

Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya

By Allen J. Christenson. New York: O Book, 2003. Distributed by the University of Oklahoma Press. Pp. 328, 80 b&w illustrations, 6 maps.

Popol Vuh: Literal Poetic Version.

By Allen J. Christenson. New York: O Book, 2003. Distributed by the University of Oklahoma Press. Pp. 320.

The *Popol Vuh* was a sixteenth century manuscript that was written by literate members of the Postclassic K'iche' elite of highland Guatemala shortly after their defeat by the Spanish. Although the original document was lost, one of the copies made by the Spanish priest Francisco Ximénez survived, and is now housed in the Newberry Library. Ximénez copy is written in a two column format with the original K'iche' text on the left and his Spanish translation on the right. The narrative of the *Popol Vuh* explains the creation of the world, the role of the major deities in this event, and the history of the K'iche' during the Postclassic period. The *Popol Vuh* relates the deeds of three generations of deities: the creator grandparents (Xpiyacoc and Xmucane), their sons One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, and One Hunahpu's two sets of sons called One Chouen and One Batz, and Hunahpu and Xbalanque (the hero twins). This core creation mythology is an ancient story that is also found in the Preclassic and Classic period art of the lowlands, and lowland parallels for all of these gods have been identified (Coe 1973, 1977, 1989; Taube 1985,1992; Bassie-Sweet 1996, in press; Zender 2004). Other characters and themes from the *Popol Vuh* are also evident in lowland art. For example, there is a supernatural bird called Wak in the *Popol Vuh* who was based on the species *Herpetotheres cachinnans* (the waco or laughing falcon). The laughing falcon is a snake eating bird of prey that the contemporary Maya identify as a messenger bird associated with rain making and healing, and these are the two principal functions of the creator grandfather (Bassie-Sweet, in press). Laughing falcons bite off the heads of poisonous snakes and then fly up into trees to eat them. In the *Popol Vuh* episode, the creator grandmother sends a louse from her head to deliver a message to the hero twins. The louse voluntarily allows himself to be swallowed by a toad who can move more quickly, and the toad, in turn, is swallowed by a faster moving snake, and finally the snake is swallowed by Wak. When Wak arrives before the hero twins, he calls out to them and, being the good bird hunters that they are, they shoot him in the eye with their blowguns. Wak tells them that he will not give them their message until they demonstrate their healing abilities by restoring his sight. In previous episodes, the hero twins had to demonstrate that they were the worthy replacements for their father, and by extension, their grandfather. A key skill was the ability to heal. The hero twins restore Wak's eyesight, and receive their message to go the underworld to battle the lords of the underworld, avenge their father's death, and bring about the first dawn of the new era.

The recently discovered Pre-Classic San Bartolo murals that date from about 100 B.C. illustrate an avian form of the creator grandfather who was called Itzamnaaj in the lowlands. This supernatural bird also appears in the art of later periods in the lowlands. His most common feature is that he carries a double headed serpent in his mouth, and in later Classic period scenes, the hero twins are pictured shooting the Itzamnaaj bird with their blowguns. Although many researchers have mistakenly associated these scenes with

the Popol Vuh episode when the hero twins shot the deity Seven Macaw, the snake and bird of prey attributes of the Itzamnaaj bird make it abundantly clear that he is a parallel to Wak. The Popol Vuh is, thus, a vital source in the reconstruction of ancient Maya world view.

There have been a number of scholarly translations of the Popol Vuh into English. Adrián Recinos produced a Spanish translation from the original K'iche' which was then later translated into English by Delia Goetz, and published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1950. Recino chose to create a free translation rather than a literal word for word translation. In 1971, Munro Edmonson published his own English version from the original K'iche' text. He used a two column format with the original text on the left and an English word by word translation on the right. In contrast to that literal translation, Dennis Tedlock published a free translation without the original text in 1985 and a slightly revised version in 1996. In this edition, Allen Christenson has published a two volume set that includes both a free translation and literal translation. The first volume is a free translation with copious footnotes to explain the meaning of various words, concepts and practices. It also includes an overview of the history of the Popol Vuh and demonstrates the numerous poetic conventions used in this great narrative. The second volume is divided into two parts. The first is a two column format with a literal translation on the left and the original text transcribed into modern orthography on the right. Christenson has arranged this text according to its poetic structure with the lines that are parallel in form or concept joined together. The lines are numbered for easy reference. The second part of volume two presents the text in its original orthography and as a continuous text. The line numbers of the first part have been added to this text again for ease of reference. Christenson's stated purpose for using the modern orthography in part one is to provide the contemporary K'iche' who now use this orthography with greater access to the document. This is a highly commendable decision.

Christenson's free translation conveys the tone and syntax of the original text, while still making it very understandable for English speakers. By analyzing the poetic structure of the Popol Vuh and identifying the large number of conventions used by its authors, Christenson has not only demonstrated the great literary nature of this document, but he has been able to clarify much of its meaning. For example, chiasmus (reverse parallelism) occurs when the first element of a strophe parallels the last, the second element parallels the next to last, and so on. In the Popol Vuh, chiasmus is often used in the lists of deity names and titles. As an example, the creator grandfather Xpiyacoc and the creator grandmother Xmucane are most often named together along with their numerous titles in parallel couplets. In one section, they are called "Midwife, Patriarch, Xpiyacoc, Xmucane". By failing to recognize this chiastic arrangement, some researchers have concluded incorrectly that Xpiyacoc was female. There is great importance in what the Popol Vuh says, but it is equally important how it is said. Christenson has demonstrated that the ancient Maya were using sophisticated literary and poetic conventions, and these conventions are still found in the oral prayers recited by Maya shaman today.

