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Fighting the gods: the *Popol Vuh* (or why the Conquest of Mexico could not repeat itself with the Maya)

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The Maya, 6,000,000 strong, have maintained traditions which played an important part in forming the mentality of resistance; hence, there is a long history of Maya colonial rebellion, in marked contrast to the overall panorama of Aztec submission. The philosophical roots of the Maya attitude appear through an analysis of the sacred text *Popol Vuh*, texts of coded Zuyua riddles of a ritualistic and pre-Columbian nature, and legends of the Maya Xtabay mythological witch. The Maya legends influence on legends of colonial resistance is evident among the Guetarre Indians of Costa Rica. The marked divergence of Maya and Aztec attitudes is apparent even in plays of the 16th century; it's a history of mentalities that viewed the universe differently. The marked tendency towards rebellion present in pre-Christian Maya thought constitutes an important component in the formation of Maya revolts—the longest series of indigenous revolts recorded in all areas of the New World.

Los mayas, quienes suman 6 millones en la actualidad, han mantenido tradiciones que jugaron un papel importante en la formación de una mentalidad de resistencia: de ahí su larga historia de rebeliones coloniales, en contraste con la sumisión que mostraron los aztecas. Las raíces filosóficas de la actitud maya se analizan a través del texto sagrado *Popol Vuh*, de textos zuyua de adivinanzas codificadas (de naturaleza ritualística y precolombina) y de leyendas de la bruja mitológica maya Xtabay. La influencia de las leyendas mayas en las leyendas de resistencia colonial es evidente entre los indios guetarre de Costa Rica. La marcada diferencia entre las actitudes maya y azteca se evidencia incluso en dramas del siglo XVI; es una historia de mentalidades que concebieron al mundo de manera diferente. La marcada tendencia a la rebelión presente en el pensamiento maya pre-cristiano constituye un componente importante en el surgimiento de futuras rebeliones en la zona maya, donde tuvo lugar la más larga serie de revueltas indígenas en todo el continente americano.
Historical Context of the Popul Vuh

Since Bishop Diego de Landa, in the name of the Spanish Crown, ordered the burning of thousands of Maya hieroglyphic books in 1562, our understanding of their intellectual development is limited: only three codices survived, with a fourth one debated for its authenticity. Despite this, the post-Conquest Maya were still close enough to their roots to convey a relatively pure vision of their worldview. They have left us the *Popul Vuh*, recognized as one of the world’s great mythical-historical epics, and the first post-Columbian Native American literary work. The *Popul Vuh* demonstrates perfectly the Maya ambivalence towards authority, a fact made even stronger since the story is written down after the establishment of Spanish rule in Central America.

Written and compiled in the mid-1560’s, based on religious parables whose origin goes back to the pre-Classic period (200-900 AD) according to the testimony of Maya hieroglyphics and art, the *Popul Vuh* recounts a struggle against evil, as all great epics do. As opposed to many epics, the Maya story is filled with humor, with cynicism, and bereft of any hatred of the “other”: the Hero Twins of the scriptures are themselves as much the offspring of the Lords of Xibalba as they are of the Creator God.

The anonymous author of the *Popul Vuh* (it is unanimously regarded as the work of one author because of a notable, identical narrative style running through the entire work), lived somewhere in the area of Chichicastenango and/or Quesaltenango, as the work is recorded in the Quiche Maya language (and the dialects specific to those regions). Written in Latin letters, the work is divided into three distinct segments. It deals with a) creation, b) the struggles between the Creation Twins and the Lords of the Underworld and c) the adventures of the Twins’ descendents, certain branches of the Quiche Maya. Maya sages did not view the genesis of their people as simultaneous with the birth of the universe, as did the ancient Egyptians. Their mathematical calculations, which hearkened back millions of years, told them that the universe was far older than they were. Regarding their concept of the Ages of Creation, the moment when the Creator God separated the Milky Way from the oceans and sky and sea were differentiated, the Maya placed themselves in a relatively young position.
The Weltanschauung enshrined in the Popul Vuh is not the pristine bubble of the Classic Period temple priests. Nor is it the syncretic, colonialized variant of Mayan religion that the Spanish empire tolerated in the “indianized” ceremonies of Central American churches. It is a testimony to the Maya ingeniousness and self-reliance that weathered the ethnocide of the Spanish Empire, and the incessant squabbling of their own princes. At the beginning of the 18th century, Quiche Maya elders near Quesaltenango revealed the existence of the then over two centuries old manuscript to the Spanish priest Xavier Ximenez. Due to Ximenez’ steadfast support of the Maya in their disputes with the Colonial powers, the elders trusted him, more than they trusted local Maya functionaries who collaborated with the worst anti-Indian abuses. Ximenez was entrusted with the most valued possession of the community.

