popol Vuh was the place whose ruins are known today as Copán, located straight east of the

Quiché capital and just across the border in Honduras. Another place that is no longer misty is the mountain named *Pan Paxil* or "Split Place" (previously translated "Broken Place"), which turns out to be well known to the present-day Mam Maya under the name *Paxal.* It is located in the far western highlands of Guatemala, near the Mexican border and just south of the Pan-American Highway. The Mam, like the writers of the Popol Vuh, say that corn originated from the split in that mountain.

A reexamination of the ways in which the European invaders of Mesoamerica conducted themselves has led to a reinterpretation of the Popol Vuh passage that describes the hanging of the Quiché kings. It is now evident that this was not hanging by the neck but rather hanging by the wrists, the method of torture favored by Europeans at the time. Pedro de Alvarado, acting in accordance with the European belief that people who are tortured will make truthful statements, forced Three Deer and Nine Dog to confess that they had plotted against him and then used their confession as a justification for burning them at the stake. What most struck the authors of the Popol Vuh was not the execution but the means of interrogation. Accordingly, the translation no longer states that the kings "were hanged by the Castilian people," which appears to refer to execution, but rather that they "were tortured by the Castilian people."

In 1988, Mayan scholars and educators in Guatemala established the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala. The long-range goals of the members of the Academia include the introduction of the reading and writing of Mayan languages in the public schools of Guatemala. Their first practical task was to institute reforms in the alphabetic writing of Mayan languages; for the first time ever, all the orthographic decisions were made by native speakers of the languages in question. In the present edition of this book I retain old spellings only for proper names appearing in the Popol Vuh manuscript and other early documents, or for direct citations of such sources. Otherwise I have been guided by the decisions of the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas.

The opportunities for the field work, library research, and writing that went into the original edition of this book and the present revision came during an era that may yet survive all the recent efforts to shut it down. A Fellowship for Independent Study and Research from the National Endowment for the Humanities, a grant from the Translations Program at the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a sabbatical leave from Boston University made the first edition possible. The time for work on this new one was provided by a Fellowship in Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., and by a sabbatical leave from the State University of New York at Buffalo. May we all see a

time when the understanding of other languages, literatures, and cultures is more highly valued than ever.

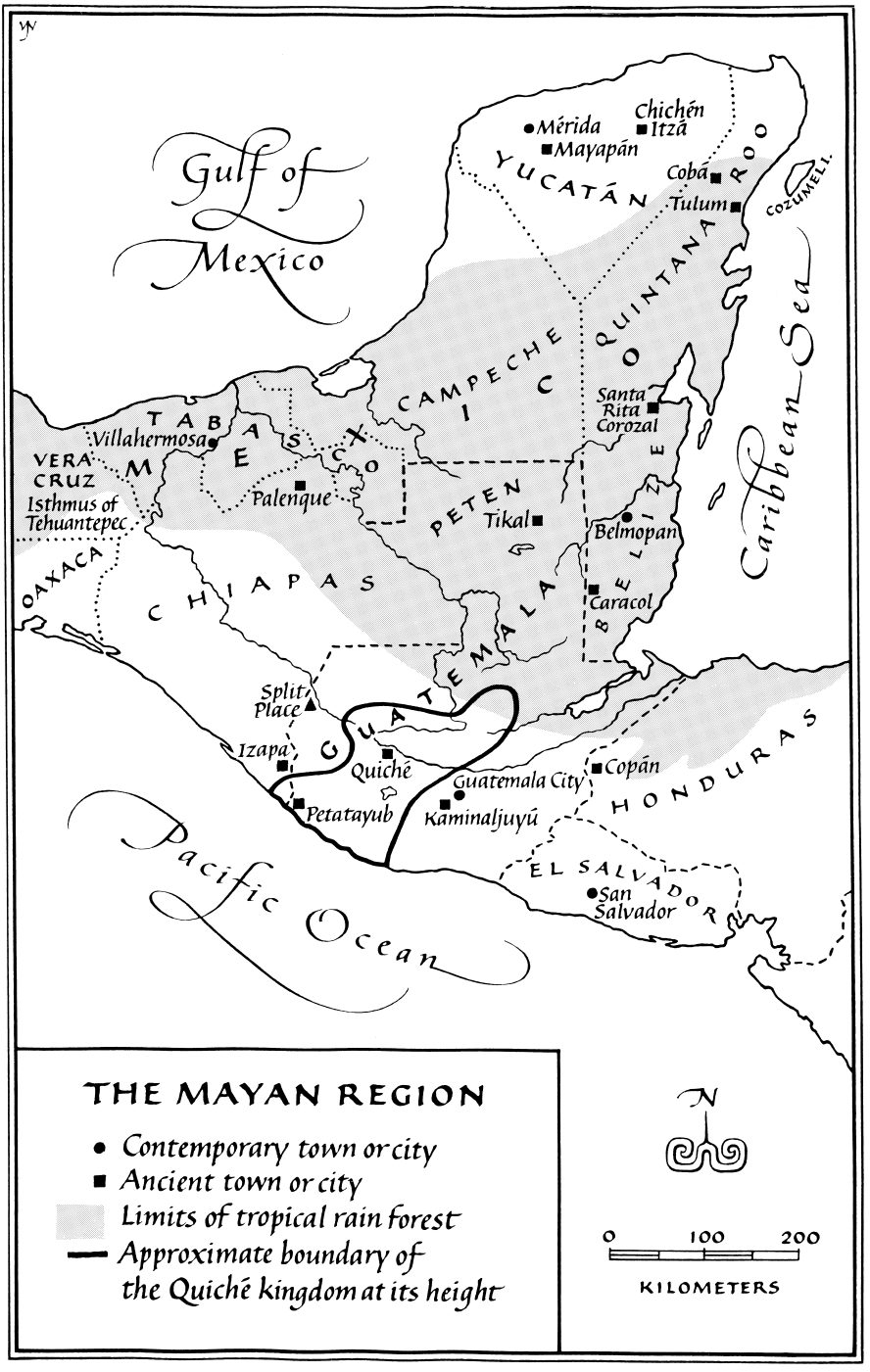
My greatest debt in preparing this new edition of the Popol Vuh is to Barbara Tedlock, as scholar, artist, colleague, soul mate, and wife of many more years than most couples we know. All this while she has been writing her own accounts of Mayan peoples and places and times. We have made return visits to the Quiché, but we have also ventured onto new ground with the Achí of Rabinal, the Kekchí in the Alta Verapaz and Belize, and the Mopán of San Antonio Toledo in Belize.

I remain grateful to Andrés Xiloj Peruch of Momostenango, who not only traveled with me through the Quiché text of the Popol Vuh but taught Barbara Tedlock and myself how to read dreams, omens, and the rhythms of the Mayan calendar. Today he continues as the mother-father or spiritual head of his lineage, and recently he accepted a new burden, becoming the mother-father for all the people of his district of Momostenango. As a diviner he is, by profession, an interpreter of difficult texts. From the moment he first saw the Quiché text of the Popol Vuh, he was intrigued by its patterns of darkness and light. His insights shine throughout the old edition and they continue to shine in this new one.

