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POPOL VUH

Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya People

Translation and Commentary by
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with the initial transcription of the text used in this volume, and Scott Brian created the beautiful maps. I am indebted to them for their efforts.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

A little over twenty years ago I helped to compile a dictionary in the Quiché-Maya language in the mountains of northwestern Guatemala near a small village called Chihul. At the time, Quiché was almost completely an orally-communicated language, with very few native speakers who could read or write it. One summer evening, after a long day of work with one of my best sources, I realized that I had lost track of time and needed to hurry down to the valley where I had a small home before it got dark. The region had no electricity and hiking steep mountain trails at night was dangerous, particularly because of the numerous packs of wild (and often rabid) dogs that roamed freely about. I therefore started down a small footpath that appeared to be a more direct route than the usual winding road taken by buses.

About a third the way down the mountainside, I passed an isolated adobe and thatch house built in a clearing surrounded by pine forest. A small group of men were seated on a low wooden bench in front of the house conversing. When they saw me, they called out a greeting and beckoned me to join them. After introductions were properly exchanged, a requirement in formal Quiché conversation, I was offered a warm cup of toasted corn coffee and a space on the bench was opened up for me to sit down.

One of the men had heard that there was a fair-skinned young man that people called *raqän us* (mosquito legs) who was visiting in Chihul, and he asked if that would be me. My name is difficult to pronounce in Quiché, so I had been given that rather unfortunate nickname, derived no doubt from my lanky physique in those days. I told him that I was the one they had heard about. They asked what I was doing, and I explained that I was interested in collecting the words of his people so that I could carry them with me back to my own town beyond the mountains to the north. Another of the men was curious as to how I could “collect” words and carry them away, since he assumed that his language could only be

spoken, not written.

Quichés in that area had, of course, seen documents and books like the Bible written in Spanish but had little conception at that time that it was possible to use phonetic letters to record their own language. This is a great tragedy, because until about five hundred years ago the Maya were the most literate people in the Americas, preserving their history and culture with a sophisticated hieroglyphic script in hundreds of folded screen books. The Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century was a devastating blow to Maya literacy in Mexico and Guatemala. Christian missionaries burned great numbers of hieroglyphic texts in an attempt to eradicate indigenous religious practices. Native scribes were singled out for persecution to such an extent that within one hundred years, the art of hieroglyphic writing had virtually disappeared from among the Maya people.

My new friends were therefore very interested in the notes I had written that day in their language. Excited by the possibility of preserving their own thoughts in written form, they asked me to demonstrate how to write a number of words and phrases. After writing a few phrases for them in Quiché, I asked the oldest of them if he would like me to write something for him. He said that he did and I waited a long time for the words he wished me to write. Finally he asked me to record a few brief words of counsel for his son. I didn't know it at the time but his five year old boy was the last of twelve children, all of whom had died in childhood, mostly to tuberculosis. That week his last surviving child had begun to cough up blood and he knew that his hope for posterity would inevitably die with him.

By this time I knew I would never make it down to the valley before dark so my elderly friend invited me to stay in his corn loft. Before the others left for the night, I asked if they would like to hear the words of their fathers. This was greeted with indulgent smiles of disbelief, since few of their parents were alive and they were sure that I couldn't have known them. But I told them that it wasn't their fathers' words that I carried with me, but rather those of their fathers' fathers' (repeated many times) fathers, dating back nearly five hundred years. I happened to have with me a copy of the *Popol Vuh* manuscript, a book that was compiled in the mid-sixteenth century at a town that still exists less than thirty miles from where we sat. I began to read from the first page of the book:

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

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

All alone are the Framer and the Shaper, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, They Who Have Borne Children and They Who Have Begotten Sons. Luminous they are in the water, wrapped in quetzal feathers and cotinga feathers. (*Popol Vuh*, pp. 67-69)

After I had read a page or two from the account of the creation of the earth, I stopped and waited for their reaction. No one spoke for some time. Finally, the elderly man with the sick boy asked if he might hold the unbound pages of the manuscript copy for a moment. He gently took it from my hands and with great care turned its pages.

“These are the words of my ancient fathers?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you know what you have done for them?” I wasn’t quite sure what he meant, so I didn’t answer at first. “You make them live again by speaking their words.”

The word he used was *k’astajisaj*, meaning “to cause to have life,” or “to resurrect.” The written word has the power to survive the death of its author, to preserve the most precious souvenirs of human existence—thoughts, hopes, ideals, and acquaintance with the sacred. We tend to take writing for granted. The Maya do not. The ability to write words and have them preserved long after the death of the author is a miracle.

Many of the larger highland Maya communities possess wooden chests containing books and clothing owned by their ancestors which they revere as precious relics. These objects are said to bear the *k’ux*, or “heart” of the ancestors. On special occasions, the contents are

removed ceremonially to “feed” them with offerings of incense and prayers. Many of these books are of great antiquity. I attended the opening of one of these old chests in the town of Santiago Atitlán which contained a number of loose manuscript pages, birth and death registries, and several bound leather books, one of which I could see was a seventeenth century missal.