The Popul Vuh explained the most prominent aspects of pre-Christian Maya theology, and the Spaniards were friends enough to respect their perspective, although it could not harmonize with their own. Father Ximenez worked with the elders, translating the hieratical, pictographic-phonetic writing of 16th century Quiche into the colloquial dialect of lower Guatemala. Then the priest translated the epic into elegant literary Spanish, a labor of love so beautifully done that the “Ximenez” version is still quoted by Maya and non-Maya scholars as the most exact and authoritative edition.

Ximenez understood 300 years ago what late 20th century epigraphers conclusively proved: that the older Maya language was indeed phonetic as well as symbolic, and that spoken Maya languages would help in deciphering those “mysterious” glyphs. In the early 1990’s, Yale’s George Stuart proved that the “carved figures” of the Copan palaces and temples were not abstract designs, but rather the records of a dynasty 16 rulers long, commencing in 426 of the Common Era. This Mayan scholar was following in Ximenez’ footsteps and breaking ranks with those who felt, like the famed Erich Thompson, that no Native American culture was somehow capable of producing a written, literary tongue.

Stuart showed that the sovereign’s plumed macaw headdress spelled out, through a combination of syllabic components as in Chinese, the name of the founder of the Copan dynasty: Yax Cuk Mo. Real people, puns, double meanings, Stuart demonstrated what
Ximenez had stated, to almost universal derision: the Maya could be classified, in the most elitist of Western terms, as highly literate.

The *Popul Vuh* is quite an irreverent "holy text". Like the enigmatic expressions on the faces of Maya carvings, a smirk often lurks beneath the seriousness. And in the second chapter, which recounts the story of the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Ixbalanque, the text resonates with a scathing laughter directed at the gods. The text conveys a message of hope that would be more easily understood by existentialist humanists, such as Albert Camus, than it would be by any theologian. Force of will and intelligence forge destiny. Allah, Christ, and Jehovah instill fear into the hearts of their believers, because the penalty for denying them is dreadful; the Aztecs would never have doubted the need to appease their pantheon; in the *Popul Vuh*, the situation is reversed. The Lords of Xibalba, the Maya underworld, attempt to frighten humanity, but they fail. Their "Divine Majesties" are reduced to idiocy. The Creation Twins descended to the depths of the netherworld, but they returned unscathed- a voyage, quite literally, to Hell and back. Unlike the monotheistic religions or the Aztec faith, the twins achieved their own salvation by defying Divine Authority. Through their actions, they build a new identity for themselves and the rest of humanity.

In Maya philosophy, humanity takes precedence over submission to the gods. The individual, as in Western naturalist philosophy, constitutes the central focus. The *Popul Vuh* reflects, therefore, that long line of thought already made palpable in Maya sculpture: life revolves around a historical rather than religious axis. Religious rites figure as a backdrop illuminating political events. Gods are invoked as justifications, when necessary, and their commands are not always heeded. Since, by the post-Conquest period, Maya thinkers were becoming disenchanted with their own duties, they took less refuge in the esoteric. That is why the Maya, unlike the Aztec, did not interpret the Spaniards' arrival as divine anger. The Conquest was, to the Maya, just another manifestation of the Lords of Xibalba, of adversity and suffering, in the Middle World. And it would be overcome, just as the Lords of Xibalba were.

If the Maya scoffed at their own gods, why would they behave differently towards other Holy Beings? Aztecs succumbed to Spanish
propaganda as both peoples shared the same psychology of fear towards the metaphysical. The Conquistadors were equipped to vanquish hostile divinities (they were not so far removed from 800 years of Holy War between Muslims and Christians on the Iberian peninsula). Opposing gods were familiar territory, but how does a Conqueror react in the face of the Maya cosmic cynicism?

How do you convince someone to bow to your God-given authority if the person is convinced that the Almighty is not exactly All-Knowing? Aztecs and Spaniards could exchange one set of terrors for another: an eternity of dark mountains and obsidian blades, or the Devil's torments of the Damned, fused together easily. The post-Conquest Maya were now no longer afraid, and so their thought was not at home in the field of absolute religious ideologies. Nietzsche would have felt at home with the author of the Popul Vuh:

now that all structures are destroyed and we have come to the desert, we must discover how to live there, with no help from the gods.  

Outline of the Adventures of the Hero Twins

The story commences with the tragedy of the father and uncle of the Creation Twins: 1-Hunahpu and 7-Hunahpu. They have been executed by the Lords of Xibalba for angering, and then, most significantly for them, fearing the Xiballans. For the Maya, the World was a three-tiered universe in which soon to be reincarnated souls gestated in the nebulous, subterranean womb of the Netherworld of Xibalba. In Maya reasoning, for souls to be successfully reborn they had to develop their own intelligence so as to outwit malicious gods. That being done, the souls would ascend into the celestial abode and then again down the branches of the World Tree: our own infuriating and exhilarating Middle World. This is life, and the process repeats itself.