From the beginning of our work on the Popol Vuh, Xiloj felt certain that if one only knew how to read it perfectly, borrowing the knowledge of the lords of the days, the moist breezes, and the distant lightning, it should reveal everything under the sky and on the earth, all the way out to the four corners. As a help to my own reading and pondering of the book, he suggested an addition to the prayer that daykeepers recite when they go to public shrines. It goes like this:

> Make my guilt vanish,
> Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth;
> do me a favor,
> give me strength, give me courage
> in my heart, in my head,
> since you are my mountain and my plain;
> may there be no falsehood and no stain,
> and may this reading of the Popol Vuh
> come out clear as dawn,
> and may the sifting of ancient times
> be complete in my heart, in my head;
> and make my guilt vanish,
> my grandmothers, grandfathers,

and however many souls of the dead there may be,
you who speak with the Heart of Sky and Earth,
may all of you together give strength
to the reading I have undertaken.


Gulf of Mexico
Mérida
Chichén Itzá
Mayapán
YUCATÁN
Cobá
Tulum
COZUMEL
QUINTANA ROO
Caribbean Sea
CAMPECHE
Santa Rita Corozal
TABASCO
Villahermosa
VERACRUZ
Isthmus of Tehuantepec
Palenque
PETEN
Tikal
Belmopan
BELIZE
OAXACA
CHIAPAS
GUATEMALA
Caracol
Split Place
Izapa
Quiché
Guatemala City
Copán
HONDURAS
Petatayub
Kaminaljuyú
EL SALVADOR
San Salvador
Pacific Ocean
THE MAYAN REGION
Contemporary town or city
Ancient town or city
Limits of tropical rain forest
Approximate boundary of the Quiché kingdom at its height
N
0
100
200
KILOMETERS

INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST FOUR HUMANS, the first four earthly beings who were truly articulate when they moved their feet and hands, their faces and mouths, and who could speak the very language of the gods, could also see everything under the sky and on the earth. All they had to do was look around from the spot where they were, all the way to the limits of space and the limits of time. But then the gods, who had not intended to make and model beings with the potential of becoming their own equals, limited human sight to what was obvious and nearby. Nevertheless, the lords who once ruled a kingdom from a place called Quiché, in the highlands of Guatemala, once had in their possession the means for overcoming this nearsightedness, an *ilb'al*, a "seeing instrument" or a "place to see"; with this they could know distant or future events. The instrument was not a telescope, not a crystal for gazing, but a book.

The lords of Quiché consulted their book when they sat in council, and their name for it was Popol Vuh or "Council Book." Because they obtained the book (or some section of it) on a pilgrimage that took them down from the highlands to the Atlantic shore, they called it "The Light That Came from Beside the Sea." Because the book told of events that happened before the first true dawn, and of a time when their ancestors hid themselves and the stones that contained the spirit familiars of their gods in forests, they also called it "Our Place in the Shadows." And because it told of the rise of the morning star and the sun and moon, and foretold the rise and radiant splendor of the Quiché lords, they called it "The Dawn of Life."

Those who wrote the version of the Popol Vuh we know today do not give us their personal names, but rather call themselves "we" in its opening pages and "we who are the Quiché people" later on. In contemporary usage "the Quiché people" are an ethnic group in Guatemala, consisting of all those who speak the particular Mayan language that itself has come to be called Quiché; they presently number close to a million and occupy most of the former territory of the kingdom whose development is described in the Popol Vuh. To the west and northwest of them

are other Mayan peoples, speaking other Mayan languages, who extend across the Mexican border into the highlands of Chiapas and down into the Gulf coastal plain of Tabasco. To the east and northeast still other Mayans extend just across the borders of El Salvador and Honduras, down into the lowlands of Belize, and across the peninsula of Yucatán. These are the peoples, with a total population of more than six million today, whose ancestors developed what has become known to the outside world as Mayan civilization.

The roots of Mayan civilization may lie in the prior civilization of the Olmecs, which was flowering on the Gulf coastal plain of Veracruz and Tabasco by about 1200 B.C. A more immediate antecedent is the Izapan culture, which ran along the western and southern edges of the Mayan world and reached inside that world at the highland site of Kaminaljuyú, on the west side of what is now Guatemala City. Beginning in the first century B.C., Izapan stone monuments display an iconography and writing system similar to the ones that emerge later in the sites archaeologists designate as properly Mayan. This emergence took place during the period they call the Early Classic (A.D. 300–600), and it was centered in the lowland rain forest that separates the mountain pine forest of Chiapas and Guatemala from the low and thorny scrub forest of northern Yucatán. Swamps were drained and trees were cleared to make way for intensive cultivation. Hieroglyphic texts in great quantity were sculpted in stone and stucco, painted on pottery and plaster, and inked on long strips of paper that were folded like screens to make books.

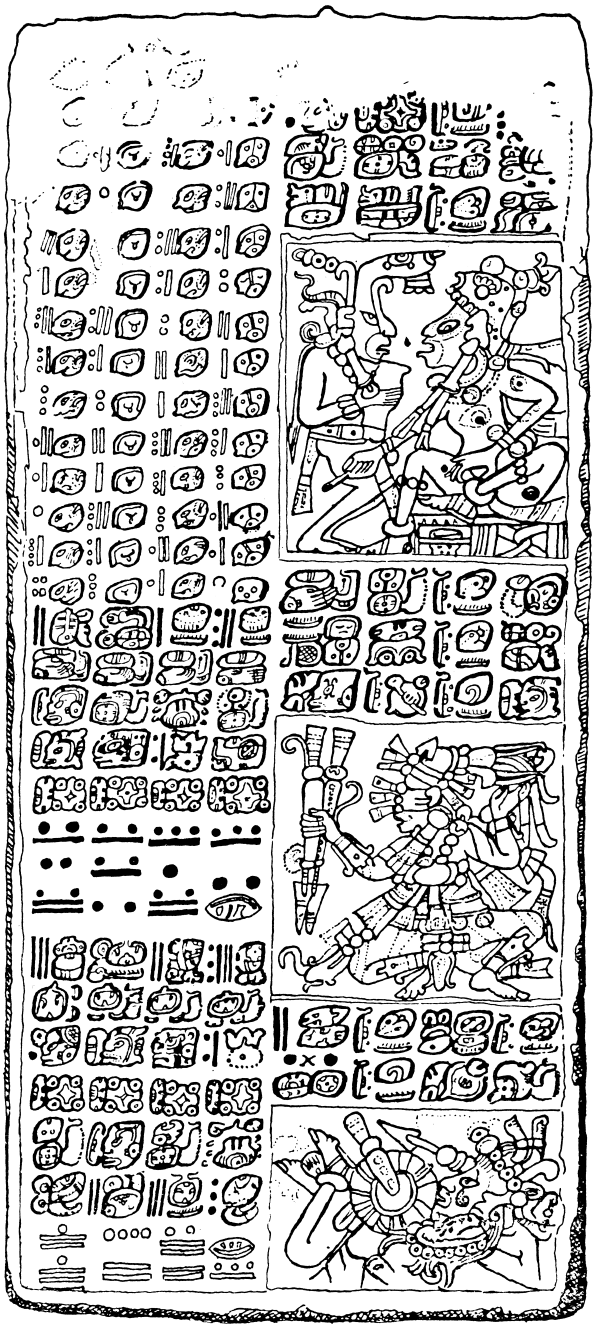
During the Early Classic period lords from Teotihuacan, the great city of the central Mexican highlands, took control of Kaminaljuyú and established political and trade relationships with such lowland Mayan cities as Tikal. The Late Classic period (A.D. 600–900) opened with the collapse of Teotihuacan and its outpost at Kaminaljuyú, and it saw the establishment of a Mayan presence at Xochicalco and Cacaxtla in central Mexico. In the lowland rain forest, such Mayan cities as Palenque, Tikal, and Caracol rose to their greatest glory, and Chichén Itzá was founded in the north. The southernmost city was Copán, located in the foothills of the highlands rather than in the rain forest. Its rise to prominence coincided with the decline of Kaminaljuyú, and it has recently been revealed that its rulers claimed descent from the royal line of Teotihuacan.

