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INTERACTIONS FROM TEXT TO COSMOS IN THE *POPOL VUH*

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**Summary:** The *Popol Vuh*, the Maya book of creation, is a paradoxical text. It was once possibly a hieroglyphic codex, lost with the Spanish destruction of works they could not read. It resurfaced as an alphabetic text that claims to have reimplanted the Ancient Word. This essay explores how this rescue of a cultural foundation was possible using a medium very different from the one of the original codex. The process points to an adaptive mechanism: Maya facility with interaction at the textual level as well as in their cultural vision expressed in their cosmogony. The essay examines these two processes in the *Popol Vuh*.

*Key words: Popol Vuh, Rabinal Achi, Maya cosmos, Maya textuality, oral tradition, interaction.*

The *Popol Vuh*, considered the Maya book of creation, did not use to be a fixed text. The only version of the *Popol Vuh* that we now have is at the Newberry Library in Chicago. It's text is fixed like a snapshot of something that once was in motion and to some extent still is.

Even in its present form there is immediate interaction. The manuscript is in two columns. The text in Quiché Maya is on the left and a translation to Spanish on the right. Two cultures face each other on the page from beginning to end of the book. In the inevitable imperfections of translation, there is difference in content between the two columns. Yet this snapshot of a text is all we now have. But from it we can envision how textuality functions for the Maya as a process of interaction. And this process doubles in the vision of the cosmos that the text presents.

Interaction is a process of connecting, which changes all parts linked. In other words, interaction keeps the participating elements in a state of flux and prevents them from settling down into a final fixed form. We will see that the *Popol Vuh* is an interactive text in two ways, at least. One level of interaction comes from its description of the creation of life of earth. Creation was not the result of an already made thought that commanded what should be. Instead it was a series of attempts with mistakes and corrections made along the way. The second level comes from how the book functions as a text. The Newberry manuscript of the *Popol Vuh* is the rescued alphabetic version of a narrative that may well have been originally a hieroglyphic codex, and these two writing systems are not equivalent. The text that survives carries in itself a dynamics.

The Newberry manuscript is in two versions. One column is in a Maya language with plenty of archaic terms and expressions so that uncertainties abound. The second column is in Spanish is the work of a priest, Francisco Ximénez (1965). We can understand this translation, but it comes from a different cultural point of view and has to...
be approached with special care. After all, the Spanish had tried to suppress the cosmological view expressed in the *Popol Vuh*, and paradoxically it was a Spanish priest who at the start of the eighteenth century translated that conflict for posterity.

An Interactive Cosmos

Life in the *Popol Vuh* emerges from a desire rather than a plan. The creators wanted to make beings that would figure out things as they went and discussed problems among themselves to decide on what to do next.

First, land was made. Then animals were fashioned. They multiplied and scattered. But the creators realized that this first attempt failed. The beings they created were unable to praise them. So they carried out a second attempt. This time they used mud. Yet the bodies fashioned from earth were senseless and quickly dissolved in the rain.

For the third attempt, the creators decided to use wood. This worked well at first. Wooden beings multiplied and scattered. But they were rather stilted and had no memory of their creators. The gods finally decided that this experiment was also a failure. The wooden creatures remained as monkeys while the creators gathered once again in council to discuss what to try next.

What we see in the *Popol Vuh* are gods interact with the stuff of creation to make things happen. Nature does not yield to their will. The work of trial-and-error is the way to improve on initial concepts. Since the gods are dealing with uncharted territory, they learn as they go. For the forth creation, after much discussion they selected maize as the prime ingredient. Four humans were fashioned. Conceptually, they were an instant success. The four humans had perfect understanding of everything. But the gods thought this was odd. These people were too good. The four thanked them so much that it raised suspicions of a takeover. So the gods decided that they had to put some imperfection into the humans. They obscured their vision to reduce human understanding. To make them less god-like they gave the humans sexuality and created four women so that they would multiply.

The humans remained quite happy although their wisdom had been curtailed. What the gods did not realize was that the humans managed to write down the ancient knowledge they once had. These were the writings of Tulan, which were passed to the next generation, and found their way through an unbroken chain of legitimacy into the *Popol Vuh* that we now have.

The writings of Tulan allowed the Maya to interact more effectively with their perceived creators. The mutual link was not broken. This is an ecological process of interaction. Since ancient times, the Maya continue to make offerings to their creators, not as inferior subjects appeasing their gods, but as part of a reciprocal need. It is a form
of co-adaptation that rebalances creation on the go so that life does not come to an end.