When brought out into the open, such books are reverently offered incense and prayers, but no attempt is made to open them or read them. Partly this is because few contemporary Maya know how to read the early script of the colonial period, and partly out of respect for the words themselves. When the words of the ancestors are read, or spoken aloud, it is as if that person had returned from death to speak again. Reading ancient texts is therefore a very delicate matter, filled with peril if the words are not treated with sufficient respect.

While working as an ethnographer and translator in the Guatemalan highlands, I collaborated with a number of Maya shaman-priests called *aj q'ijab'* (they of days, or daykeepers). Prior to reading the words of ancient Maya manuscripts like the *Popol Vuh*, it was customary for one of them, don Vicente de León Abac of Momostenango, to first purify my xeroxed copy of the text by waving copal incense smoke over it and asking forgiveness of the ancestors who had written the original for disturbing them. When I asked why he did this, he replied that to read the thoughts of ancient ancestors is to make their spirits present in the room and give them a living voice. Such power must be approached with great seriousness, and all care taken to be faithful to their original ideas in any transcription or translation. At the end of our work sessions, he politely dismissed the gods and ancestors involved in that day's reading with his thanks and asked pardon for any offense we might have given.

Most of the people who lived on the American continents prior to the arrival of Europeans lacked a written script. Even in Mesoamerica, where there was a long tradition of hieroglyphic writing among some of the ancient cultures of the region, such as the Maya and Zapotecs, other neighboring cultures preserved their history and theology principally through the spoken word, passed from generation to generation. This was true even of highly sophisticated cultures such as the Aztecs, whose painted texts relied primarily on a rebus or picture form of writing incapable of recording abstract ideas phonetically. Yet the concept of

oral poetry held by the Aztecs is exemplary of the view of such discourse throughout Mesoamerica, including the Maya.

For the ancient Aztecs the highest form of sacred communication was poetry, what they called *xochicuicatl* (“flower-song”). These were delicately beautiful hymns meant to be recited orally, often to musical accompaniment. In paintings, Aztec poets are depicted with speech scrolls issuing from their mouths. These scrolls are often colored a rich blue or green, symbolic of the precious nature of the poets’ words as if they were composed of jade or sacred quetzal feathers. Aztecs looked upon poetry as the actualization of a creative act inspired by divinities who were called upon to be present at the performance. Thus the poet Ayocuan Cuetzpaltzin of Tecamachalco believed that his songs came from heaven, but lamented that his own words could not express them as they came undefiled from the gods:

From within the heavens they come,
The beautiful flowers, the beautiful songs.
Our longing spoils them,
Our inventiveness makes them lose their fragrance. (León-Portilla 1980, 257)

Such songs exist only at the moment of their performance, their sound hanging briefly in the air, then fading to silence. It is only when they are spoken that they reveal their divine origin, transforming the poet into a messenger of deity:

Now I am going to forge songs,
Make a stem flowering with songs,
Oh my friends!
God has sent me as a messenger.
I am transformed into a poem. (León-Portilla 1969, 80)

Most poems were learned by heart and were lost forever if forgotten. Thus Aztec poetry had no permanent reality of its own, no more than a dream. It is only by an accident of history that we know of them at all. Soon after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire in 1521, a few Spanish missionaries such as Fr. Andrés de Olmos and Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún attempted to preserve long transcriptions of ancient Aztec history, theology, and poetry utilizing the Latin script. Olmos and Sahagún relied for these accounts on elderly

THE PRIMORDIAL WORLD⁴⁸

THIS IS THE ACCOUNT of when all is still silent and placid.⁴⁹ All is silent and calm.⁵⁰ Hushed⁵¹ and empty is the womb of the sky.

THESE, then, are the first words, the first speech. There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock, hollow, canyon, meadow, or forest. All alone the sky exists. The face of the earth has not yet appeared. Alone lies the expanse of the sea, along with the womb of all the sky. There is not yet anything gathered together. All is at rest. Nothing stirs. All is languid, at rest in the sky. There is not yet anything standing erect. Only the expanse of the water, only the tranquil sea lies alone.⁵² There is not yet anything that might exist. All lies placid and silent in the darkness, in the night.

All alone are the Framer and the Shaper, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, They Who Have Borne Children and They Who Have Begotten Sons. Luminous⁵³ they are in the water,⁵⁴ wrapped in quetzal feathers and cotinga⁵⁵ feathers. Thus they are called

⁴⁸ lines 97-154

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

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

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

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

⁵³ In his *Vocabulario de lengua quiche*, Domingo de Basseta interprets *zaktetoh* as “the brightness that enters through cracks.” Thus the brightness of the gods is seen as shining between the feathers that envelop them.

Quetzal Serpent. In their essence, they are great sages, great possessors of knowledge.