As the Late Classic period drew to a close, the Mayan communities that had carved out a place for themselves in the rain forest, along with Copán, were caught in a deepening vortex of overpopulation, environ-

mental degradation, malnutrition, and warfare. At the same time, they were being bypassed by a developing sea-trade network that reached all the way around Yucatán from Tabasco to Honduras. By A.D. 900, the political and economic strength of the larger city-states had broken under the strain. From that time until the European invasion, the remaining inhabitants of the rain forest lived in smaller towns along the shores of lakes, rivers, and estuaries. The greater part of the Maya population was now divided between two areas that had been on the periphery during Classic times, one in northern Yucatán and the other in the southern highlands. The Late Postclassic (from A.D. 1200 to the European invasion) saw the rise of the kingdom of Mayapán in the north and that of Quiché in the south, both of them tribute-collecting conquest states that followed Chichén Itzá in giving mythic prominence to a divine king named Plumed Serpent. At the core of each of these states was an alliance of noble lineages that was largely Mayan but included Mexicans whose native language was Nahua. The heads of these lineages, whatever their places of origin, resided in the capital, surrounded by fortifications.

Carved inscriptions were no longer a major feature of Mayan monuments and buildings during the Postclassic period, but writing and painting flourished on plastered walls and the pages of books. This is especially evident for sites located on or near the east coast of Yucatán, from the island of Cozumel and the mainland sites of Cobá, Tancah, and Tulum in the north down to Santa Rita Corozal in Belize. The illustrations in three of the surviving Mayan books, the ones now known as the Madrid, Paris, and Dresden codices, have strong ties in both style and content to the wall art of this region. Cortés and his men saw many books when they landed on Cozumel, and there is good evidence that the loot they took away with them included the Dresden Codex. The writing in Postclassic books, as compared with Classic writing, shows an increased reliance on phonetic signs, including the use of distinctly Mayan signs to spell out words borrowed from Nahua.

The European invasion of the Mayan world began during the sixteenth century, and so did a long history of Mayan resistance that continues right down to the broadcast news of our own day. Backed by means of persuasion that included gunpowder, instruments of torture, and the threat of eternal damnation, the invaders established a monopoly on virtually all major forms of visible public expression, whether in drama, architecture, sculpture, painting, or writing. In the highlands, when they realized that textile designs carried complex messages, they even at-



DRAWING BY CARLOS A. VILLACORTA

tempted to ban the wearing of Mayan styles of clothing. Hundreds of hieroglyphic books were burned by missionaries, but they were still in use as late as the end of the seventeenth century in Yucatán and the beginning of the eighteenth in highland Guatemala. Only four books are known to have survived to the present day, including the three that found their way to Madrid, Paris, and Dresden long ago. A fourth was recovered in 1966 from looters who had found it in a dry cave in Chiapas.

But the survival of ancient Mayan literature was not dependent on the survival of its outward forms. Just as Mayan peoples learned to use the symbolism of Christian saints as masks for ancient gods, so they learned to use the Roman alphabet as a mask for ancient texts. There was no little justice in the fact that it was the missionaries themselves, the burners of the ancient books, who first introduced Mayans to alphabetic writing. What they wanted their pupils to write was translations of Christian prayers, sermons, and catechisms into Mayan languages, but very little time passed before some Mayans found political and religious applications for alphabetic writing that suited their own purposes. These independent writers have left a literary legacy that is both more extensive than the surviving hieroglyphic corpus and more open to understanding. Their most notable works, created as alphabetic substitutes for hieroglyphic books, are the Chilam Balam or "Jaguar Translator" books of Yucatán and the Popol Vuh of Guatemala.

The authors of the alphabetic Popol Vuh were members of the three lordly lineages that had once ruled the Quiché kingdom: the Cauecs, the Greathouses, and the Lord Quichés. They worked in the middle of the sixteenth century, and the scene of their writing was the town of Quiché, northwest of what is now Guatemala City. The east side of this town, on flat land, was new in their day, with low buildings in files on a grid of streets and a tall church on a central plaza. The west side, already in