1-Hunahpu and 7-Hunahpu were trapped in Xibalaba because they had surrendered to the terror of Xibalba. Fear was the only element assuring the triumph of the lords of Xibalba, since their magical artifice was itself quite deficient. When Xibalba's power was perceived to be strong, it became so. Hindu philosophy speaks of the world being a product of our own illusions, coincidentally “maya”. 20th century Spanish philosophers, such as Jose Ortega y Gasset, spoke of the power of human attitudes to create behaviors, which in turn mold our life circumstances.
Behavioral psychologists such as Erich Fromm spoke of this as a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” In the Popul Vuh, our perceptions alter destiny. We are no longer prisoners of Fate, because the Creation Twins will not share the same perceptions of Xibalban power as their forbears.

The Lords of Xibalba attempted to terrify the Creation Twins, Hunahpu and Ixbalanque, as they had the previous generation. Unexpectedly, the Creation twins see the Xibalbans as ludicrous, laughable fools, not awe-inspiring denizens of the Realm of the Night. The Lords of Xibalba were only as frightening as you allowed them to be. This story provides the scheme wherein we may understand Maya resolve in the face of the Conquest: having watched the first kingdom, the Aztecs' Tenochtitlan, dissolve with fear before the gun-wielding Europeans, the Maya were determined not to repeat the Aztecs' error. Firepower was unknown in the Americas, and its appearance was indeed an inexplicable horror. That did not mean that one should kneel before those who wielded these strange, otherworldly weapons. So the Spanish Xibalbans had come with firearms but, beyond the immediate panic produced by that novelty, they bore a suspicious resemblance to Aztec militarists and home grown Maya warlords, all of whose destruction and greed were already too familiar.

From the 5th century of the Common Era, the Maya maintained contacts with the center of Mesoamerican civilization: Teotihuacan. This city, “where men become gods” was the capital of the Toltec culture, whose philosophy is based on Mayan belief. The Toltecs spoke of the need to disentangle oneself from the welter of “mitote”, literally, intertwining reeds of a dense mat. This is the fabric of misconceptions that we have been taught since birth (our social conditioning, psychologists would say). In the Popul Vuh, the Creation Twins manage to unravel the “mitote” (similar to the “maya” of the Hindus) of the gods, liberating themselves, and all humanity, from the power of self-delusion, and our own misgivings and fear.

Hunahpu and Ixbalanque annoyed the gods, but the Twins did not tremble; they chuckled. The Lords of Xibalba had the easy confidence of those who had already triumphed. Why should these two differ from their unfortunate father and uncle? Even when the Twins undergo sacrifice, their faith in their imminent victory transcends Death, and they re-emerge as “fish-men” from the Rivers
of Xibalba. The Lords were not prepared, and neither was the would-be Conqueror, Pedro de Alvarado. The Twins had learned from their elders.

The Twins outwitted the Xibalbans' sacrificial knife (obsidian rock). Its sharp blade cuts like the most malicious gossip and is thus called by the Maya “chay abah,” the stone that talks. It is an oracle whose words cannot be questioned, because it is the finality of Death. However, if death is merely a passage to another incarnation, it is not so final, and Hunahpu and Ixbalanque do not fear it.

Why did the Lords wish to torture the Creation Twins and, by inference, punish humanity? Was it because the youngsters’ noisy ball playing had enraged the gods’ sensitive ears? Blessed with a contrary nature, Hunahpu and Ixbalanque immensely enjoyed giving the gods a headache. In the rubber ball courts of Mesoamerica, the Maya played a game that mimicked the cycle of Venus, the swinging sphere and symbol of Duality. The ball was Venus, the Morning and Evening Star, the complementary forces that the Xibalbans were trying to upset. And the Twins were Humanity, “playing the game” in an eloquent sense, living.

Otherworldly migraines bring dangerous consequences, and the Twins thump the heavy ball around until the Xibalbans decide to kidnap the Two and put a stop to all this nonsense. The ominous Lords of the Night, as the Maya refer to them, force Hunahpu and Ixbalanque to “play with them,” thinking they will be easily defeated, but the Twins are in collusion with the forces of Nature: always superior to advocates of terror and superstition. The Twins befriend a rabbit that obligingly poses as a bouncing ball. This ball bounces higher than any other, and the Xibalabans embark on a wild chase after the little animal. Control of the adventure is entirely in the hands of the Twins. “We are such stuff as dreams are made of,” wrote Shakespeare, and our dreams and perceptions can make fools of us all. Even a somber god of the underworld looks like a clown when pursuing a rabbit that he assumes is a bouncing ball. By losing their dignity, the Lords lose their ability to terrify.