Thus surely there is the sky. There is also Heart of Sky,⁵⁶ which is said to be the name of the god.⁵⁷

THE CREATION OF THE EARTH⁵⁸

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

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

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

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

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

⁵⁸ lines 155-274

⁵⁹ Literally “they found themselves.”

bringing together their words and their thoughts.⁶⁰ Then they gave birth, heartening one another. Beneath the light, they gave birth to humanity. Then they arranged for the germination and creation⁶¹ of the trees and the bushes, the germination of all life and creation, in the darkness and in the night, by Heart of Sky, who is called Huracan.⁶²

First is Thunderbolt Huracan, second is Youngest Thunderbolt,⁶³ and third is Sudden Thunderbolt.⁶⁴ These three together are Heart of Sky.⁶⁵ Then they came together with Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent. Together they conceived light and life:

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How shall it be sown? When shall there be a dawn for anyone? Who shall be a provider?⁶⁶ Who shall be a sustainer?⁶⁷

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

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

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

revelatory messages (B. Tedlock 1982, 133-147). Although Quiché gods are normally named in pairs, there are occasional appearances of a trinity, as in this case. The principal gods of the three ruling Quiché lineages were Tohil, Auilix, and Hacavitz (see p. 223). Quiché temples generally had three entrances (for reconstruction drawings of such temples, see Carmack 1981, 270, 273). The idea of a trinity in Maya cosmology may be very ancient. The largest of the Maya centers built prior to the birth of Christ was El Mirador, located in the central Petén rain forest of Guatemala. Characteristic of its temples was a unique triadic pattern consisting of huge platforms, each surmounted by three pyramids.

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

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

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

⁶⁹ *Ju suk'*. Basseta translates this as “quickly, instantly.” It literally means “one straight,” somewhat like our English phrases “straightaway,” or “directly.”

brought about the conception of the mountains and the valleys.⁷² Straightaway were created cypress groves and pine forests to cover the face of the earth.

Thus Quetzal Serpent rejoiced:

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

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

⁷⁰ *Nawal* also has no English equivalent. In Quiché theology, all things, both living and inanimate, have a spirit essence which they call *nawal*. This spirit essence is believed to give them power to act or communicate on a supernatural plane, for example, to transform their usual form into that of a powerful animal or force of nature. Father Coto ascribes this power to the devil, defining the word *nawal* as “the magical means whereby the devil spoke to the Quichés through their idols. Thus they would say that the life of the tree, the life of the stone, of the hill, is its *nawal*, because they believed there was life in these objects. If a man asks his wife for something to eat or drink when there is nothing in the house, the wife would reply, *xa pe ri tin naualih?* (Do you expect me to perform miracles?)” (Coto 1983, 328, 369). Although *nawal* is borrowed from the Nahuatl language, where it means “to transform” (Campbell 1983, 84), the Quiché interpretation of the word is derived from the root *na'*, meaning “to feel” or “to know.” Thus the creation took place by means of the power of the gods’ spirit essence or divine knowledge rather than by physical action.

⁷¹ *Pus* is a loan word from ancient Mixe-Zoque (Campbell 1983, 83), likely the language of the Olmecs who dominated the Gulf Coast region from ca. 1500-400 BC. It refers to the cutting of flesh, and specifically to the practice of human sacrifice. In Colonial period Quiché texts, the word is often paired with the word *nawal* to describe the supernatural power of deities to accomplish what ordinary humans cannot. In the first years after the Spanish conquest, Roman Catholic missionaries adopted the word to describe the power of the Christian God to forgive sins and offer his body as a sacrament (Coto 1983, 424). This use of the word was soon abandoned, however, because of the word’s association with ancient Maya gods and their ceremonies. Father Coto thus defines *pus* as “magic, enchantment, necromancy, or witchcraft,” thereby associating the people’s belief in the power of the Quiché gods with evil and sorcery (Coto 1983, 74, 180, 328, 369).

⁷² *Juyub'-Taq'aj* (Mountain-Plain) is an example of merismus, the expression of a broad concept by a pair of complementary elements that are narrower in scope. This pairing is commonly used among present-day Quichés to refer to the earth as a whole. This not only comprises the physical contrast of elevations versus valleys, but also the notion of wilderness versus cultivated land (Cook 2000, 75).

sky was set apart. The earth also was set apart within the waters. Thus was conceived the successful completion of the work when they thought and when they pondered.

THE CREATION OF THE ANIMALS⁷³

THEN were conceived the animals of the mountains, the guardians of the forest,⁷⁴ and all that populate the mountains—the deer⁷⁵ and the birds, the puma⁷⁶ and the jaguar,⁷⁷ the serpent⁷⁸ and the rattlesnake,⁷⁹ the pit viper⁸⁰ and the guardian of the bushes.

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

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

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

⁷³ lines 275-339

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

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

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

⁷⁷ *Panthera onza*.

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

⁷⁹ *Crotalus durissus*.

⁸⁰ *K'an Ti'* (Yucatec or Cholan: “Yellow Mouth”) is a pit viper, likely the cantil or *fer-de-lance* (*Trionocephalus specialis*), which is extremely poisonous (Cook 2000, 166). Its name is perhaps derived from the yellow markings around the mouth of the *fer-de-lance* (D. Tedlock 1996, 228 n. 66). Basseta records that it may be any venomous serpent and lists specifically the coral snake. I have used pit viper which covers the range of venomous vipers living in the Maya region.

“You, deer, will sleep along the courses of rivers and in the canyons. Here you will be in the meadows and in the orchards. In the forests you shall multiply. You will walk on all fours, and thus you will be able to stand,” they were told.