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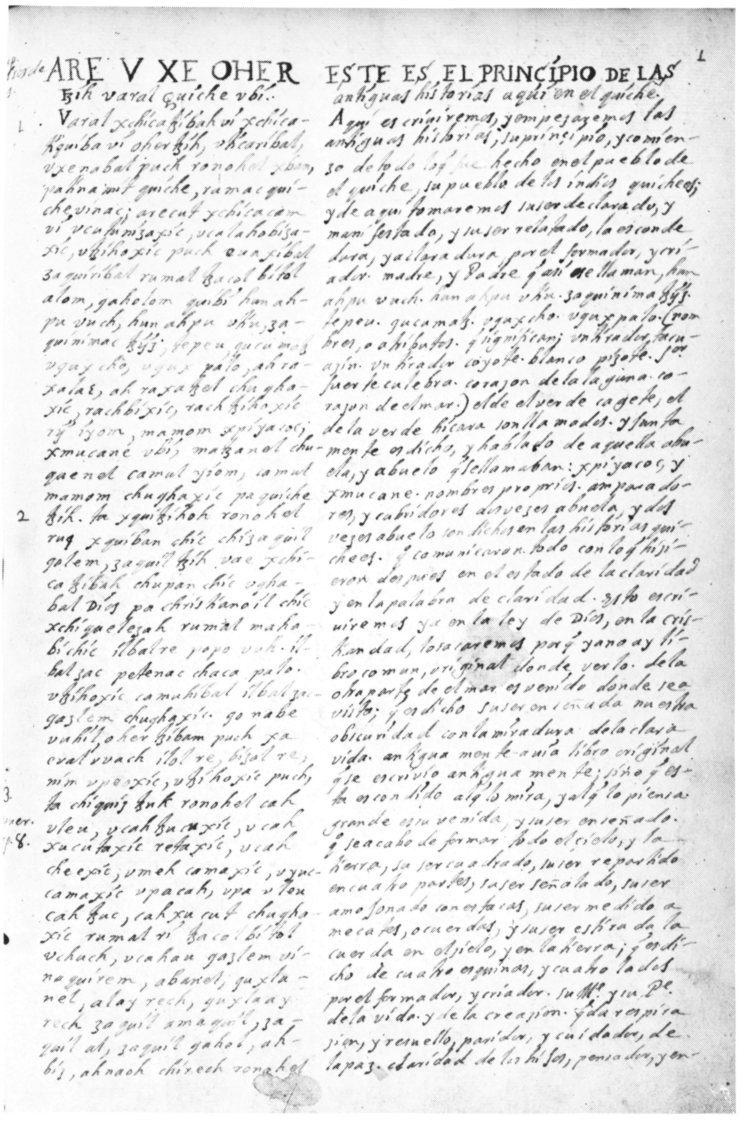
THE PAGES OF BOOKS: *This is a page from the Maya hieroglyphic book known as the Dresden Codex, dating from the fifteenth century. The left-hand column describes the movements of Venus during one of five different types of cycles reckoned for that planet. The right-hand column describes the auguries for the cycle and gives both pictures and names for the attendant deities. In the top picture the seated figure is Hunahpu, called Hun Ahaw in Yucatán. In the middle picture is the god who currently accounts for Venus itself, holding a dart thrower in his left hand and darts in his right. In the bottom picture is his victim, whose shield has been pierced by a dart.*



THE ONLY SURVIVING COPY: *The first page of the alphabetic version of the Popol Vuh, as copied by Francisco Ximénez in Chichicastenango; the Quiché text is on the left and his Spanish translation is on the right.*

PHOTO COURTESY NEWBERRY LIBRARY

ruins, was on fortified promontories above deep canyons, with pyramids and palaces clustered around multiple plazas and courtyards. The buildings of the east side displayed broad expanses of blank stone and plaster, but the ruined walls of the west side bore tantalizing traces of multicolored murals. What concerned the authors of the new version of the Popol Vuh was to preserve the story that lay behind the ruins.

During the early colonial period the town of Quiché was eclipsed, in both size and prosperity, by the neighboring town of *Chuwi La'* or "Nettles Heights," otherwise known as Chichicastenango. The residents of this rising town included members of the Cauec and Lord Quiché lineages, and at some point a copy of the alphabetic Popol Vuh found its way there. Between 1701 and 1703, a friar named Francisco Ximénez happened to get a look at this manuscript while he was serving as the parish priest. He made the only surviving copy of the Quiché text of the Popol Vuh and added a Spanish translation (see the illustration on the opposite page). His work remained in the possession of the Dominican order until after Guatemalan independence, but when liberal reforms forced the closing of all monasteries in 1830, it was acquired by the library of the University of San Carlos in Guatemala City. Carl Scherzer, an Austrian physician, happened to see it there in 1854, and Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, a French priest, had the same good fortune a few months later. In 1857 Scherzer published Ximénez' Spanish translation under the patronage of the Hapsburgs in Vienna, members of the same royal lineage that had ruled Spain at the time of the conquest of the Quiché kingdom, and in 1861 Brasseur published the Quiché text and a French translation in Paris. The manuscript itself, which Brasseur spirited out of Guatemala, eventually found its way back across the Atlantic from Paris, coming to rest in the Newberry Library in 1911. The town graced by this library, with its magnificent collection of Native American texts, is not in Mesoamerica, but it does have an Indian name: Chicago, meaning "Place of Wild Onions."

The manuscript Ximénez copied in the place called "Nettles Heights" may have included a few illustrations and even an occasional hieroglyph, but his version contains nothing but solid columns of alphabetic prose. Mayan authors in general made only sparing use of graphic elements in their alphabetic works, but nearly every page of the ancient books combined writing (including signs meant to be read phonetically) and pictures. In Mayan languages the terms for writing and painting were and are the same, the same artisans practiced both skills, and the patron deities of both skills were twin monkey gods bearing two different names for the same day, translatable as One Monkey and One Artisan. In the

books made under the patronage of these twin gods there is a dialectical relationship between the writing and the pictures: the writing not only records words but sometimes offers pictorial clues to its meaning. As for the pictures, they not only depict what they mean but have elements that can be read as words.

At times the writers of the alphabetic Popol Vuh seem to be describing pictures, especially when they begin new episodes in narratives. In passages like the following, the use of sentences beginning with phrases like "this is" and the use of verbs in the Quiché equivalent of the present tense cause the reader to linger, for a moment, over a lasting image:

> This is the great tree of Seven Macaw, a nance, and this is the food of Seven Macaw. In order to eat the fruit of the nance he goes up the tree every day. Since Hunahpu and Xbalanque have seen where he feeds, they are now hiding beneath the tree of Seven Macaw, they are keeping quiet here, the two boys are in the leaves of the tree.

It must be cautioned, of course, that word pictures painted by storytellers, in Quiché or in any other language, need not have physical counterparts in the world outside the mind's eye. But the present example has an abruptness that suggests a sudden still picture from a story already well under way rather than a moving picture unfolded in the course of the events of that story. The narrators do not describe how the boys arrived "in the leaves of the tree"; the opening scene is already complete, waiting for the blowgun shot that comes in the next sentence, where the main verb is in the Quiché equivalent of the past tense and the still picture gives way to a moving one.

The writing of words in ancient Mayan books was done by means of a script that combines logographic and phonetic principles. Logographic signs, which stand for entire words and sometimes carry pictorial clues to their meaning, are most often used for such common items as day names. Mayan phonetic signs proceed syllable by syllable, with each sign corresponding to a consonant and vowel in combination or (less often) a vowel alone. Where a spelling problem was created by a syllable that had a single vowel bracketed by two consonants, the conventional solution was to treat it as if it were two syllables, each containing one of the consonants, and leave it up to the reader to avoid pronouncing the second vowel sound. This and other syllabic conventions sometimes affected the spelling choices Mayan writers made when they later used the Roman alphabet. For example, if the authors of the Popol Vuh had written in a purely alphabetic manner, they might have spelled the Quiché name of

Macaw House, one of the first four women created by the gods, as Cakixha. What they did instead was to treat its three syllables as if they were four, spelling it Cakixaha (Ca-ki-xa-ha).