Our Twins are saved by their haughtiness. Such strength of will is immortalized in the “beheading” episode of the Popol Vuh. When Hunahpu is decapitated by a malicious vampire bat, Ixbalanque
responds by reattaching his brother’s head. This quest is accomplished in stages. First, a turtle is employed as a replica of the severed organ. (Maya Creation myths told of the Maize God sprouting from the turtle’s shell, representing the primeval waters, and the life arising from them.) Then the Hurricane, called by the Maya “the heart of the sky,” paints features on the creature’s shell. The ruse tricks the Xibalbans, never too bright to begin with, and far too blind to distinguish between authenticity and lies. While the Lords rejoice with Hunahpu’s head, (the tortoise shell), Ixbalanque, with the aid of the more benevolent Creator Deity, Itzamna, is busily reassembling Hunahpu’s body. Bravery and inventiveness open the doorway to Eternal Life. Fear does not paralyze Ixbalanque’s reactions. Because he perceives a reality deeper than the visible—in this case beheading, he does not recognize Death as such, and Hunahpu can be resurrected.

Obsidian blades are impotent against the celestial World Tree, with its intertwined Upper, Lower and Middle Worlds. The Lords of Xibalba represent the mundane folly of life and death; as in Hindu thought, there is another, spiritual reality, behind the visible. Though the Popul Vuh criticizes certain aspects of organized religion, it is by no means an atheistic tract. Like Spinoza’s God, this belief cannot be confined within the rigidity of an institution, which makes the Popul Vuh so much a post-Classic Maya work. No Classic Period (200-900 CE) Maya would have dared author such a work. In that time, the Maya theocracy would have destroyed both the work and its author. In the post-10th-century Maya world, secular governing councils had replaced the priesthoods, and the ceremonial centers, such as Tikal and Copan, were abandoned. Shamans administered to the spiritual needs of the Maya populations; but they did not control the comportment of the individual Maya.

Ridicule defeats the Lords of Xibalba. Ordeals are transformed into battles of wits, with the Twins cleverness and creativity overcoming the supernatural bullying. Their intelligence even prompts the Creator God, Itzamna, to collaborate with Ixbalanque in order to revive Hunahpu. This god, also known as the god of the scribes, of writing and the intellect, apparently preferred the Twins to his own Divine Counterparts... (from an intellectual point of view, the Xibalbans were fairly embarrassing). While many theologies speak of a struggle...
against the gods, only the Maya allow the struggle to be won. Cakchiquel Maya stories tell how fire was robbed from the celestial world, a fact celebrated by the Maya. How deeply this contrasts with the sufferings of Prometheus!

The decapitated Twin symbolizes our impotent, “other” self: our nightmares, our weaknesses. Stepping back and looking at ourselves, we may, like Ixbalanque, (the twin whose head is still on his shoulders) rectify the problem. It is too terrifying to view our own mortality, and even in dreams we usually wake before actually witnessing our own end. The Popul Vuh grants us a mirror image of our own death: that of our identical twin. It is close enough for discomfort but still cloaked in a certain “distance.”

When the Lords of Xibalba force the Twins to sacrifice an innocent third party, the Twins help the victim. By virtue of their own magic, the Twins defy the Xibalbans and revive the unfortunate subject.¹⁰ Later, Hunahpu and Ixbalanque stage a masterpiece of theatre which plays upon the Xibalbans’ stupidest flaw: their sense of omnipotence. They invite the Lords to submit to the “chay abah,” the stone that talks— the sacrificial obsidian knife.¹¹ The Lords cannot confess to fearing death. How could they, when they were too proud to admit that they could not differentiate between a rabbit and a rubber ball, or Hunahpu’s head and a painted shell? Proudly (and stupidly) they spread themselves before the obsidian knife. If Hunahpu and Ixbalanque had resurrected a mere mortal, how could they dare not do the same for the gods? Their conceit, and their obtuseness, proves their Achilles heel: for, as the reader has been able to glean, Hunahpu and Ixbalanque sacrifice the gods, and leave them dead!

The Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado did not know of the myths upon which the Popul Vuh was based: had he done so, he might never have accepted so eagerly Hernán Cortes’ proposal, in December 1523, that Alvarado “subdue” the Maya as Cortes had done to the Aztec. Alvarado was convinced that the Maya would bow to his horrifying reputation: after all Alvarado had been scolded, by Cortes himself, for his massacre of over two hundred unarmed Aztec noblemen in 1520.¹²

His reputation was known among the Maya, but it only produced disgust, not fear. The Maya did not find any equivalence between military might and Divine favor: whereas the Aztec accepted his loss
as the will of Heaven, the Maya had no time for these metaphysical thoughts. They simply had to learn (and would learn, with the help of Spanish renegades) how to use the exploding weapons of the Conquistadors.