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

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

When this had been done, all of them received their places to sleep and their places to rest. Homes were provided for the animals on the earth⁸¹ by She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons. Thus all was completed for the deer and the birds.

THE FALL OF THE ANIMALS⁸²

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

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

“Speak therefore our names. Worship⁸³ us, for we are your Mother and your Father. Say this, therefore: ‘Huracan, Youngest Thunderbolt, and Sudden Thunderbolt,

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

⁸² lines 340-433

Heart of Sky and Heart of Earth, Framer and Shaper, She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons.’ Speak! Call upon us! Worship us!” they were told.

But they did not succeed. They did not speak like people. They only squawked and chattered and roared. Their speech was unrecognizable,⁸⁴ for each cried out in a different way.

When they heard this,⁸⁵ the Framer and the Shaper said, “Their speech did not turn out well.”

And again they said to each other:

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

They were therefore told:

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

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

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

⁸⁴ Literally “not appeared its face their speech.”

⁸⁵ Literally “try again their day.” *Q'ij* (day, sun) has a host of associated meanings. As Barbara Tedlock writes, “each day has ‘its face,’ its identity, its character, that influences its events; a person’s luck of the moment, or even his fate in general, is called ‘the face of his day’ (B. Tedlock 1982, 2).”

will give honor. Your calling will merely be to have your flesh eaten. Thus be it so. This must be your service,”⁸⁶ they were told. Thus were commanded the animals, both small and great, that were upon the face of the earth.

Then they wanted to test again their fate. They wanted to make another attempt. They wanted to try again to arrange⁸⁷ for those who would worship them.

The speech of the animals could not be understood. Because of the way they were made, they were not successful.⁸⁸ Therefore their flesh was brought low. They were made to serve. The animals that were on the face of the earth were eaten and killed.

THE CREATION OF THE MUD PERSON⁸⁹

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

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

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

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

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

⁸⁹ lines 434-517

Then was the framing, the making of it. Of earth and mud was its flesh composed. But they saw that it was still not good. It merely came undone and crumbled. It merely became sodden and mushy.⁹⁰ It merely fell apart and dissolved. Its head was not set apart properly.⁹¹ Its face could only look in one direction. Its face was hidden. Neither could it look about. At first it spoke, but without knowledge.⁹² Straightaway it would merely dissolve in water, for it was not strong.

Then said the Framer and the Shaper:

“We have made a mistake; thus let this be merely a mistake.⁹³ It cannot walk, neither can it multiply. Then let it be so. Let it be merely left behind as a thing of no importance,”⁹⁴ they said.

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

Then they said again:

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

Then they thought again:

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

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

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

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

⁹⁴ According to Coto, *na'oj chi ri'* means “leave behind; of little importance.”

“We shall merely tell Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, Hunahpu Possum and Hunahpu Coyote, ‘Try again a divination,⁹⁵ a shaping,’” said the Framer and the Shaper to each other.

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

THE CREATION OF THE EFFIGIES OF CARVED WOOD⁹⁷

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

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

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

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

⁹⁷ lines 518-679

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

it be sown. May it dawn so that we are called upon and supported, so that we are remembered by framed and shaped people, by effigies⁹⁹ and forms¹⁰⁰ of people. Hearken and let it be so.

“Reveal your names, Hunahpu Possum and Hunahpu Coyote, Great She Who Has Borne Children and Great He Who Has Begotten Sons, Great Peccary and Great Coati, Jeweler and Worker in Precious Stones, Sculptor and Wood Worker, Creator of the Green Earth and Creator of the Blue Sky, Incense¹⁰¹ Maker and Master Artist,¹⁰²

⁹⁹ *Poy* is any type of created image that resembles a human— an effigy, doll, manikin, scarecrow, etc.

¹⁰⁰ According to Basseta, *anom* is something that is created in the image of something else, a “model or form,” often made by means of a mould. It is also used to refer to a “fool, buffoon, or someone who is lightminded and unserious.” These words presage the falseness and lack of intelligence characteristic of the wooden effigies that are soon to be created.

¹⁰¹ *Q'ol*. This is tree sap, the most common source of incense among the Maya. This word most commonly refers to pine resin incense, although it may be used for other types as well.

¹⁰² The Quiché title *Aj Toltecat* is given to anyone who is highly skilled in art, science, religion, and creative endeavors in general. *Toltecat* refers specifically to the ancient Toltecs, who, under the legendary priest-ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, founded the city of Tula in Central Mexico in the tenth century a.d. Although the city fell some two centuries later, the fame of its people was passed from generation to generation, undoubtedly embellished significantly with each retelling. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the ancient Toltecs had achieved an almost mythic reputation as masters in all the arts. The Aztecs gave the following description in folio 172v of the Codex Matritensis:

The Toltecs were a skillful people;
all of their works were good, all were exact,
all well made and admirable.

Their houses were beautiful, with turquoise mosaics,
the walls finished with plaster,
clean and marvelous houses, which is to say
Toltec houses, beautifully made,
beautiful in everything...

Painters, sculptors, carvers of precious stones,
feather artists, potters, spinners, weavers,
skillful in all they made....