More than any other Mayan book, whether hieroglyphic or alphabetic, the Popol Vuh tells us something about the conceptual place of books in the pre-Columbian world. The writers of the alphabetic version explain why the hieroglyphic version was among the most precious possessions of Quiché rulers:

> They knew whether war would occur; everything they saw was clear to them. Whether there would be death, or whether there would be famine, or whether quarrels would occur, they knew it for certain, since there was a place to see it, there was a book. "Council Book" was their name for it.

When "everything they saw was clear to them" the Quiché lords were recovering the vision of the first four humans, who at first "saw everything under the sky perfectly." That would mean that the Popol Vuh made it possible, once again, to sight "the four sides, the four corners in the sky, on the earth," the corners and sides that mark the earth and serve as reference points for the movements of celestial lights.

If the ancient Popol Vuh was like the surviving hieroglyphic books, it contained systematic accounts of cycles in astronomical and earthly events that served as a complex navigation system for those who wished to see and move beyond the present. In the case of a section dealing with the planet Venus, for example, there would have been tables of rising and setting dates, pictures of the attendant gods, and brief texts outlining what these gods did when they first established the pattern for the movements of Venus. When the ancient readers of the Popol Vuh took the roles of diviners and astronomers, seeking the proper date for a ceremony or a momentous political act, we may guess that they looked up specific passages, pondered their meanings, and rendered an opinion. But the authors of the alphabetic Popol Vuh tell us that there were also occasions on which readers offered "a long performance and account" whose subject was the lighting of the whole *kajulew* or "sky-earth," which is the Quiché way of saying "world." If a divinatory reading or pondering was a way of recovering the depth of vision enjoyed by the first four humans, a long performance, in which readers may well have covered every major subject in the entire book, was a way of recovering the full cosmic sweep of that vision.

If the authors of the alphabetic Popol Vuh had transposed the ancient Popol Vuh directly, on a glyph-by-glyph basis, they might have produced

a text that would have made little sense to anyone but a fully trained diviner and performer. What they did instead was to quote what readers of the ancient book would say when they gave long performances, telling the full story that lay behind the charts, pictures, and plot outlines of the ancient book. Lest we miss the fact that they are quoting, they periodically insert such phrases as "This is the account, here it is," or "as it is said." At one point they themselves become performers, *speaking directly to us* as if we were members of a live audience rather than mere readers. When they introduce the first episode of a long cycle of stories about the gods who prepared the sky-earth for human life, they propose that we all drink a toast to the heroes.

At the beginning of their book, the authors delicately describe the difficult circumstances under which they work. When they tell us that they are writing "amid the preaching of God, in Christendom now," we can catch a plaintive tone only by noticing that they make this statement immediately after asserting that their own gods "accounted for everything—and did it, too—as enlightened beings, in enlightened words." What the authors propose to write down is what Quichés call the *Ojer Tzij,* the "Ancient Word" or "Prior Word," which has precedence over "the preaching of God." They have chosen to do so because "there is no longer" a Popol Vuh, which makes it sound as though they intend to re-create the original book solely on the basis of their memory of what they have seen in its pages or heard in the long performance. But when we remember their complaint about being "in Christendom," there remains the possibility that they still have the original book but are protecting it from possible destruction by missionaries. Indeed, their next words make us wonder whether the book might still exist, but they no sooner raise our hopes on this front than they remove the book's reader from our grasp: "There is the original book and ancient writing, but the one who reads and assesses it has a hidden identity." Here we must remember that the authors of the alphabetic Popol Vuh have chosen to remain anonymous; in other words, they are hiding their identities. If they are protecting anyone with their enigmatic statements about an inaccessible book or an anonymous reader, it could well be themselves.

The authors begin their narrative in a world that has nothing but an empty sky above and a calm sea below. The action gets under way when the gods who reside in the primordial sea, named Maker, Modeler, Bearer, Begetter, Heart of the Lake, Heart of the Sea, and Sovereign Plumed Serpent, are joined by gods who come down from the primordial sky, named Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth, Newborn Thunderbolt, Sudden Thunderbolt, and Hurricane. These two groups engage in a dialogue,



THE EMERGENCE OF THE EARTH FROM THE WATER: *Lake Atitlán, called* Najachel *in Quiché, with the volcanoes of Cerro de Oro (in the middle distance) and San Pedro (beyond). The contemporary Quichés of Momostenango reckon this as the lake of the south, one of four sacred lakes that mark the four sides of their world.*

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

and in the course of it they conceive the emergence of the earth from the water and the growth of plants and people on its surface. They wish to set in motion a process they call the "sowing" and "dawning," by which they mean several different things at once. There is the sowing of seeds in the earth, whose sprouting will be their dawning, and there is the sowing of the sun, moon, and stars, whose difficult passage beneath

the earth will be followed by their own dawning. Then there is the matter of human beings, whose sowing in the womb will be followed by their emergence into the light at birth, and whose sowing in the earth at death will be followed by dawning when their souls become sparks of light in the darkness.

For the gods, the idea of human beings is as old as that of the earth itself, but they fail in their first three attempts (all in Part One of the present translation) to transform this idea into a living reality. What they want is beings who will walk, work, and talk in an articulate and measured way, visiting shrines, giving offerings, and calling upon their makers by name, all according to the rhythms of a calendar. What they get instead, on the first try, is beings who have no arms to work with and can only squawk, chatter, and howl, and whose descendants are the animals of today. On the second try they make a being of mud, but this one is unable to walk or turn its head or even keep its shape; being solitary, it cannot reproduce itself, and in the end it dissolves into nothing.

Before making a third try the gods decide, in the course of a further dialogue, to seek the counsel of an elderly husband and wife named Xpiyacoc and Xmucane. Xpiyacoc is a divine matchmaker and therefore prior to all marriage, and Xmucane is a divine midwife and therefore prior to all birth. Like contemporary Quiché matchmakers and midwives, both of them are *ajq'ij* or "daykeepers," diviners who know how to interpret the auguries given by thirteen day numbers and twenty day names that combine to form a calendrical cycle lasting 260 days. They are older than all the other gods, who address them as grandparents, and the cycle they divine by is older than the longer cycles that govern Venus and the sun, which have not yet been established at this point in the story. The question the younger gods put to them here is whether human beings should be made out of wood. Following divinatory methods that are still in use among Quiché daykeepers, they give their approval. The wooden beings turn out to look and talk and multiply themselves something like humans, but they fail to time their actions in an orderly way and forget to call upon the gods in prayer. Hurricane brings a catastrophe down on their heads, not only flooding them with a gigantic rainstorm but sending monsters to attack them. Even their own dogs, turkeys, tools, and houses rise against them, taking vengeance for past mistreatment. Their only descendants are the monkeys that inhabit the forests today.

