

## THE INNER MEANING OF THE MAYAN CREATION EPIC

By Kenneth Johnson

The *Pop Wuj*, also known as the *Popol Vuh*, the “Book of the Mat”<sup>1</sup> or “Book of Good Counsel”, was written in the Western alphabet but in the Ki’che’ language, probably in the middle of the sixteenth century. It was first recorded by elders who were working from a hieroglyphic text, now lost. Between 1701 and 1703, the priest Francisco Ximenez of Chichicastenango copied down the Ki’che’ text and added a Spanish translation. Although the oldest copy we have of the *Pop Wuj* is the one transcribed by Ximenez, it is clear that the book records some of the most ancient and primal myths of Mayan civilization. Certain stories from the *Pop Wuj* can be found carved on monuments from the “proto-Mayan” site of Izapa, dating from the first few centuries before Christ, and recently discovered murals at the pre-Classic site of San Bartolo and dated to c. 400 BCE appear to contain themes from the same mythic cycle.

All of the twenty day-signs can be found within the pages of the Pop Wuj. I was often told that meditation upon the role that the day signs play within the great epic will reveal some of their deepest meanings. In general, I have listed the name of the day sign in Yucatec first and then in K’iche’ (unless some explanation is required, since Yucatec is more familiar to most readers).

The Maya describe creation as an interplay of positive and negative polarities not dissimilar to the Chinese concept of yin and yang. At its most fundamental level, the Divine is called Tz’aqol B’itol, the Architect and Maker, an energy which embodies the eternal polarities. This was the power that created Earth and Sky. This duality of creation can also be expressed as “Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth.” Heart of Sky is also the god known as Hun Rakan – or, to use one of the few Mayan words that has been adopted into English, “Hurricane.” This deity is the primal spirit of the wind and the air, and is an aspect of the day-sign **Ik/Iq’** as god of the wind. Lord Feathered Serpent (**Chicchan/Kan**) is also connected with the day-sign Iq’ as the power of the wind, and thus emerges as part of the creative energy of the universe itself.

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<sup>1</sup> In ancient times, to be seated on a special mat signified a noble or royal status, indicating a person who was regarded as either a political or religious authority, or, as often as not, both.

The gods resolved to create a race of beings who would praise them and sing out their names, who would keep the days of the Sacred Calendar and walk in the path of truth. And so they made the animals, the deer and the turkeys, the peccaries and the tapirs. And they said, “Sing out to us now, and worship us!” But the animals could only howl and roar and make strange noises.

And the gods were disappointed. They resolved to make a new creation, a second creation. They fashioned a man of mud. He looked like a man should look, but he could not speak plainly, nor turn his head, nor act of his own mindful volition. When the rain came, he began to dissolve. And the gods allowed it to happen.

Next, Feathered Serpent and Hurricane resolved to create a man made out of wood. They approached the primal couple, the grandfather and the grandmother, Xpiyacoc and Xmucane. They asked them to divine with the sacred *tz’ite* seeds, reading the oracle of the days of the Sacred Calendar. And the grandfather and grandmother said, “It is good that you should make men out of wood.”

So they fashioned men of wood, and there were many of them. They could speak like men, walk like men, and multiply like men, but they did not remember the gods. They did not call out to the gods in songs of praise. They did not keep the days of the Sacred Calendar. And so Feathered Serpent and Hurricane were once again disappointed. Hurricane sent a great storm which destroyed that creation, the creation of the wooden men. Their dogs and turkeys, even their household utensils, rose up against them, attacked them and battered them and killed them while the great storm raged. The few who survived were those who climbed into the trees and became the monkeys that we see today.

Once upon a time, perhaps in the days of these men of wood, Grandfather Xpiyacoc and Grandmother Xmucane had two twin sons, One Junajpu and Seven Junajpu. The brothers were great adepts of the Mesoamerican handball game; their ball court lay upon the edge of the earth at a place called the Great Abyss. In time their vigorous playing became so noisy that it annoyed the Lords of the Underworld, One Death and Seven Death (**Cimi/Kame**), who sent brooding owls as messengers to challenge the twins to a game of handball in the very depths of Xib’alb’a, the Underworld. The twins left One Junajpu’s sons, One Monkey and One Artisan, to care for their grandmother Xmucane. As musicians and poets, they could be relied upon to keep her entertained.

When the Hero Twins set forth to challenge the Lords of the Underworld, they traveled the path of the Milky Way or road of souls (**Eb/E', the Road**), following it through the sky until they reached a Crossroads, and then they took the dark or black road that leads to Xib'alb'a. This crossroads is the place where the ecliptic and the Milky Way cross at the Galactic Center. The starry path of the Milky Way is the White Road or *saq b'e*; a yellow (sometimes said to be green) road follows the ecliptic eastward while a red road follows it westward. The dark swathe of sky which we call the Great Rift in the Milky Way and which marks the Galactic Center is known among the Maya to this very day as the black road or the Road to Xib'alb'a, and it is this road that the Hero Twins chose.