Approximately between the third and fourth creation begins a crucial sequence of events that will affect the fate of the humans. The *Popol Vuh* narrates what becomes the battle for light to illuminate the earth. It takes place on a different level of creation, yet interacts closely with the earth bound creations. Twin deities named *Hunahpu* and *Xbalanque* manage to defeat the dark Lords of *Xibalba* at a ball game in the underworld. Their father and uncle, also twins, were defeated before at the same game. The *Xibalbans* tricked them at every step and finally killed them. But this second generation of twins somehow managed to learn how to win from their ancestors. They inherited the wisdom to succeed. From this victory, the twins rise into the sky as the sun and the moon. This brings the first dawn upon the earth, which the descendents of the first four humans had long awaited. The twin deities had to go through two generations to learn how to defeat the forces of darkness so that there may be light for the sake of the rest of creation.

Maya creation is interactive play on several interconnected domains. There is a sense of participation at all levels. Nature in the form of acting gods is not fixed forever with rigid rules. On the contrary: it listens, reacts, and changes. Creation also co-evolves in reaction to the makings of the gods. This forms a loop of creation (Arata 2002). The loop links creator and creation in a reciprocal process of adaptive interaction. The *Popol Vuh* shows that creators are intimately linked to what they make. Will alone is not enough. They are not in full control. What they make shapes them as well. The creators of the *Popol Vuh* keep going back to council meetings to decide how to proceed based on the immediate results they had. Their vision is gradually realized in a give-and-take with the stuff of creation.

Once the cosmos has been set in motion, the responsibility of the created beings is to continue performing their functions to keep the entire complex universe in motion. This performance remains interactive. The parts have not been written in advance, nor are they determined. The function of the *Popol Vuh* is to maintain a memory of this interactive wisdom so that it may go on and keep the cosmos alive.

**An Interactive Text**

During the 16th century, Spanish missionaries set out to destroy Maya hieroglyphic codices to erase the memory of ancient ways thought to be sinful. Yet at the same time they taught the Maya to read and write using the Latin alphabet. This was meant to facilitate conversion. Converted Maya priests would be able to access the teachings of the Church directly and help spread the doctrine. Unknowingly, the Spanish gave the Maya a tool to transliterate what was being destroyed. The *Popol Vuh* we have now is an alphabetic text that was a product of this paradox. But the rescue of the *Popol Vuh* involved a metamorphosis from a complex polysemic hieroglyphic system that mixed pictograms with syllabic writing, into a far more restrictive alphabetic system, then further adapted to the Quiché Maya language. The two systems were simply not equivalent.

The narrative voice of the *Popol Vuh* gives
an idea of how the rescue across mediums was possible. It hinges on a different conception of writing. More than a conveyor of specific messages, the Maya text provides a link to a legitimacy. In the case of the *Popol Vuh*, we are told that this legitimacy goes all the way back to the writings of Tulan, to the wisdom of the first four humans. This wisdom is an understanding, a perfect vision of how things are. Its expression was verbal as well as pictorial.

To write, the Maya had hieroglyphics supported by oral tradition. The Latin alphabet functions much differently. The text dictates the reading. No oral tradition needs to enter the process of reading. This makes the alphabet more precise and independent so that even a machine can read it. But the alphabetic system cannot capture a polysemic expression. So, what the ancient writing underwent was not so much a change in form that would leave a legitimate message unaltered. It was rather a reimplantation, a regrounding of a legitimacy. In other words, the alphabetic version of the *Popol Vuh* is more of a transcription of a reading of the original hieroglyphic text. The alphabetic medium functions like a soil, as it were, for the sprouting of the message. Naturally, we can imagine that many details could be directly translated to the alphabetic medium, such as historical events, names, and sequences of events. But the remains open and depended on the act of reading. The alphabetic form is restrictive in the sense that it marks its own reading. Interpretation may vary, but the words remain clear and distinct, so that every reading of an alphabetic text comes out linguistically the same. Not so with hieroglyphs: the reader fills in the gaps between glyphs. In effect, Maya scribes appropriated European textuality and used it for their own purposes, perhaps in the way poets appropriate their own language to express through it what is more than a message.

When Dennis Tedlock undertook his translation of the *Popol Vuh*, he sought the assistance of Andrés Xiloj, a Quiché Maya who still practiced native traditions. Xiloj composed a prayer to help with the reading. This is part of the prayer in translation:

> And may this reading of the *Popol Vuh* come out clear as dawn, and may the sifting of ancient times be complete in my heart, in my head; and make my guilt vanish, my grandmothers, grandfathers, and however many souls of the dead there may be, you who speak with the Heart of Sky and Earth, may all of you together give strength to the reading I have undertaken. (Tedlock 1996: 18-19)

Xiloj saw meaning as a clarity that may or may not emerge from the text depending on the quality of the interaction between the reader and the words. The text itself is an intermediary for the emergence of a clear vision that does not come from interpretation, but from the ability to establish a harmony with the text through the act of reading. But the most significant part of Xiloj’s prayer is the revelation of a function: a reading of the text can make ancestral times manifest. This is the domain of the Ancient Word. It is the voice of the ancestors, which emerges through a clear vision of the text.