At this point the gods who have been working on the problem of making human beings will need only one more try before they solve it, but the authors of the Popol Vuh postpone the telling of this episode,



DIVINATORY METHODS THAT ARE STILL IN USE: *A divination in progress on top of the mountain called Tohil's Place. At left is the client, Lucas Pacheco Benítez, himself a daykeeper. Spread out on the stone at lower right is the paraphernalia of the daykeeper who is divining for him, set up for a counting of days. Burning in the background are offerings of candles and copal incense.*

PHOTO BY BARBARA TEDLOCK

turning their attention to stories about two generations of heroic deities whose triumphs make the sky-earth a safer place for human habitation. First come the twin sons of Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, named One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, together with Blood Moon, the daughter of a lord of the underworld named Blood Gatherer. In the second generation come her twin sons, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, jointly fathered by One and Seven Hunahpu. Both generations of twins are players of the Mesoamerican ball game, in which the rubber ball (an indigenous American invention) is hit with a yoke-shaped device worn on one side of the body, riding just under the arm or resting on the hip. In addition to being ballplayers, One and Seven Hunahpu occupy themselves by gambling with dice, whereas Hunahpu and Xbalanque go out hunting with blowguns.

The adventures of the sons, daughter-in-law, and grandsons of Xpiyacoc and Xmucane are presented in two different cycles, with the episodes

divided between the cycles more on the basis of where they take place in space than when they take place in time. The first cycle deals entirely with adventures on the face of the earth, while the second, though it has two separate aboveground passages, deals mainly with adventures in the underworld, a region named Xibalba or "Place of Fear." If the events of these two cycles were combined in a single chronological sequence, the aboveground episodes might alternate with those below, with the heroes descending into the underworld, emerging on the earth again, and so forth. These sowing and dawning movements of the heroes, along with those of their supporting cast, prefigure the present-day movements of the sun, moon, planets, and stars.

Hunahpu and Xbalanque are the protagonists of the first of the two hero cycles (presented in Part Two), and their enemies are a father and his two sons, all of them pretenders to lordly power over the affairs of the earth. Hurricane, or Heart of Sky, is offended by this threesome, and it is he who sends Hunahpu and Xbalanque against them. The first to get his due is the father, named Seven Macaw, who claims to be both the sun and moon. In chronological terms this episode overlaps with the story of the wooden people (at the end of Part One), since Seven Macaw serves as their source of celestial light and has his downfall at the same time they do. The twins shoot him while he is at his meal, high up in a fruit tree, breaking his jaw and bringing him down to earth. Later they persuade a pair of curers, an elderly couple named Great White Peccary and Great White Coati, to give him the reverse of a face-lift, pulling out his teeth and removing the metal disks from around his eyes. His earthly descendants are scarlet macaws, with broken, toothless jaws and bare white cheeks that turn red when they get excited. He himself remains as the seven stars of the Big Dipper, and his wife, Chimalmat, corresponds to a circle of northern stars that includes the arc of the Little Dipper. In mid-July, when he is already falling from his tree as the night begins, he opens the hurricane season, and in mid-October, when he almost gets back up the tree before morning, he closes it. It was his first fall, brought on by the blowgun shot of Hunahpu and Xbalanque, that opened the way for the great flood that brought down the wooden people. Just as Seven Macaw only pretended to be the sun and moon, so the wooden people only pretended to be human.

Hunahpu and Xbalanque next take on Zipacna, the elder of Seven Macaw's two sons, a crocodilian monster who claims to be the maker of mountains. But first comes an episode in which Zipacna has an encounter with the gods of alcoholic drinks, the Four Hundred Boys. Alarmed by Zipacna's great strength, these boys trick him into digging a deep hole

and try to crush him by dropping a great log down behind him. He survives, but he waits in the hole until they are in the middle of a drunken victory celebration and then brings their own house down on top of them. At the celestial level they become the stars called Motz, the Quiché name for the Pleiades, and their downfall corresponds to early-evening settings of these stars. At the earthly level, among contemporary Quichés, the Pleiades symbolize a handful of seeds, and their disappearance in the west marks the proper time for the sowing of crops.

Zipacna meets his own downfall when Hunahpu and Xbalanque set out to avenge the Four Hundred Boys. At a time when Zipacna has gone without food for several days, they set a trap for him by making a device that appears to be a living, moving crab. Having placed this artificial crab in a tight space beneath an overhang at the bottom of a great mountain, they show him the way there. Zipacna goes after the crab with great passion, and his struggles to wrestle himself into the right position to consummate his hunger become a symbolic parody of sexual intercourse. When the great moment comes the whole mountain falls on his chest (which is to say he ends up on the bottom), and when he heaves a sigh he turns to stone.

Finally there comes the demise of the younger son of Seven Macaw, named Earthquake, who bills himself as a destroyer of mountains. In his case the lure devised by Hunahpu and Xbalanque is the irresistibly delicious aroma given off by the roasting of birds. They cast a spell on the bird they give him to eat: just as it was cooked inside a coating of earth, so he will end up covered by earth. They leave him buried in the east, opposite his elder brother, whose killing of the Four Hundred Boys associates him with the west (where the Pleiades may be seen to fall beneath the earth). Seven Macaw, as the Big Dipper, is of course in the north. He is near the pivot of the movement of the night sky, whereas his two sons make the earth move—though they cannot raise or level whole mountains in a single day as they once did.

Having accounted for three of the aboveground episodes in the lives of Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the Popol Vuh goes back a generation to tell the story of their twin fathers, One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu (at the beginning of Part Three). This is the point at which the authors treat us as if we were in their very presence, introducing One Hunahpu by saying, "Let's drink to him." As the story opens, One Hunahpu is married to Egret Woman and they have twin sons named One Monkey and One Artisan. One and Seven Hunahpu sometimes play ball with these two boys, and a messenger from Hurricane, a falcon, sometimes comes to watch them. The boys become practitioners of all sorts of

arts and crafts, including flute playing, singing, writing, carving, jewelry making, and metalworking. At some point Egret Woman dies, but we are not told how; that leaves Xmucane, the mother of One and Seven Hunahpu, as the only woman in the household.

The ball court of One and Seven Hunahpu lies in the east, at a place called Great Hollow with Fish in the Ashes. Their ball playing offends the lords of Xibalba, who dislike hearing noises above their subterranean domain. The head lords are named One Death and Seven Death, and under them are other lords who specialize in causing such maladies as lesions, jaundice, emaciation, edema, stabbing pains, and sudden death from vomiting blood. One and Seven Death decide to challenge One and Seven Hunahpu to come play ball in the court of Xibalba, which lies at the western edge of the underworld. They therefore send their messengers, who are monstrous owls, to the Great Hollow. One and Seven Hunahpu leave One Monkey and One Artisan behind to keep Xmucane entertained and follow the owls over the eastern edge of the world. The way is full of traps, but they do well until they come to the Crossroads, where each of four roads has a different color corresponding to a different direction. They choose the Black Road, which means, at the terrestrial level, that their journey through the underworld will take them from east to west. At the celestial level, it means that they were last seen in the black cleft of the Milky Way when they descended below the eastern horizon; to this day the cleft is called the Road of Xibalba.