The Toltecs were truly wise;
they conversed with their own hearts....
They played their drums and rattles;
They were singers, they composed songs
and sang them among the people;

Grandmother of Day and Grandmother of Light. Thus shall you all be called by that which we shall frame and shape. Cast¹⁰³ grains of maize and *tz'ite*¹⁰⁴ to divine how what we shall make will come out when we grind and chisel out its mouth and face in wood,”¹⁰⁵ so it was said to the Masters of Days.

Thus began the divination ceremony, the casting of grains of maize and of *tz'ite*, the revelation of days and of shaping. Then spoke the one Grandmother and the one Grandfather to them.

For this was the Grandfather, the Master of the *Tz'ite*, Xpiyacoc by name. And this was the Grandmother, the Mistress of Days¹⁰⁶ and Mistress of Shaping who is at the foot,¹⁰⁷ who is called Xmucane.

Thus they began to speak, to carry out their divination ceremony:

“May it be discovered. May it be found. Say it! Our ears hear you. Speak! Tell it! May the tree be found that is to be carved and chiseled out by the Framer and the Shaper.

They guarded the songs in their memories,
they deified them in their hearts. (León-Portilla 1980, 207)

¹⁰³ *Mala'* (to cast) refers not only to the scattering of the grains of maize or *tz'ite*, but also to the act of gently passing the hand over the pile of grains to mix them prior to their use in divination ceremonies (for a description of this ceremony see Schultze-Jena 1954; B. Tedlock 1982).

¹⁰⁴ *Tz'ite* is the bright-red beanlike seed of the coral tree (Spanish: *palo de pito* tree; *Erythrina corallodendron*). The seeds are used in divination ceremonies. Just as in the *Popol Vuh* manuscript, modern Quiché *aj q'ij* priests may use maize kernels or *tz'ite* seeds for such divinations. *Tz'ite* seeds are often referred to metaphorically as maize as well (Schultze-Jena 1954, 84; B. Tedlock 1982, 84).

¹⁰⁵ Each of the first three creative attempts used a different class of material—animal (wild beasts and birds), mineral (mud), and vegetable (wood).

¹⁰⁶ In Momostenango the ideal is for married couples to act as the agents in such ceremonies, similar to the tradition of Xpiyacoc and Xmucane (B. Tedlock 1982, 85).

¹⁰⁷ *Chi raqan* may mean either “at the foot” or “at the leg” since the Quiché language does not distinguish between the foot and the leg. Although Dennis Tedlock translates this phrase somewhat inaccurately as “who stands behind others,” I agree with his interpretation that Xmucane in her role as a female *aj q'ij* (daykeeper) positions herself at the feet of the petitioner so as to give assistance “as a daykeeper does when praying and giving offerings on behalf of a client, or a midwife does when assisting a birth” (D. Tedlock 1996, 234 n. 70).

If this is to be the provider and the sustainer, then may it now be sown that the dawn may come. You, grains of maize, and you, *tz'ite*; you, days, and you, the shaping—you are called,¹⁰⁸ you are summoned.”¹⁰⁹ Thus it was said¹¹⁰ to the grains of maize and the *tz'ite*, to the days and the shaping.

“Bring it to a conclusion,¹¹¹ O Heart of Sky. Do not punish them further.¹¹² Do not cause any more suffering for Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent,” they said.

Then they spoke straight to the point:¹¹³

“May these effigies of wood come out well. May they speak. May they communicate there upon the face of the earth. May it be so,” they said.

¹⁰⁸ According to Basseta, *chokonik* refers to “calling,” in the sense of being called upon to carry out an errand.

¹⁰⁹ *Taqentaj* is “to be summoned, commissioned, dispatched, given a task to fulfill, or be sent out as a messenger.”

¹¹⁰ Modern *aj q'ij* priests also speak directly to the *tz'ite* as they carry out their divinatory ceremonies, urging them to give an accurate and true answer to their petition.

¹¹¹ *K'ix* is “to complete, finish, conclude, or come to a solution” (Varea). As a noun, the word refers to a thorn, spine, or insect sting. When used as a verb, it is one of the words used to describe drawing blood in auto-sacrificial ceremonies. In this passage, it is possible that both meanings are intended. In Mesoamerican theology, gods of the creation often sacrifice themselves in order to provide the sacred blood necessary to produce new life.

¹¹² The phrase *mak'ajisaj u chi', u wach* (don't grind up his mouth, his face) is a common expression meaning something like “don't punish him” or “don't teach him a hard lesson.” Heart of Sky is thus being counseled not to cause Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent any more grief with further failures to successfully create beings who can worship and support them. Perhaps a bit of frustration at the gods' lack of success up to this point is evident in this address by Xpiyacoc and Xmucane to Heart of Sky. The Quichés are known for their directness in prayer. When a perceived injustice takes place in the life of a petitioner, he/she may well complain directly to the god who has responsibility for that malady and insist bluntly that things be made right. Bunzel suggests that Quiché deities are generally neutral entities, and thus “subject to bribery, cajolery and threats” (Bunzel 1952, 267). I heard one farmer bitterly accuse the earth god of taking a tool of his, even though the man had made all the appropriate offerings, and demand that it be returned immediately. Modern *aj q'ij* priests repeatedly admonish the gods to tell the truth and not *b'an tzij* (make words or lie).