Alvarado was unnerved to discover that the Maya were worse than pagans. They were doubters. Even had they viewed the Conquistador as semi-divine, it would hardly have helped matters. Alvarado could not teach these people to reverently adore new gods when they had already killed their own. Religious skepticism determined the course of Maya political resistance to the Conquistadors. This fact would manifest itself in the work of an anonymous Spanish colonial playwright, who would forever immortalize Alvarado’s confrontation with this Amerindian nation in “The Conquest of Quesaltenango.”

The connection between folklore and politics. Zuyua: Nursery Rhymes with an Incendiary Twist

In the drama of the Conquest of the Americas, European and Native American mythology often shaped reactions that determined national destiny. The Spaniards and the Portuguese attained the support of Pope Alexander VI, in the Bull Intercaetem of 1493, so that Christ supposedly guided military conquests. The Aztecs and the Incas were tortured by legends of a white god from the East (the Incas called him “Viracocha,” the Aztecs, Quetzalcoatl), a legend which aggravated the horror which the Conquistadors’ coming had ignited. The Maya did not attempt to insert the Conquistadors into their already existing cosmology, as the Aztecs and the Spaniards did with each other. Rather, they used their folklore to strengthen cultural memories in the face of the colonial barrage.

From the 1520’s on, the Maya elaborated a linguistic code which exasperated Spanish missionaries, known as “Zuyua.” Appearing to be a form of gibberish, it was a reworking of several Maya dialects that enabled them to transmit, clandestinely, elements of their pre-Christian theology. Zuyua rhymes dealt often with themes of cosmic regeneration whose sexual content would have scandalized the Church.

Zuyua fanciful word-plays were impenetrable to the “outsider”: the Colonial-Church alliance. Taking advantage of colonial perceptions of the Maya as naïve, they cloaked their forbidden spiritual teachings...
in outwardly childish verse, as what was deemed nonsense would not invite scrutiny by the authorities. Following the Spanish destruction of their entire library in Mani in 1562, Zuyua codes gained in importance. It preserved an annihilated tradition: the hymns of their pre-Columbian rulers. Prior to the first Spanish invasion of Maya territory in 1524 (though other incursions had occurred earlier), Maya lords were blessed by their scribes with a series of cryptic riddles. The imaginative language of the Zuyua was attributed by the Spaniards to the infantile fantasy of these "Indians"; in reality, these verbal gems transmitted the ceremonies and outlook of a vanished social order, constituting part of the cultural repository or, in Jung’s phrase, the "collective memory" of the Maya. During the 16th and 17th centuries, this heritage was perpetuated in the caves of Yucatán and the hills of the Guatemalan highlands, remote and "hostile" areas where the long arm of Spain’s Inquisition-run censorship usually did not care to reach.

We have a hint of the "Zuyua" poetic embellishments in the 16th century drama "The Conquest of Quesaltenango". The prince Tecun Uman declares he is a child of the sun, the symbol used by nearly all Mesoamerican civilizations to denote royalty, adding, in good Maya style (the play itself was written by a Spaniard who had observed the Maya closely) the force of his own intelligence to that of his exalted lineage: before the 10th century, Maya kings viewed their ancestry as celestially based. From that century onwards, the councils which would appoint the Maya rulers demanded that the nobility of the Sun also be mixed with natural intellect. If not wise enough, a ruler would be, and often was, overthrown. In the post-Conquest 16th century Maya text, written in Latin letters but from the Quiche Maya tongue, we see an intriguing mixture of the Divine Sun and natural wit. A Maya king asks for the sun as a gift:

Primero faltará el sol
que el mi padre te engañe
Yo he de oscurecer el sol
a fuerza de mis encantos

First the sun will
vanish from the skies
since my heavenly
father has tricked you
I myself shall make
dark the sun by the
potency of my magic...13
This is the first query which they put to him.....
He will inquire about the banquet.
The high priest will say to his acolytes,

Those of the divine axe-Bring me the sun!
Bring me the sun, oh my children,
To watch it glowing here upon my plate!
The lance of the high cross will kneel
In the deepest recesses of the heart,
The heart where Yax-Bolon, the green jaguar,
Is drinking blood. This is the speech of Zuyua...11

Creation devoured the Creator; Man ate the Sun, humans gobbled down their own life force, the life force of the gods and the very symbol of Divine Kingship, the Sun. Had the gods' progeny run amok in the Mayan cosmovision? Or was this an ode to the high priest dining on a fried egg (the sun), garnished by the "green jaguar" (green chile peppers)?