Entering the council place of the lords of Xibalba is a tricky business, beginning with the fact that the first two figures seated there are mere manikins, put there as a joke. The next gag that awaits visitors is a variation on the hot seat, but after that comes a deadly serious test. One and Seven Hunahpu must face a night in Dark House, which is totally black inside. They are given a torch and two cigars, but they are warned to keep these burning all night without consuming them. They fail this test, so their hosts sacrifice them the next day instead of playing ball with them. Both of them are buried at the Place of Ball Game Sacrifice, except that the severed head of One Hunahpu is placed in the fork of a tree that stands by the road there. Now, for the first time, the tree bears fruit, and it becomes difficult to tell the head from the fruit. This is the origin of the calabash tree, whose fruit has the character of a human skull when dried and hollowed.

Blood Moon, the maiden daughter of a Xibalban lord named Blood Gatherer, goes to marvel at the calabash tree. The skull of One Hunahpu, animated by both brothers, now spits in her hand and makes her pregnant with Hunahpu and Xbalanque. A voice comes from the skull, ex-

plaining to her that henceforth a father's face will survive in his son, even after his own face has rotted away and left nothing but bone. After six moons, when Blood Moon's father notices that she is pregnant, he demands to know who is responsible. She answers that "there is no man whose face I've known," which is literally true. He orders the owl messengers of Xibalba to cut her heart out and bring it back in a bowl; armed with the White Dagger, the instrument of sacrifice, they take her away. But she persuades them to spare her, devising a substitute for her heart in the form of a congealed nodule of sap from a croton tree. The lords heat the nodule over a fire and are entranced by the aroma; meanwhile the owls show Blood Moon to the surface of the earth. As a result of this episode it is destined that the lords of Xibalba will receive offerings of incense made from croton sap rather than human blood and hearts. At the astronomical level Blood Moon corresponds to the moon, which appears in the west at nightfall when it begins to wax, just as she appeared before the skull at the Place of Ball Game Sacrifice when she became pregnant.

Once she is out of the underworld, Blood Moon goes to Xmucane and claims to be her daughter-in-law, but Xmucane resists the idea that her own sons could be responsible for Blood Moon's pregnancy. She puts Blood Moon to a test, sending her to get a netful of corn from the garden that One Monkey and One Artisan have been cultivating. Blood Moon finds only a single clump of corn plants there, but she produces a whole netful of ears by pulling out the silk from just one ear. When Xmucane sees the load of corn she goes to the garden herself, wondering whether Blood Moon has stripped it bare. On the ground at the foot of the clump of plants she notices the imprint of the carrying net, which she reads as a sign that Blood Moon is indeed pregnant with her own grandchildren.

To understand how Xmucane is able to interpret the sign of the net we must remember that she knows how to read the auguries of the Mayan calendar, and that one of the twenty day names that go into the making of that calendar is "Net." Retold from a calendrical point of view, the story so far is that Venus rose as the morning star on a day named Hunahpu, corresponding to the ball playing of Xmucane's sons, One and Seven Hunahpu, in the east; then, after being out of sight in Xibalba, Venus reappeared as the evening star on a day named Death, corresponding to the defeat of her sons by One and Seven Death and the placement of One Hunahpu's head in a tree in the west. The event that is due to come next in the story is the rebirth of Venus as the morning star, which should fall, as she already knows, on a day named Net. When she sees the imprint of the net in the field, she takes it as a sign that this

event is coming near and that the sons born to Blood Moon will make it possible.

When Hunahpu and Xbalanque are born they are treated cruelly by their jealous half-brothers, One Monkey and One Artisan, and even by their grandmother. They never utter a complaint, but keep themselves happy by going out every day to hunt birds with their blowguns. Eventually they get the better of their brothers by sending them up a tree to get birds that failed to fall down when they were shot. They cause the tree to grow tall enough to maroon their brothers, whom they transform into monkeys. When Xmucane objects they give her four chances to see the faces of One Monkey and One Artisan again, calling them home with music. They warn her not to laugh, but the monkeys are so ridiculous she cannot contain herself; finally they swing up and away through the treetops for good. One Monkey and One Artisan, both of whose names refer to a single day on the divinatory calendar, correspond to the planet Mars, whose period is thereafter reckoned by that day, and their temporary return to the house of Xmucane corresponds to the retrograde motion of Mars. They are also the gods of arts and crafts, and they probably made their first journey through the sky during the era of the wooden people, who were the first earthly beings to make and use artifacts and who themselves ended up as monkeys.

With their half-brothers out of the way, Hunahpu and Xbalanque decide to clear a garden plot of their own, but when they return to the chosen spot each morning they find that the forest has reclaimed it. By hiding themselves at the edge of the plot one night, they discover that the animals of the forest are restoring the cleared plants by means of a chant. They try to grab each of these animals in turn, but they miss the puma and jaguar completely, break the tails off the rabbit and deer, and finally get their hands on the rat. In exchange for his future share of stored crops, the rat reveals to them that One and Seven Hunahpu left a set of ball game equipment tied up under the rafters of their house, and he agrees to help them get it down. At home the next day, Hunahpu and Xbalanque get Xmucane out of the house by claiming her chili stew has made them thirsty; she goes after water but is delayed when her water jar springs a leak. Then, when Blood Moon goes off to see why Xmucane has failed to return, the rat cuts the ball game equipment loose and the twins take possession of it.

When Hunahpu and Xbalanque begin playing ball at the Great Hollow they disturb the lords of Xibalba, just like their fathers before them. Once again the lords send a summons, but this time the messengers go to Xmucane, telling her that the twins must present themselves in seven

days. She sends a louse to relay the message to her grandsons, but the louse is swallowed by a toad, the toad by a snake, and the snake by a falcon. The falcon arrives over the ball court and the twins shoot him in the eye. They cure his eye with rubber stripped from their ball, which is why this particular species of falcon (the so-called laughing falcon) now has a black patch around the eye. The falcon vomits the snake, who vomits the toad, who still has the louse in his mouth, and the louse recites the message, quoting what Xmucane told him when she quoted what the owls told her when they quoted what the lords of Xibalba told them to say.

Having been summoned to the underworld, Hunahpu and Xbalanque go to take leave of their grandmother, and in the process they demonstrate a harvest ritual that Quichés follow to this day. They "plant" ears of corn in the center of her house, in the attic; these ears are neither to be eaten nor used as seed corn but are to be kept as a sign that corn remains alive throughout the year, even between the drying out of the plants at harvest time and the sprouting of new ones after planting. They tell their grandmother that when a crop dries out it will be a sign of their death, but that the sprouting of a new crop will be a sign that they live again.