The level of Christenson's accuracy in translation is excellent. While he has discussed the meaning of proper names in his footnotes, he has wisely chosen not to translate proper names in his text given the difficulties of such practices. For example, the name of the Popol Vuh goddess Xbaquiyalo could be translated as Lady Bone Water.

Tedlock translated her name as Lady Egret because one of the Yucatec names for herons, cranes, and egrets can be translated as “bone water.” He also argued that this name was related to a deity at Palenque who had a water bird form and that this bird was an egret. David Stuart has recently demonstrated that the Palenque bird was likely based on a black cormorant, and that the deity was male. While it is highly probable that the goddess Xbaquiyalo had a white water bird form, an egret translation muddies the water.

Some of the differences between Christenson’s translations and that of others may seem inconsequential to the casual reader, but they have enormous impact on the meaning of the passages. As an example, the hero twins wanted to restore the skull of their deceased father One Hunahpu. The word that is used in this passage is “*wiq*.” Recinos, Edmonson, and Tedlock translated this word as honor, reassemble, or put back together, and respectively they translated the passage as: “And here is how their fathers were honored by them;” “and this then was the reassembling of their father by them;” and “And here their father is put back together by them.” As a fluent speaker of K’iche’, Christenson knew that “*wiq*” specifically means to adorn, and it is used to describe actions such as dressing saint figures for a festival. His translation is: “Here now is the adornment of their father by them.” There are many examples of this adornment painted on Classic Period pottery. In these scenes, the deity One Ixim (the father of the hero twins) is washed by naked goddesses and then dressed in his jade costume. His sons often appear in these scenes carrying his costume elements.

The information found in the Popol Vuh and in Classic period scenes complements and amplifies each other. For example, after the adornment of One Hunahpu, the hero twins tell him that humans will always worship him first. The hero twins then rise up as sun and full moon, and begin the new era. The Popol Vuh repeatedly emphasizes that the K’iche’ and other tribes, who had gathered at the tops of their sacred mountains to see this first sun rise, first saw the heliacal rising of the morning star, but the text does not directly state which deity was the morning star. We know from the Venus tables of the Dresden Codex that this first rising occurred on the calendar date One Ajaw (One Hunahpu in the K’iche’ calendar). Given that deities are named for the day on which they are born or re-born, it is apparent that the recently adorned One Hunahpu was this morning star. This fact increases our understanding of the Classic Period adornment of One Ixim in his jade costume; he is being prepared to become the first morning star.

Numerous stelae show a Classic Period ruler dressed in the costume of One Ixim during Period Ending ceremonies. As demonstrated by Houston and Stuart (1996), Maya kings took on the identity of certain gods by dressing in their costumes. We can extrapolate from this evidence that part of the king’s duties during these ceremonies was to act out the role of the morning star. It has been noted by numerous researchers that deceased rulers were washed and dressed in the costume of One Ixim after their deaths. The implication is that Maya lords were thought to become the morning star after their death. So it is apparent that Christenson’s subtle changes in translation have a significant ripple effect in the interpretation of Classic scenes and practices.

There are many Classic Period scenes concerning One Ixim that are directly related to the story of One Hunahpu as told in the *Popol Vuh*, but there are also numerous other scenes that indicate his story was far more complex. In fact, the authors of the *Popol Vuh* directly state that only a small part of the story about One Hunahpu will be

told. It is our great loss that other versions of this core story that focus on these other chapters in his life did not survive the conquest.

In my review of Christenson's volumes when they were first published, I stated that they are an extraordinary masterpiece of scholarly analysis, and that they are the most accurate and comprehensive translation ever produced. I still hold that opinion. These volumes are a must read for anyone interested in Maya or Mesoamerican cultures. As more scholars become familiar with Christenson's translation, I believe it will become the preferred course book at universities that offer Mesoamerican or indigenous courses. And as it reaches a larger audience, I think that any course on great epic literature will also include it. There are 1.3 million Maya living in the United States and Canada who now speak English, and many of these people are unaware of their rich literary heritage. It is my sincere hope that Christenson's translation will help to rectify that situation.

Karen Bassie
Research Associate
University of Calgary

References

Bassie-Sweet, Karen

1996 *At the Edge of the World*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press
in press *Maya Sacred Geography and the Creator Deities*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Coe, Michael

1973 *The Maya Scribe and his World*. New York: Grolier Club.
1977 Supernatural Patrons of Maya Scribes and Artists. In *Social Process in Maya Prehistory*, ed. Norman Hammond, 327-347. London: Academic Press.
1989 The Hero Twins: Myth and Image. In *The Maya Vase Book*, Vol. 1:161-184, ed. Justin Kerr. New York: Kerr Associates.

Edmonson, Munro

1971 *The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh of the Quiche Maya of Guatemala*. New Orleans: Middle American Research Institute

Houston, Stephen & David Stuart

1996 Of Gods, Glyphs and Kings: Divinity and Rulership among the Classic Maya. *Antiquity* 70:289-312.

Recino, Adrián

1950 *Popol Vuh*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Taube, Karl

1985 The Classic Maya Maize God: A Reappraisal. In *Fifth Palenque Round Table, 1983*, Vol. 7, ed. Merle Greene Robertson & Virginia Fields, 171-81. San Francisco: The Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute.
1992 *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

Tedlock, Dennis

1985 *Popol Vuh*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

1996 *Popol Vuh*. revised edition. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Zender, Marc

2004a The Glyphs for “Handspan” and ”Strike” in Classic Maya Ballgame Texts. *PARI Journal* Vol. IV, No. 4. Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute. San Francisco.