¹¹³ Literally “they spoke its straightness.”

And when they had spoken, straightaway the effigies¹¹⁴ of carved wood were made. They had the appearance of people and spoke like people as well. They populated the whole face of the earth. The effigies of carved wood began to multiply, bearing daughters and sons.

Nevertheless, they still did not possess their hearts nor their minds. They did not remember their Framer or their Shaper.¹¹⁵ They walked without purpose.¹¹⁶ They crawled on their hands and knees and did not remember Heart of Sky. Thus they were weighed in the balance. They were merely an experiment, an attempt at people. At first they spoke, but their faces were all dried up. Their legs and arms were not filled out. They had no blood or blood flow¹¹⁷ within them. They had no sweat or oil. Their cheeks were dry, and their faces were masks.¹¹⁸ Their legs and arms were stiff. Their bodies were rigid.¹¹⁹ Thus they were not capable of understanding¹²⁰ before their Framer and their Shaper, those

¹¹⁴ *Poy* refers to any effigy fashioned in the likeness of a human, such as a doll or scarecrow. Tedlock translates the word as “manikin,” Recinos as “figure,” and Edmonson as “doll.”

¹¹⁵ Again, the cause of the downfall of this attempt at humanity is their failure to *remember* the gods and thus worship them properly.

¹¹⁶ According to Basseta, *xalok'* is something “without cause, without purpose, in vain.” Tedlock’s Quiché collaborator remarked that this phrase indicates that the wooden effigies were “like animals,” because humans must ask permission of the gods to travel any significant distance (D. Tedlock 1996, 234, n. 70).

¹¹⁷ The text lists two parallel words here, *kik'el* and *komajil*, both of which mean “blood.” Basseta mentions that *komaj* may specifically refer to menstruation, or menstrual blood flow.

¹¹⁸ Quichés consider the face to be the symbol for the personality or essence of a person. The fact that the wooden effigies had masks rather than faces implies that they were false by nature.

¹¹⁹ The word *yeyoj* means both “rigid” as well as “stubborn.”

¹²⁰ *Na'wik*. This is the capacity to understand, notice, observe, perceive. Thus it is the wooden effigies’ inability to learn and grow in knowledge that destroys them. *Na'b'al* (understanding, knowledge, memory) is a uniquely human trait. A resident of Santiago Chimaltenango noted that even a newborn baby has *naab'l*. But although animals may have a kind of awareness, they lack *naab'l* (Watanabe 1992, 82). Watanabe suggests that the notion of *naab'l* includes the larger concepts of soul, socialization, learning, and conventions of Chimalteco morality (Ibid., 100). Thus, the effigies of wood lack the essential awareness,

who had given them birth and given them hearts. They were the first numerous people who have lived here upon the face of the earth.

THE FALL OF THE EFFIGIES OF CARVED WOOD¹²¹

THEN came the end of the effigies carved of wood, for they were ruined, crushed,¹²² and killed. A flood was planned by Heart of Sky that came down upon the heads of the effigies carved of wood.¹²³

The body of man had been carved of *tz'ite* wood¹²⁴ by the Framer and the Shaper. The body of woman consisted of reeds¹²⁵ according to the desire of the Framer and the

and understanding that are characteristic of human beings. In this sense, they are like the animals who were not able to remember or honor the gods properly and were thus destroyed.

¹²¹ lines 680-837

¹²² *Q'utuxik* is "to be crushed or pulverized," generally with reference to dried vegetables like chili peppers.

¹²³ The destruction of the earth by flood prior to our present age was a widespread tradition in Mesoamerica: "There was among them information of the flood and of the end of the world, and they called it Butic, which is the word which means flood of many waters and means 'judgment,' and so they believe that another Butic is about to come, which is another flood and judgment, not of water, but of fire, which they say would be the end of the world, in which all the creatures would reprove, especially those which serve man, like the stones on which they grind their corn and wheat, the pots, the vessels, giving to understand that they will turn against man, and that the moon and sun would be eclipsed, saying that they would be eaten" (Las Casas 1967, III.ccxxxv.507; cf. III.cxxiv.650. Translation by author). The Yucatec Maya *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* records that the people of that age "were buried in the sand at the shore of the sea, in the waves. Then in a great sheet of water the waves came. When the great serpent was taken away, the heavens fell and the earth was submerged" (León-Portilla 1969, 50; cf. Roys 1967, 170). Aztec tradition also has the inhabitants of the fourth age of the earth destroyed by flood: "These are those who lived in the fourth Sun, called 4-Water. They lived 676 years, until they were destroyed. They were swallowed up by the waters and became fish. The heavens collapsed upon them and in a single day they perished" (Velázquez 1945, 119-120). Although the *Popol Vuh* has the wooden effigies destroyed in a flood (see also p. 85; lines 706-709, 728-731), lines 710-723 have them crushed and devoured by monstrous beasts, while lines 736-823 describe their ruin at the hands of their own domesticated animals, grinding stones, utensils, and other possessions.