Rather than admit their incomprehension, the Spanish clergy generally chose to deride the Zuyua as puerile "nursery rhymes." The All-Seeing Eye of the political apparatus of the Inquisition, in Foucault's phrase, a species of "Panopticon"1, could not grasp the Zuyua riddles. For the next three centuries, Zuyua rhymesters reveled in the Eye's blindness. Maya folklore, in the colonial period, was not some dreamy-eyed retreat into a spiritual world. It was a political burlesque.

It would not be the first nor the last time that Maya thought was misinterpreted. 19th century diffusionist theorists, such as the great Alexander Von Humboldt, were convinced that the modern-day Maya could not be descended from the proud peoples whom the Spaniards encountered: some even suggesting that sculpted tapirs in the Maya ruins of Guatemala and Honduras were in reality East Indian elephants", since the architects could not have been Native Americans, they must have come from Asia. So went the reasoning that continues to see the Amerindians as "backwards," while asking no questions about what led to their degraded socio-economic status vis-a-vis the white population.

Had the Spanish clergy grasped the insinuation of the "lance of the high cross," and not have assumed that it was Church based, they would have been appalled. In Maya thought, the Cross in pre-Columbian times represented the quadripartite division of the universe, the center point, where the lance is thrust, being the Middle
World that we inhabit. Man was swallowing the Sun, fighting his own Divine origin, challenging God. Such insubordination was intolerable in colonial New Spain.

Norwegian researcher Thor Heyerdahl proved conclusively that Native American trans-oceanic contact could have existed with boats from the Andean lake Titicaca region, so it should come as no surprise that Maya folklore may well have traveled equally far-flung routes before the Conquest. Maya influence has been documented in the enemy kingdom of the Aztecs, Tlaxcalla, as early as the 8th century, and their maritime trade routes took them up and down the coasts of the Americas, as well as along inland routes. Interestingly, the Hopi Indians of the American southwest celebrate in March the 5-day festival of a plumed serpent by the name of “Pululukan.” The term “kan” denotes, in Maya languages, the dragon, the serpent, the wisdom bringer, like the Mayas’ “Kukulcan.” Pululukan is, like Kukulcan, identified with the planting and harvesting of maize. The similarities may be coincidental or the result of contacts which ended with the European Conquest.

Of course, folktales are not recorded history, but they contain valuable data for the historian, because these tales encapsulate psychological attitudes and mental perceptions of the era in which they were told. In the analysis of the Maya reaction to the Spanish Conquest, their folklore provides us with a clarification of the “why” of human actions. Zuyua rhymes and stories are in no way “innocent”: even Humpty Dumpty, in 18th century England, was actually a scathing political satire though, like the Zuyua example we cited, it seemed to be an omelet in the making. But even eggs can be seditious.

Zarate: Fairytales and Colonial Reality

Throughout 16th century Central America, a series of Maya-inspired fairytales were orally disseminated throughout the varied Indian populations of the region, finding their way as well into Spanish settlements and the burgeoning mestizo (Spanish-Native American) peoples. “Xtabay,” the beautiful courtesan of Maya legend, was the archetype for these stories, so different from the virginal model princess familiar to European publics; and equally strange to many Native American ears, where chastity was prized as much as in
Catholic Europe. Xtabay was a charitable seductress whose body was transformed into sweet swelling flowers upon her death, thanks to the help she extended to the needy. Her soul is lifted into the celestial sphere while the chaste Utzcolel, her nemesis, (a sexually frustrated woman who was as famed for her tight-fisted greed as she was for her “purity”) haunts the crossroads of Central America, assuming the form of the Xtabay. But, since she is a specter and an imitation, she kills, rather than satisfies, her lovers.

How much this contrasts with the more pliant Aztec “Malinche” model is self-evident. (It is also ironic because there is a certain amount of supposition that Malinche may have been a renegade Maya slave!) Malinche had submitted to her master, Cortes, to the point of marrying, at Cortes’ behest, his lieutenant Francisco Jaramillo, thereby remaining close to her owner without compromising Cortes’ ranking, or the fact that he was already married. The motif continues to haunt contemporary Mexican literature. Even Pedro de Alvarado, famed for slaughtering Indian civilians, married a Tlaxcaltecan Indian woman. Sleeping with the enemy, as it were, in no way augured benevolence towards his wife’s people. In the Maya stories, the woman is unpredictable, from the male (Spanish or Indian) point of view. Her rebelliousness became another element shaping, and enlarging, Maya colonial resistance.