The twins play a game with language when they instruct their grandmother; only now, instead of a quotation swallowed up inside other quotations we get a word hidden within other words. The secret word is *Aj,* one of the twenty day names; the twins point to it by playing on its sounds rather than simply mentioning it. When they tell their grandmother that they are planting corn ears (*aj*) in the house (*ja*), they are making a pun on the name *Aj* in the one case and reversing its sound in the other. The play between *Aj* and *ja* is familiar to contemporary Quiché daykeepers, who use it when they explain to clients that the day *Aj* is portentous in matters affecting households. If the twins planted their corn ears in the house on this day, then their expected arrival in Xibalba, seven days later, would fall on the day named Hunahpu. This fits the Mayan Venus calendar perfectly: whenever Venus rises as the morning star on a day named Net, corresponding to the appearance of Hunahpu and Xbalanque on the earth, its next descent into the underworld will always fall on a day named Hunahpu.

Following in the footsteps of their fathers, Hunahpu and Xbalanque descend the road to Xibalba, but when they come to the Crossroads they do things differently. They send a spy ahead of them, a mosquito, to learn the names of the lords. He bites each one of them in turn; the first two lords reveal themselves as mere manikins by their lack of response,

but the others, in the process of complaining about being bitten, address each other by name, all the way down the line. When the twins themselves arrive before the lords, they ignore the manikins (unlike their fathers) and address each of the twelve real lords correctly. Not only that, but they refuse to fall for the hot seat, and when they are given a torch and two cigars to keep lit all night, they trick the lords by passing off a macaw's tail as the glow of the torch and by putting fireflies at the tips of their cigars.

The next day Hunahpu and Xbalanque play ball with the Xibalbans, something their fathers did not survive long enough to do. The Xibalbans insist on putting their own ball into play first, though the twins protest that this ball, which is covered with crushed bone, is nothing but a skull. When Hunahpu hits it back to the Xibalbans with the yoke that rides on his hip, it falls to the court and reveals the weapon that was hidden inside it. This is nothing less than the White Dagger, the same instrument of sacrifice the owls were supposed to use on Blood Moon; it twists its way all over the court, but it fails to kill the twins.

The Xibalbans consent to use the rubber ball belonging to the twins in a further game; this time four bowls of flower petals are bet on the outcome. After playing well for a while the twins allow themselves to lose, and they are given until the next day to come up with the petals. This time they must spend the night in Razor House, which is full of voracious stone blades that are constantly looking for something to cut. In exchange for a promise that they will one day have the flesh of animals as their food, the blades stop moving. This leaves the boys free to attend to the matter of the petals; they send leaf-cutting ants to get them from the very gardens of the lords of Xibalba. The ground-dwelling birds who guard this garden, poorwills and whippoorwills, are so oblivious that they fail to notice that their own tails and wings are being trimmed along with the flowers. The lords, who are aghast when they receive bowls filled with the petals of their own flowers, split the birds' mouths open, giving them the wide gape that birds of the nightjar family have today.

Next, the hero twins survive stays in Cold House, which is full of drafts and falling hail; Jaguar House, which is full of hungry, brawling jaguars; and a house with fire inside. After these horrors comes Bat House, full of moving, shrieking bats, where they spend the night squeezed up inside their blowgun. When the house grows quiet and Hunahpu peeks out from the muzzle, one of the bats swoops down and takes his head off. The head ends up rolling on the ball court of Xibalba, but Xbalanque gives his brother a temporary replacement in the form of a carved squash. While he is performing this head transplant the eastern sky reddens with



CONTEMPORARY QUICHÉ DAYKEEPERS: *All the adults in this picture are daykeepers; in addition, the woman is a midwife, the man wearing a hat is a matchmaker, and the man at right is a singer and prayer maker. The man bending over toward the child is Andrés Xiloj.*

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

the dawn, and a possum, addressed in the story as "old man," makes four dark streaks along the horizon. Not only the red dawn but the possum and his streaks are signs that the time of the sun (which has never before been seen) is coming nearer. In the future a new solar year will be brought in by the old man each 365 days; the four streaks signify that only four of the twenty day names—Deer, Tooth, Thought, and Wind—will ever correspond to the first day of a solar year. Contemporary Quiché daykeepers continue to reckon the solar dimension of the Mayan calendar; in the year 2000, for example, they will expect the old man to arrive on February 25, which will fall on One Thought.

Once Hunahpu has been fitted out with a squash for a head, he and Xbalanque are ready to play ball with the Xibalbans again. When the lords send off Hunahpu's original head as the ball, Xbalanque knocks it out of the court and it lands among a group of ball bags. Hidden among the bags is a rabbit, and when it runs away the lords mistake it for the bouncing ball. While they chase it Xbalanque retrieves the head, puts it

back on Hunahpu's shoulders, and then puts the squash among the bags, pretending to find the ball there. Now the squash is put into play, but it wears out and splatters its seeds on the court, revealing to the lords of Xibalba that they have been played for fools. The game played with the squash, like the games played with the bone-covered ball and with Hunahpu's severed head, corresponds to an appearance of Venus in the west, the direction of evening and death. If these events were combined in chronological order with those that take place entirely above ground, they would probably alternate with the episodes in which the twins defeat One Monkey and One Artisan, Seven Macaw, Zipacna, and Earthquake, with each of these latter episodes corresponding to an appearance of Venus in the east, the direction of morning and life.

At this point we are ready for the last of the episodes that prefigure the cycles of Venus and prepare the way for the first rising of the sun. Knowing that the lords of Xibalba plan to burn them, Hunahpu and Xbalanque instruct two seers named Xulu and Pacam as to what they should say when the lords seek advice as to how to dispose of their remains. This done, the twins cheerfully accept an invitation to come see the great stone pit where the Xibalbans are roasting the ingredients for an alcoholic beverage. The lords challenge them to a contest in which the object is to leap clear across the pit, but the boys cut the deadly game short and jump right in. Thinking they have triumphed, the Xibalbans follow the advice of Xulu and Pacam, grinding the bones of the boys and spilling the powder into a river.

After five days Hunahpu and Xbalanque reappear as catfish; the day after that they take human form again, only now they are disguised as vagabond dancers and actors. They gain great fame as illusionists, their most popular acts being the ones in which they set fire to a house without burning it and perform a sacrifice without killing the victim. The lords of Xibalba get news of all this and invite them to show their skills at court; they accept with pretended reluctance. The climax of their performance comes when Xbalanque sacrifices Hunahpu, rolling his head out the door, removing his heart, and then bringing him back to life. One and Seven Death go wild at the sight of this and demand that they themselves be sacrificed. The twins oblige—and, as might already be imagined, these final sacrifices are real ones. Hunahpu and Xbalanque now reveal their true identities before all the inhabitants of the underworld. They declare that henceforth the offerings received by Xibalbans will be limited to incense made of croton sap and to animals, and that Xibalbans will limit their attacks on future human beings to those who have weaknesses or guilt.