¹²⁴ In highland Guatemala, the wood of the *tz'ite* (coral tree) is still considered to have extraordinary power, including the ability to speak (Orellana 1984, 98). In the Tz'utujil-Maya village of Santiago Atitlán, traditionalists venerate an effigy carved of *tz'ite* wood that they call Maximon (Ancient One Who Is Bound) or alternatively Mam (Ancient One). The trunk of this effigy is approximately 2.5 feet in height and 6-8 inches thick, with separate pieces of wood attached to form the head and legs. A carved mask with a roughly hewn face is tied about the head (cf. p. 84; lines 668-669). This effigy is said to be more ancient

Shaper. But they were not capable of understanding and did not speak before their
Framer and their Shaper, their makers and their creators.

Thus they were killed in the flood. There came a great resin down from the sky.¹²⁶

There came the ones called Chiselers of Faces, who gouged out their eyes.¹²⁷

There came Death Knives,¹²⁸ which cut off their heads. There came Crouching¹²⁹ Jaguar,
who ate their flesh. There came Striking¹³⁰ Jaguar, who struck them. They smashed their
bones and their tendons.¹³¹

Their bones were ground up. They were broken into pieces. Their faces were
ground up¹³² because they proved to be incapable of understanding before the face of
their mother and the face of their father, Heart of Sky, Huracan by name.¹³³

than Christ, having been created “in the beginning of time, or of the world” (Mendelson 1959, 58, 60). Maximon is considered old and often malignant, standing in opposition to the established order of the community. He is thus associated with forgetfulness (B. Tedlock 1982, 101; cf. p. 83; lines 652-653, 656-657), hunger, sterility, sexual depravity (Thompson 1970, 299; Mendelson 1958b, 9), and opposition to life deities. He is particularly prominent during Easter celebrations, in which he presides over the death and entombment of Jesus Christ (Mendelson 1959, 1965; Tarn and Prechtel 1997; Christenson 2001, 176-191). The Maximon figure may be a remembrance of the chaotic world prior to the creation of humankind, when the gods were not remembered or worshiped properly by effigies carved from *tz’ite* wood. Cook suggests that Maximon’s opposition to Christ represents a kind of “underground survival of powers from earlier, superseded epochs” (Cook 2000, 139-140).

¹²⁵ This is the type of reed commonly used for weaving mats in Guatemala (*Typha angustifolia*).

¹²⁶ Some confusion appears in the text as to the nature of the flood that destroyed the wooden effigies. Here the flood is composed of resin, sap, or turpentine (secretions of pine trees). Page 87 (lines 728-731) however describes a watery flood caused by heavy rainfall.

¹²⁷ *U b’aq’ u wach* (its seed his/her face) refers to the eyes.

¹²⁸ *Lotz* is a knife used in butchering or surgery, although the word may also refer to the act of cutting flesh.

¹²⁹ “Crouching,” as if lying in ambush.

¹³⁰ *Tukuj* is “to strike something violently, with the intention of breaking it.”

¹³¹ *Ib’och’il* may refer to “tendons, blood vessels, or nerves.” I have chosen “tendons” because this word best parallels bones as a stiff supporting structure of the body.

¹³² To “grind someone’s face” is a metaphor for inflicting punishment.

Thus they caused the face of the earth to be darkened, and there fell a black rain,¹³⁴ a rain that fell both day and night. The small and the great animals came in upon them.¹³⁵ Their faces were crushed by the trees and the stones. They were spoken to by all their maize grinders and their cooking griddles,¹³⁶ their plates and their pots, their dogs¹³⁷ and their grinding stones.¹³⁸ However many things they had, all of them crushed their faces.

Their dogs and their turkeys¹³⁹ said to them:

“Pain you have caused us. You ate us. Therefore it will be you that we will eat now.”

¹³³ The violent destruction of the wooden effigies is perhaps commemorated in the dismemberment of the Maximon figure at Santiago Atitlán (see previous note on the *tz'ite*-wood figures). Maximon is a figure of carved *tz'ite*-wood prominently displayed at times of crisis, such as during the death of Christ at Easter or at harvest time, when the crops are ceremonially “killed.” When Christ rose from the dead and life restored to the world at the climax of such festivals, Maximon was ritually defeated by disassembling the wooden pieces of his body, removing his mask, and placing it upside down so that he cannot harm anyone and so that he will be left “without power of speech” (Mendelson 1965, 123). In other highland Maya communities, figures representing Maximon are torn apart, hung from trees, or burned. I saw one particularly evil-looking Maximon near the town of Sololá slashed repeatedly with a machete and thrown out onto a highway so that cars and buses would run over it.

¹³⁴ “Black” in the sense that the storm was so severe that the sky was darkened with clouds.

¹³⁵ The implication is that the wild animals of the mountains entered into the houses of the wooden effigies. The Quichés believe that when a wild animal enters their home it is to deliver a message from the earth god, who is the master of the animals. In this case, the message is a foreshadowing of the destruction that is soon to come upon the wooden effigies.

¹³⁶ *Xot* (griddle) is a round, flat clay piece upon which tortillas or slices of steamed maize dough are cooked.

¹³⁷ There were very few domesticated animals in Precolumbian Mesoamerica. Those that have been documented are the dog, turkey, and honeybee. The dog mentioned here is a small, fat, nearly hairless variety that does not bark and that was eaten in addition to being kept as a pet.