A Maya book functions much like a visual
entity. It is a place to see an account rather than to gain information about the account as it is written. In fact, the Maya use the same term for writing and for painting. The Popol Vuh was called an “ilbal,” which means: a “place to see.” Dennis Tedlock noted that if the alphabetic Popol Vuh were a direct transcription of a hieroglyphic text, the result may well have been a text “that would have made little sense to anyone but a fully trained diviner and performer” (Tedlock 1996: 30).

As Xiloj indicated, a successful reading is not then just a repetition of the written words but one that manages to recreate a vision. This sense of clarity recalls the perfect vision of the first humans who came to life in the fourth creation described in the Popol Vuh. They were endowed from the beginning with a full understanding of nature. For them to understand was to see clearly. Among the first tasks that the sons of the first four humans undertook was to travel to their place of origin to obtain certain objects which legitimized them as rulers. Among these emblems of lordship were the writings of Tulan, which provided an account of their origin and showed the perfect vision of their fathers before the gods weakened their eyes. Those ancient writings constituted a place to see all the way back to the moment of creation.

The writings about Tulan became the “popol vuh” of subsequent lords who used the book to make decisions. It allowed them to look into the past, but also into the future. The “popol vuh” was a Book of Time.

The term “popol vuh” suggests then a special type of book rather than the title of a specific book. Actually, the text we know as Popol Vuh is untitled. It was Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg who in 1861 translated it to French and first entitled it Popol Vuh. The term chosen for title comes from the Quiché Maya text where it appears first as “popo vuh”. Tedlock translates it as “Council Book,” which is the most accepted rendition and the one Ximénez used in his Spanish version.

The Maya translator Adrián Chávez (1979) noted that “popo” or “popol” is a variation of “pop”. It refers to the mat, a Maya symbol of authority. The mat also denotes the council of lords who sit on mats during their deliberations. But “pop” is also the first month in the Maya calendar. According to Chávez, the meaning of “popol vuh” would be “Book of Time” or “Book of Events”. Naturally, “Book of the Mat” or “Council Book” are also possible translations because of the multiple and compatible meanings of “pop” Maya writing has abundant word puns that play on coincidences of divergent meanings, like the two natures of “pop”. Rather than restrict the rich play of Maya terms, it is more important to establish a general direction for the flow of meaning.

Instead of considering the Popol Vuh as either a Book of Council or a Book of Time, it can be seen both ways. Maya words are crossroads of meanings. Michael Coe (1993) summed up this condition indicating that the Maya are not “either/or people”. Dennis Tedlock noted that the Maya use dualities in a complementary and interpenetrating way rather than as mutually exclusive (Tedlock 1996: 59).

Perhaps one of the most striking images of an ancient reading of a text is found in several Yaxchilan lintels. Lintel 24 shows a woman known as Lady Xoc holding...
delicately a rope that connects her mouth with what I suggest is an open codex viewed laterally, rather than simple sheets of paper as has been previously suggested (Arata 1997). It has the typical spots of a jaguar pelt cover used on codices. The rope graces the surface of the book. She does not look at the text, but gazes straight ahead. The emergence of the Ancient Word does not call for a direct reading. Instead the ancestral world is called to emerge by linking the text and her mouth with the cord. She becomes the spokesperson of the text.

The Maya revered books as ancestral objects that transferred to the reader the ability to see things clearly again. For example, Francisco Ximénez narrates in his Historia de la Provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala the story of a codex that had been passed from generation to generation. A stick was used to turn the pages, out of reverence, so that hands would not touch them (1965: 132).

The interpretation of Yaxchilan lintel 24 has been previously of a bloodletting ritual rather than a reading (Schele et al 1986).

Bloodletting hinges of the interpretation of glyph T712 to mean bloodletting. Unfortunately T712 has been interpreted by believing that the image such as that of lintel 24 represents bloodletting in the first place. The argument is circular. Proskouriakoff had already suggested that such glyph has no precise meaning (1973: 171).

A similar tendency toward association of Maya culture with heart sacrifice appears in the Maya play Rabinal Achi. The French priest Brasseur de Bourbourg was the first to bring the dramatic text to Europe. In his translation, the play ends with the protagonist, a Quiché warrior, killed through heart sacrifice. In the most recent translation of the play from its original, Dennis Tedlock argues that the Quiché warrior has his head cut off. The ending is not a sacrifice but an execution. The entire play functions as a trial. Tedlock notes that the exotic view of Mesoamerican gods with an appetite for blood and torn-out human hearts requires a major revision (Tedlock 2003: 4-5). Likewise, the view of Yaxchilan lintel 24 as bloodletting cannot be canonical, especially since the argument for bloodletting is tautological. What the episodes of creation in the Popol Vuh, along with the Rabinal Achi and the Yaxchilan lintels show, is that Maya beliefs are far subtler than the exotic offerings of blood and hearts the gods.