In the Underworld, they were subjected to magical tests by One Death and Seven Death. In one such test, they had to pass the night in a House of Darkness (**Akbal/Aq'ab'al** in its meaning of "darkness," known to the Aztecs as "House") and keep their cigars lit all night. They failed to do so; consequently, the Underworld Lords sacrificed them before they even had a chance to play handball. The head of One Junajpu was left hanging in a tree. In time a young maiden called Blood Woman, daughter of one of the Xilb'alb'a Lords, came to the tree and saw the head of One Junajpu. It spit into her right hand, thus impregnating her. When her father discovered that she was pregnant, she protested her innocence, claiming, truthfully enough, that she had not known a man sexually. When she realized that her father didn't believe her and intended to sacrifice her, she made her way to the upper world and to the very house of Grandmother Xmucane. She told Xmucane that she was about to give birth to twins who were the sons of her own son, One Junajpu. But Xmucane didn't believe her either. She gave her a magical test, telling her to go and bring back a net full of corn from a garden which she knew to contain only a single plant. But Blood Woman pulled the silk out of a single ear of corn, which was magically transformed into an abundant harvest. Amazed, Xmucane went to the garden, poked around, and saw the imprint of Blood Woman's magical net. Knowing that her sons, the first pair of Hero Twins, were also the planet Venus, and knowing that Venus would return from the Underworld on a day called **K'at** in K'iche' (*k'at* means "net", and this is **Kan** in Yucatec), she realized that Blood Woman was telling the truth. Now she knew that Blood Woman's children were her own grandchildren.

Thus a new set of Hero Twins was born. Their names were Junajpu (**Ajpu** or Yucatec **Ahau**) and Xb'alanke, and they grew up in their grandmother's house. Their twin half-brothers, One Monkey and One Artisan, teased them mercilessly. Being magicians of a high order, Junajpu and Xb'alanke coaxed their artistic, musical half-brothers into a tree, where they were magically transformed into monkeys. They tried to make their way back to Xmucane's house, but their grandmother laughed uproariously at their comical appearance as monkeys, so they went away again. This explains why the day-sign **Chuen** (K'iche' **B'atz'**), commonly symbolized by a monkey, is associated with the arts.

Junajpu and Xb'alanke grew up as heroes and magicians; they performed many miraculous exploits. At that time most "human beings" were made of wood. Failing to worship the gods properly, they instead worshiped a pretender, a false god called Seven Macaw (**Cib/Ajmaq**) who exemplified the Seven Shames. The macaw bird was perched on top of the tree which stood at the center of the universe, the world tree that forms the axis of all being. From his lofty vantage point, looking down upon the world below him, he began to assume that he was God. But he was mistaken. Only Ajaw is God. The macaw was deluded by pride, ambition, and ignorance. The gods sent the Hero Twins to dislodge him from his perch, causing him to see that, in reality, he was only a silly bird. Shooting him with a blowgun, they toppled Seven Macaw from the sky. They even disfigured him so that he now resembles the peculiar countenance of the scarlet macaw.

Then they defeated his two sons, who were primordial beasts, one named Zipacna who is in the form of a crocodile (**Imix/Imox**) and the other one known as Earthquake (**Caban/No'j**).

Xmucane and Blood Woman had carefully hidden the ballgame gear which once belonged to One and Seven Junajpu, father and uncle of the Hero Twins. They didn't want the two twins to meet the same fate as their elders. But a cunning rat revealed to them that the ball-playing equipment was hidden in the rafters of Xmucane's house. Having discovered the equipment, the Hero Twins could not help but start playing handball. Once again, the Lords of Xib'alb'a heard the resounding noise, and once again they were annoyed, summoning the twins to play ball with them in the Underworld.

As the Hero Twins, Junajpu and Xb'alanke, were about to journey into the Underworld to challenge the Lords of Death in a game of handball, they each planted an ear of corn (**Ben/Aj**)

in their grandmother's patio. They told her that if the corn withered, it would mean that they were dead, but if it sprouted again, they were once more alive.