¹³⁸ This is the *metate*, upon which maize and other grains are ground. It is usually made from a single block of heavy volcanic stone, quadrangular in shape, and supported by three short stone legs.

¹³⁹ In modern Quiché usage, *ak'* refers to chickens, which were introduced by the Spaniards soon after the Conquest. The Precolumbian *ak'* was the domesticated turkey (*Meleagris ocellata*). Colonial period dictionaries often refer to the turkey as *kitzih ak'* (true *ak'*) to distinguish it from the chicken introduced from Europe. The dog and turkey together represent those domesticated animals raised by the Quichés and thus under their direct care and supervision. The wooden effigies thus reaped the vengeance of their own animals as a result of their cruelty and thoughtlessness.

Then the grinding stones said this to them:

“We were ground upon by you. Every day, every day, in the evening and at dawn, always you did *holi, holi, huki, huki*¹⁴⁰ on our faces. This was our service for you who were the first people. But this day you shall feel our strength. We shall grind you like maize. We shall grind up your flesh,”¹⁴¹ said their grinding stones to them.

Then their dogs said this to them:

“Why was it that you didn’t give us our food? All we did was look at you, and you chased us away. You threw us out. You raised sticks against us to beat us while you ate.¹⁴² Thus you have spoken to us.¹⁴³ We could not speak; therefore we received nothing from you. How could you not have understood this?¹⁴⁴ You did understand. We were forgotten because of you. This day, therefore, you shall try the teeth that are in our mouths. We shall eat you,” said the dogs to them. Thus their faces were crushed.

¹⁴⁰ The phrase *holi, holi, huqui, huqui* has been translated in a variety of ways in the past. Raynaud translates it as “strip, strip, tear, tear.” Edmonson interprets it as “Crunch, crunch! Scrape, scrape!” Tedlock uses “R-r-rip, r-r-rip, r-r-rub, r-r-rub.” *Juk’i* may, in fact, be translated “scrape” or “rub,” but *jol* has no relevant meaning in this passage. I have chosen to leave the phrase untranslated, because I believe the authors intended the words to convey the sound that is produced when maize is ground on a *metate* stone. The initial h of each of the words is pronounced harshly, like a Spanish j or a German ch, creating a coarse sound remarkably like that of stone scraping rhythmically against stone.

¹⁴¹ It is poetic justice that each of the household possessions of the wooden effigies chose to punish their owners with the same torments that they had suffered previously at their hands. Thus the grinding stones grind the faces of the wooden people in the same way that their own faces had been ground upon day in and day out (p. 87; lines 767-769). The dogs who had been eaten now eat their masters (p. 88; lines 784-789). The griddles and pots, which had been placed on the fire each day, now throw their owners into the fire to be burned (p. 88; lines 799-800). The stone tools and hearthstones pound the heads of the wooden effigies as they had been beaten upon (pp. 88-89; lines 800-807).

¹⁴² Even today domesticated dogs are often treated very carelessly among the Quichés. Most are emaciated and in constant fear of beatings and harsh words.

¹⁴³ The purpose of the creation has been to create people who were capable of speech in order to sustain the gods. The dogs are pointing out that, instead, their speech has been limited to beatings and violence. Thus the wooden effigies have also failed in their purpose.

¹⁴⁴ *Na’wik* is to “understand, know, notice, observe, or perceive.” Any of these might fit this context. Pages 84-86 (lines 673, 724-725) assert that it was the lack of ability in the wooden effigies to “understand” that condemned them.

Then spoke also their griddles and their pots to them:

“Pain you have caused us. Our mouths and our faces are sooty. You were forever throwing us upon the fire and burning us. Although we felt no pain, you now shall try it. We shall burn you,” said all of their pots. Thus their faces were all crushed.

The stones of the hearth flattened them. They would come out from the fire, landing on their heads and causing them pain. They fled. They hurried away. They wanted to climb up on top of the houses, but the houses would fall apart beneath them and they were thrown off. They wanted to climb up to the tops of the trees, but the trees would not support them. They wanted to hide in caves, but the mouths of the caves closed up before their faces.

Thus the framed people, the shaped people, were undone. They were demolished and overthrown as people. The mouths and the faces of all of them were ruined and crushed.

It is said that the spider monkeys¹⁴⁵ that are in the forest today are descendents¹⁴⁶ of these people. This was their heritage because their flesh was merely wood when it was created by the Framer and the Shaper. Therefore the spider monkeys appear like people, descendents of one generation of framed and shaped people. But they were only effigies carved of wood.

¹⁴⁵ *K'oy* refers to the spider monkey (*Ateles vellerosus* or *Ateles geoffroyi*). Central Mexican traditions are remarkably similar. The *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* relate the tradition that in the fourth age of the earth “people were turned into monkeys. They were scattered over the mountains, and the monkey-men lived there” (León-Portilla 1980, 138).

¹⁴⁶ *Etal* is generally used to mean “sign, symbol, or manifestation.” Coto notes that it may also refer to “descendents, son, heritage, or succession.” The latter interpretation seems to fit the context better in this passage.