Maya Mythology and Prophecy

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Preservation of Mayan Mythology

• Most texts were destroyed by Spanish

• The surviving texts: Popol Vuh (Quiché) and Chilam Balam (Yucatán)

Diego De Landa, a very bad man.
History and Discovery of Popol Vuh

- In 1558, a Maya transcribed the Popol Vuh into the Quiche language. Almost two centuries later, a priest, Father Francisco Ximenez, found the manuscript in his church in Chichicastenango, Guatemala and translated it into Spanish.
- Discovered circa 1701 by Francisco Ximénez.
- He transcribed and translated manuscript in parallel Quiche and Spanish columns. Eventually ended up at the Universidad de San Carlos of Guatemala.
- Ximénez’s source is said to be a phonetic manuscript borrowed from a parishoner, speculated to be a phonetic rendering of an oral recitation by Pedro de Alvarado during his 1524 conquest.
- Sat around for awhile in the library until 1854 when two European scholars, Moritz Wagner and Carl Scherzer, copied the Spanish content from the last half of the manuscript and published it upon returning to Europe.
- In 1855, French Abbot Charles Étienne de Brasseur de Bourbourg also found the writings in the university library. Instead of copying it, however, he “absconded” with it and took it back to France.
- When Brasseur died, volume was sold to Edward E. Ayer in 1874. Donated to The Newberry Library in 1897.
- Manuscript went into obscurity until it was rediscovered at The Newberry by Adrián Recinos in 1941, who is credited for publishing the first direct edition since Scherzer and Wagner.
• Ximénez’s manuscript at Newberry library is faded, stained, contains few “organizational divisions” and frequently lacks punctuation and capitalization, making editing and transcribing the manuscript a slight mystery and estimable challenge.

• Side-by-side Quiché (left column) and Spanish (right)

• Dispute over origin of text.

• Ximenez’s convoluted claims.

• Do you think he was making it up?
Part I of Popol Vuh: Account of the Creation of Living Beings

- Starts with idea of nothingness.
- Only sky and sea.
- Tepeu (“sovereign”) and Gucumatz (“plumed serpent god”)
- “There shall be neither glory nor grandeur in our creation and formation until the human being is made, man is formed”

Quiché
Are utzijoxik wa’e
k’a katz’îninoq,
k’a kachamamoq,
katz’înonik,
k’a kasilanik,
k’a kalolinik,
katolina puch upa kaj.

Spanish
Esta es la relación de cómo todo estaba en suspensos,
todo en calma,
en silencio;
todo inmóvil,
callado,
y vacía la extensión del cielo.

[Translation]
This is the account of how all was in suspense, all calm, in silence; all motionless, all pulsating, and empty was the expanse of the sky.
Creation Myth, continued

• Earth was made first, then animals, and then humans.

• Humans
  – 1st attempt: mud
    • Result: soak up water and dissolve
  – 2nd attempt: wood
    • Result: no souls or minds means they lose favor with Gods who eventually cause them to be beaten and disfigured

• 3rd attempt of maize proved successful because men “talked, conversed, saw, and heard, walked, grasped things; they were good and handsome men, and their figure was the figure of a man.”

Source: Goetz p.11-42
Hero Twins

• Oldest Maya myth to be preserved in its entirety.
• Important ball game motif introduced
• Quiché names: Hunahpu and Xbalanque
• Story begins that their father and uncle are summoned to Xibalba (the underworld) by the Lords of the Underworld. The father and uncle are killed, pregnant mother flees from Xibalba. The twin sons grow up to get revenge, defeating the lords of the Underworld in the ballgame.

• First meeting between Hero Twins and Lord of Underworld illustrated on vase (above).

The Xibalan Ballgames

• Mayan rulers emulated heroism of Hero twins on ball field.
• Ballgame story
• [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjLUDMTJnAI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjLUDMTJnAI)
  – Ancient Mayan ball game played by hitting a heavy rubber ball through a stone ring with only the hips.
Popol Vuh: Iconographic Antecedents

• Many of characters and episodes from Popol Vuh depicted on Maya ceramics

Howler Monkey God (top), Divine Gods creating universe (bottom)
Mythological Underpinnings of Caves, Pyramids and Temples

- Caves, connected by *Cenotes* (bodies of water connected underground) considered sacred “doors to the underworld”
- Validity of Popol Vuh reinforced with discovery of frieze at Chiapas in 1997 – WAS written by Indian converts.
- Temple of Kukulkan (Quetzalcoatl) – named after plumed serpent god – 9 levels

Freize at temple at Xunantunich (above), Temple of Kukulkan at Chichen Itza
Mythological and Cosmological Underpinnings of Caves, Pyramids and Temples

- Pyramids are perfectly aligned to reflect planets
- The all-encompassing Ceiba tree represents underworld, physical world and spiritual world
Popol Vuh in Modern Context

- Famous science-fiction novels *The Haunted Mesa* by Louis L’Amour and *A Wrinkle In Time* by Madeline L’Engel both borrow myths and legends from the Popol Vuh.
- Modern animated version of creation myth by Patricia Amlin shown in many an educational context: [http://youtu.be/InjpJADFcZc](http://youtu.be/InjpJADFcZc)
- Modern day Mayans (20,000 living in southern California) infuse Catholic teachings with traditional beliefs contained in the Popol Vuh.
Chilam Balam: Book of Prophecy, History and Myth

• Historical texts and prophecies tied to Mayan calendar.

• Creation mythology tied to k’atun 11 Ahau

• Mayan Medicine

Chilam Blam de Chumayel, ca 1775
"This is the remembrance of how Hunab Ku, supreme Deity, with Oxlahum Tihu, third deity, immense deity, came . . . to say his word to the Ah Kines, Sacerdotes of the solar cult, Prophets, Chalames Balames, Wizard-Interpreters . . . the speaking taking place in the house of the Chilam, Interpreter. These words were of a warning and advisory nature, their meaning revealed . . . . The reason why it is called Chilam Interpreter is because the Chilam Balam, Wizard-Interpreter, went to bed stretched out, without moving or getting up from where he threw himself, in his own house. But no one saw the face or the form and size of who was talking on top of the house, straddling it . . . . They said that Hunab Ku, supreme Deity . . . ."

• Chilams: “That which is mouth”
  – “That which prophesizes”
• Balam: “jaguar” or “wizard”
Chilam Balam: Book of the Prophesies

• “Those who have no father or who have no house”
  – Refers to the act of prophesizing while lying down with back on the ground
• “Those who say they will come to enter Christianity[...] they will be swept away”
• “How it will be will be seen. It will be the time of pain, weeping and misery. It is what is to come.”

Originally written as prophecies about the return of Quetzalcóatl (Kukulkán, the plumed serpent god), the meaning was changed after Spanish conquest to be interpreted as predicting the arrival of the Spanish.

K’atun = 7200 days
Chilam Balam, continued

- Much of what we know about the Chilam Balam can be credited to Mayanists Barrera Vásquez and Silvia Rendón
- Compiler: Juan José Hoil (name appears on p. 81 of manuscript)
- Allusive nature of text accounts for some conjecture upon transcription
Sources

  - http://www.fhmh.ufl.edu/caribarch/ceiba.htm
- XIMÉNEZ, FRANCISCO Historia de la provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala de la orden de predicadores. Vol. 1/2. Mexico: Consejo Estatal para la Cultura y las Artes de Chiapas (1701)