The finest example of the Xtabay-based female image is found in the legend “La Gran Piedra de Aquetzarri” (The Great Stone of Aquetzarri), retold by Carlos Rubio, and first appearing in print in 1930, in Costa Rica. It originated with the Guetarre Indians, one of several nations in touch with the Maya sphere and influenced by the latter’s unwillingness to surrender. We do not find the sexually compliant female of the Aztec-based stories willing to play second fiddle to the Conquistador’s wife. She is instead, an attractive and sexually decisive sorceress along the lines of the Xtabay figure, here named Zarate. From the altar of the Spanish parish of Aquetzarri, Zarate reviles her people for adhering to the Conquistadors’ faith but fails in arousing them to take action. Her harangues excite the ire, and later the desire, of the Spanish governor Alfonso de Perez y Colma. Don Alfonso is entranced by Zarate’s fire, and by her sensuality. They speak for the first time in the Church, and it is obvious that he will
cross the boundary into her world that night. Together they drink the love potion of the Guetarre people, "mistela" (22), a brew of herbs and honey, and Zarate extracts a promise from Alfonso. In return for her devotion to him, the Conquistador will liberate the Indians from tribute to the Spanish Crown. Following in the deceitful style of his mentor Cortes, Alfonso is already engaged to be married to another Spanish woman.

Had Zarate resembled the Malinche, she would have become Don Alfonso's mistress. She is forged on the Maya model, however, and the wronged woman vows revenge. Zarate triumphs, bitterly, and for all eternity. Her punishment of Don Alfonso denies him the Last Rites, confining his soul to Purgatory until Judgement Day. The sorceress' fury encompasses the treacherous and alluring Conquistador AND her own Guetarre people, who have not answered her insurrectionary calls. One night, Zarate envelops the village of Aquetzarri in an enchanted downpour, the "cilampa" mist that shrouds the Costa Rican coast in the rainy season. Everyone, Guetarre and Spaniards, are turned slowly and agonizingly into strange birds and lizards. Mute to Zarate's pleas, she condemns them to eternal silence. Don Alfonso de Pérez y Colma is punished for his conceit: Zarate transforms him into a peacock! In the modern-day village of Aquetzarri, Costa Rican villagers retell the legend of the witch whom their ancestors betrayed, warning their children jokingly to beware of Zarate, who occasionally appears leading a certain peacock by a golden ring. It is the same wedding ring Alfonso denied her. Native American identity dies hard.

Zarate is no Virgin of Guadalupe, no beneficent patroness waiting to be adored. She is part of the mosaic of collective memory, mythological and historical, of the Indian peoples of Central America. Their uprisings were constant, inspired by the Maya. Zarate's fury was not relegated to fairy-tales. From 1524 until 1697, there was relentless warfare between the Maya and the colonial authorities; even afterwards, the uprisings continued. In all, there were at least 29 recorded (by the Spaniards) full-scale Maya led rebellions between 1679 and 1820. This is highly significant, because the last independent Maya kingdom in Tayasal, Honduras, had already collapsed in 1697. Some of the more famous rebellions were the following:
1679-Totonicapan
1751-Rabinal
1785-Momostenago
1798-Nebaj
1800-Atitlan
1808-Cahabon
1815-Quesaltenango (the site of the most famous confrontation in 1524)

In the early 20th century, Yucatan was rocked by the “Caste War” in which Maya villagers rose up against abuses committed by mestizo landowners. In 1994, Lacandon Maya of Mexico’s Chiapas region began to agitate, sometimes in violent clashes with the Mexican government, for a more just system of land reform. (It should be added that the leader of this last Zapatist movement, Commandante Marcos, is not Maya, and while virtually all the Maya are united in their demands for improved living conditions, not all are enthused with Marcos’ leadership). Given the complexity of the situation, it is nonetheless obvious that the underlying Maya attitude is quite different from that of the Aztec “crying woman,” the Llorona. Unlike the Llorona, they do not just weep for the fate of their children. Fairy-tales are often cultural prototypes, and Zarate - and the Xtabay - do not come from the Aztec society that acquiesced easily to the will of the gods. Nor is it the Conquistador (today we would call it the armed religious fundamentalist) model. It is reliance on one’s wits.

Stars and Politics: Political Uses of Astrology

The Maya built their temple in accordance with astral movements, as did many agricultural civilizations in the ancient world. Observing the constellations as indicators of the planting season, Maya architects immortalized planetary changes in stone monuments. Specific planets carried weight in the political sphere. Scribes and kings learned to manipulate the skies.

Venus was a harbinger of internecine war, justifying aggression against a neighboring Maya city-state. The Morning star reactivated
blood feuds between rival Maya kingdoms, but its duality, both as Morning and Evening Star, provided the ambivalent Maya with a perfect alibi for changing political alliances. Depending upon when the sighting of Venus was recorded (in the morning it was bellicose and in the evening it was pacific) a benign or militant course of political action could be adopted. Views of Venus, the first star of twilight or the last to vanish before sunrise, were determined by political exigency. Heaven was in the eye of the beholder.