The realm of the ancestors, the Ancient Word, then emerges from the codex in the shape of the vision serpent shown in Yaxchilan lintel 25. In lintel 15, the vision serpent appears to speak to the reader, Lady Xoc. The fish-in-hand glyph associated with such vision serpents was previously thought to denote bloodletting. It is now believed to mean “conjured” (Schele 1993 et al: 208), “called up” or “manifested” (445). Nikolai Grube suggested a phonetic spelling of the fish-in-hand glyph as tzak , meaning “to grasp” and “to exorcise” (461). The codex becomes a place from which this vision is exorcised.

This ritual function of the cord appears symbolized eight centuries later in the Books of Chilam Balam, especially in Chumayel:

The rope shall descend, the cord shall descend. There comes from heaven the word of the true path. Through it will come the fulfillment of the word of the Lord of heaven,
The cord is an umbilicus that conveys the word of the Ancestors, the sky-earth. As shown in the Yaxchilan lintels, an actual cord may have been used in the performance of texts. Cords still have ritual use in Mesoamerica, although no longer in connection to reading. Instead, a special prayer may precede the approach of the text to facilitate its flow. When Andrés Xiloj helped Dennis Tedlock understand the *Popol Vuh*, he chose to invoke the spirit of the ancestors and of the sky-earth to help make the reading of the come out “clear as dawn”. It was as if he stretched the ancient umbilical cord connecting him to his ancestors, to help make the vision of the text emerge clear.

A Maya text does not necessarily have to be read as long as the book is present to legitimize the performance of its text. The ethnographer Allan Burns recounts what a contemporary Yucatec Maya scribe had to show about their use of books:

> In a small village near Señor, I met one of the two community secretaries who kept the sacred book and copied them over for future generations. These books of prayers, incantations, and historic anecdotes, the books of Chilam Balam, are still read from, or rather performed, every year or two in some villages. I did not see their performance, but the scribe of the village told me that he and his counterpart from another village stand before the temple where the Cross is kept and take turns reading from the books. I asked him to illustrate how they are read. He used the notebook as a mnemonic for his performance. Each line of the notebook contained some of the words of his counsel, but he did not read each line verbatim. Instead he elaborated what was written down, and so his verbal example was much longer than the words contained on the written pages. (Burns, 1983: 72-73)

This textual performance illustrates how the *Popol Vuh* might have been read, so to speak, from an ancient hieroglyphic codex. The primary text may have looked like any of the five surviving pre-Columbian codices. In the ancient codices, the phonetic and logographic glyphs supported by pictures provided the raw data for the scribe’s elaboration of a narrative, for th...
in a strictly alphabetic text. Nor is creation the passive result of a centralized will and the rule of invariant laws.

The *Popol Vuh* points to a writing that captured the rhythms and patterns of the Ancient Word in a fluid way. The *Popol Vuh* belongs to a textual practice in which display, performance and re-creation are vital. As far as interpretation is concerned, the Ancient Word has no definite place in the text. We could envision it as a voice that speaks through the text and yet does not belong entirely to an oral tradition either.

Such flexibility helps understand how the Maya adapted to the Spanish colonization and managed to preserve a good deal of their culture rather intact at one level, although transformed at others. Mediums of expression changed, but the belief that certain basic aspects of the culture remained, helped prevent disintegration. The transformations of Maya culture that we see in the *Popol Vuh* show an interaction with the forces of change rather than total defiance or submission. What provided continuity as hieroglyphs gave way to the alphabet, was the use of oral tradition to interact with the written medium. This functioned as a flexible collective memory that helped bridge profound differences in mediums.

Oral tradition is an ongoing dialogue without a center. Likewise, the Maya cosmos evolves through a dialogue between its components. There is no final fate or text. There is no irrevocable destiny or meaning that would stop the process of adapting to changes and transforming with the flow of things.

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**Resumen**

El *Popol Vuh*, el libro Maya de la creación, es un texto paradójico. Posiblemente fuera escrito en forma jeroglífica y se haya perdido cuando los Españoles destruyeron lo que no podían leer. Resurgió como texto alfabético, indicando que logró volver a plantar la Antigua Palabra. Este ensayo explora cómo fue posible rescatar una base cultural usando un medio de escritura muy diferente del original. El rescate marca la presencia de un mecanismo de adaptación: los Mayas tienen la capacidad de interactuar al nivel textual como también al nivel cosmogónico. El ensayo examina esto dos procesos en el *Popol Vuh*.