The two new Hero Twins took the ancient road to Xib'alb'a, but they were more clever than their predecessors. They endured many tests and challenges during their sojourn in the dark Underworld of Xib'alb'a. They were forced to spend the night in a number of different "houses," all of which were controlled by the Lords of the Underworld and all of which were fraught with peril. One of the most difficult such houses was called Chaim Ha or Razor House, a dark cave where sharp knives fly through the air (**Etnab/Tijax**). They played a trick on the Lords of Xib'alb'a, making them think they had kept their cigars lit all night in the House of Darkness. They met the Death Lords upon the handball court; the games went on, with many magical happenings, and with a new test for the Hero Twins in a new House of Darkness every night. Finally Junajpu's head got bitten off by a bat, and it seemed as if all was lost. But Xb'alanke replaced his brother's head with a squash and chose to continue the game. Triumphantly, the Death Lords used Junajpu's severed head for a handball, but Xb'alanke knocked it into the trees. The Death Lords set off in pursuit, but ended up mistakenly following a rabbit (**Lamat/Q'anil**) instead. This gave Xb'alanke a chance to recover his brother's head and replace it upon his body, so that the Hero Twins were at full strength again.

All the same, the Hero Twins knew that the game was stacked against them, and that the Death Lords intended to sacrifice them in the fire, no matter what the game's outcome might be. The Hero Twins tricked the Lords of Death by instructing two shamans: "Tell the Lords of Death to grind up our bones and pour the dust into a river, for that shall surely rid them of us for good."

The Hero Twins leapt willingly into the fires of sacrifice; the Lords of Xib'alb'a followed the shamanic advice, grinding their bones into dust and pouring it into a river.

But it was all a ruse, for this was the formula that brought the Hero Twins back from the dead, first as a pair of catfish and then as men. The Hero Twins disguised themselves as traveling magicians and take on "dog names," Jun Ajpu Wuch' (Possum Hunter) and Jun Ajpu Utiw (Coyote Hunter) (**Oc/Tz'i**). They performed their tricks in front of the Lords of Death, with Xb'alanke sacrificing Junajpu and then restoring him to life. Fascinated by this magic, the Lords of Death wanted to learn all about it and offered themselves up for the sacrifice trick.

But this time the sacrifice is for real, and the Lords of the Dead stayed dead. Junajpu and Xb'alanke had triumphed. The universe was once again in balance. Before leaving the

Underworld, they visited the grave of their uncle Seven Junajpu. Thus began the Mayan custom (which still continues) of visiting the graves of one's ancestors on Ajpu (Ahau) days.

Now the gods transformed the world. The great god Hurricane sent storm and flood to destroy the world of the wooden men. The Hero Twins were transformed into the Sun and Moon of a new world, a world of true human beings who know how to worship the gods properly.

The rest of the *Pop Wuj* details the migrations of these "true human beings" until they became the Ki'che' people. The animals came to the gods and told them of how they had discovered a mountain filled with white and yellow corn. Grandmother Xmucane ground the corn into fine cornmeal and combined it with water to fashion a new race of men, a new creation. She made four men and four women who were the ancestors of all today's clans and lineages.

And the gods were amazed, for the new creation was perfect; the new women and men had perfect knowledge, perfect vision. They kept the days of the Sacred Calendar and they praised the gods. In fact, the gods became afraid of them, of how powerful they were, and they sent a fog to cloud their perfect vision.

Meanwhile the first human beings still wandered in darkness, for the sun had not yet risen, and there was only the vague hint of the beginning of dawn. So they wandered to a place called Tulan Zuyua, the Place of the Seven Caves. And here gathered the ancestors of all the peoples, and here they began to speak different languages. The original people were led by four men, the first Four Fathers of humanity, the *B'alameb'* or Jaguar Men (**Ix/I'x**). These first forefathers were created directly by the gods, who also created their four wives. It was they who guided the people in ancient, primordial times, and who led them upon their migrations or journeys in search of the light. The Morning Star, Venus, cast a faint glow, but it was the light that precedes the sun, the early pre-dawn light, for as of yet there was no sun. These leaders were in constant communication with their guardian deities, the most important of whom was Tohil or Tojil (**Muluc/Toj**), the patron deity of the forefather named B'alam K'itze'.

The *Pop Wuj* tells us that they gathered upon the mountain called Hacavitz, where they wept to see the light of the Morning Star. The Four Jaguar Fathers made an offering, burning so much copal that great clouds rose into the sky (**Cauac/Kawoq**). At last, the sun rose upon the Fourth World. Birds (**Men/Tz'ikin**) and animals (**Manik/Kej**) cried out for joy, and so did the people, laughing and weeping at the same time. This the spirit in which we make sacrificial

offerings, the spirit of resolution and reconciliation which blesses us and nourishes us when we surrender. It is the altar or table upon which those offerings are made. When the sun first rose upon the Fourth World, the gods of the forefathers were changed into stone. To this day, Mayan altars and sacred places in the wilderness are places of stone.

<http://www.jaguarwisdom.org>