Nezahualcoyotl (1402-1472), acclaimed poet and king of the neighboring Aztec sister-state of Texcoco, had believed that the stars gave one time to prepare for the inevitable tragedy, but the dictates of the planets, for Nezahualcoyotl, were irreversible. Aztec astrology was fatalistic; Maya astral readings depended on the temperament and the needs of the scribe. Maya mathematical tables are filled with calculations that artificially bring the planets into line with pre-established Maya calendars! The sky bows to the human intellect. Shakespeare’s maxim is quite fitting: “The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, but in ourselves.”

Maya kings utilized Venus (conveniently) as a vision of complementary forces, depending upon the circumstances where they found themselves. Their choice of the same symbol to represent diametrically clashing opposites clashed with Western and most Amerindian conceptions: neither Jesus nor Huitzilopochtli could embody both a thing and its opposite. Jesus was the Savior and Satan was the Devil; the blood-drinking god Huitzilopochtli could never be confused with Quetzalcoatl, a derivative of the Maya feathered serpent god Kukulcan, who accepted only offerings of flowers and butterflies.

Venus may share more with the Chinese diagram of the Yin-Yang, where complementary (opposing) qualities are clearly demarcated, but also overflow, intertwine, merge and revolve. That planet, for the Maya, was whatever the considerations of the political advisor watching it would determine it to be. Almost alone of all the ancient peoples, the Maya understood that the Morning and Evening apparitions of Venus were but different aspects of the same planet, whose synodic year of 584 days their mathematicians had calculated to near perfection.
In the post-Classic period, Maya thought was allowing human beings to refashion the gods in their own image. The planets were annoyingly ambiguous: the moon was either Ix Chel, the matronly crone, weaver and bringer of wisdom, or she was Ix Chup, the vigorous and sexually active young, nursing mother. The four sacred ceiba trees which symbolically raised up the four cardinal points of the universe shared in the colors of their directions - red for the east, black for the west, yellow for the south, white for the north, and their colors transform aspects of the deities who appeared in the constellations in the sky. Their characters, or "colors," varied depending upon their positions in the heavens. That meant that even a god had no fixed character. Even divinity was changeable.

Such a thought is unsettling to those brought up to believe that the nature of God is unchangeable. In the Maya universe, even holiness is unreliable, as volatile as the night sky. Their astrology was suffused by the same quality that permeated their theology, their folklore, and their politics: doubt, dissension and, above all, ambivalence.

Notes
1 Stuart, George E., Ph.d. (1997, December). Royal Crypts of Copan. National Geographic, vol. 192, no. 6, pp. 68-93
8 Girard, Rafael. (1952). El Popul Vuh, fuente histórica. (Tomo I: El Popul Vuh como fundamento de la historia maya-quiChé) [The Popul Vuh, A Historical Source. (Volume I: Foundation of Quiche Maya History)]. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública, p. 190, according to Spanish translation of Villacorta. "They were speaking while the vampire bats filled the cave, the
cave of the great Camalzotz...and as they tried hard to think in the midst of all that racket, one particular vampire swooped down from the heavens; a sepulchral silence pervaded all; all the hellish bats ceased flying and hung there in anticipation; hanging upon the points of the Twins dart-guns, and the celestial vampire cut the head of Hunahpu at one stroke.” [m.t.]

*Camus, Albert. Ibid. p. 244.
10 Girard, Rafael. Op Cit. p. 239.
11 Ibid., p. 240.
20 Malinche's Conquest, pp. 144-146.
23 Ibid., p. 51.
26 Julius Caesar. Act I, Scene II.
27 The Blood of Kings, p. 106. Referring to Structure 5C-2d, in Cerros, Belize (c. 50 BCE): “Structure 5C-2d was placed on the north end of a peninsula with a public plaza to the south. As seen from the court, the façade terraces were set with huge masks symbolically representing the rising sun in the east preceded by the Morning Star, and the setting sun in the west followed by the Evening Star... Venus and the Sun are the Hero Twins central to Maya mythology. The building is oriented so that the sun actually rises from the sea on the east and sinks in the sea on the west. The Maya farmer, standing below this building
for some ritual occasion, saw the ruler standing at the pivot of this symbolic program, that represented the movement of heavenly bodies as they rose and set. Behind his ruler, he saw the sun and its twin, Venus, actually rise in the east and sink in the west, duplicating the symbols on the monument that defined social and cosmic order. By taking his place at the apex of the symbolic program, the king declared himself to be the causal force that perpetuated this order.”