Creation Mythology and Cultural Meaning in the Popol Vuh

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Overview of the El Popol Vuh

“El Popol Vuh” is an invaluable Maya document and a rich source of ancient Mayan culture and mythology. This document is written in the Mayan language, K’iche. It uses the Latin alphabet with Spanish orthography (Goetz, 1961). This significant text recounts the mythology of the K’iche’ people of Guatemala who not only inhabit Guatemala but also regions in the Mexican states of Quintana Roo, Campeche, Chiapas, El Salvador, Belize, Yucatan, and Honduras.

Creation Story of Maya Text

The original book of Mayan culture was discovered in the early eighteenth century in the K’iche language by a parish priest, Francisco Ximenez, in the highland of Guatemala. The text is also referred to as the “Mayan Bible” translated as the “Council Book” (*The Popol Vuh: The* Maya Story of Creation – *YouTube*, n.d.) as an account of the ancient word of creation and cosmology before the coming of Christianity (Christenson, 2007). The original text of Maya’s book which is now lost was translated into Spanish by Ximenez. Ximenez’s work is now housed in the Newberry Library in Chicago.

Chronicles of the Popol Vuh

In 2009, Richard Hansen, a famous archeologist, discovered almost 8-meter-long panels carved in stucco at El Mirador, Guatemala, a pre-Classic Mayan site (Brinton, 1882). These panels attest to the antiquity of the chronicles of Popol Vuh including the actions of the creator gods and the God of Death, the creation of humankind, and the historical timeline of the K’iche’ people. These panels authenticated the rich history and cosmology of the Maya people as transcribed by Ximenez.

Themes and Content of the Maya Book

The mythological narrative of the Mayan Bible was believed to be a compilation of oral traditions which the Spanish did not tolerate. They started destroying the literary works of the Mayan people as they could not tolerate the religious beliefs and practices of their “conquered subjects,” but fortunately, the Mayan Bible survived. The main content of this Mayan text is how the Mayan creator

gods curated and created the world, how “Hunahpu, Hero Twins, and Xbalanque” were transformed into the moon and the sun, and the cosmology as well as the worldview of the K’iche’ people (Christenson, 2007).

Creation of Humankind

The chronicles of the Popol Vuh may be divided into three sections including the “creation of the world, the Hero Twins Story, and the Genealogy of the Quiche-Maya Dynasty” (Tarn, 1986). The Popol Vuh describes the creation myth of Tepeu and Gucumatz, the two creator gods who used the primordial sea to create the Earth and then populated it with animals. However, these gods realized that those animals could not speak, worship, or invoke the creator gods so they decided to create human beings with clay and made animals a source of their food. Thus, the gods failed with their first effort so they carved human beings out of wood in their second attempt which also failed because those beings did not have minds and hearts. The Popol Vuh then narrates the story of Hero Twins to tell the tale of Seven Macaw, who met his end at the hands of Xbalanque and Hunahpu or “Hunipu and Shibalangkay” (*The Popol Vuh: The Maya Story of Creation – YouTube*, n.d.), the Hero Twins who later destroyed the Lords of Death after a lot of adventures in the Underworld and subsequently became the Sun and the Moon (McKillop, 2006). The creator gods then created man from the maize which is why it is seen as a divine and sacred food, and honored as such. The Popol Vuh is then concluded with the extensive mythology, genealogy, and cosmology of the Quiche-Maya Dynasty connecting the royal Mayan family with the gods up until the sixteenth century in order to assert the divine rule (Tarn, 1986). This genealogy provides a fascinating window into the civilization of the Maya.

Significance of the Popol Vuh

The Popol Vuh is an invaluable and remarkable text that provides a window into the cultural heritage, rich mythology, and worldview of the ancient Mayan civilization. The Popol Vuh holds immense significance as we can perceive through their genealogy how different cultures perceive their creation, existence, and place in the cosmos. The resilience of the Hero Twins who descended to the Underworld and ultimately triumphed over the God of Death resonates with the struggles of today’s humankind and their courageous efforts to overcome adversity. In a nutshell, the Popol Vuh acts as a bridge between ancient wisdom and contemporary relevance reminding human beings of their shared humanity and their stories of enduring power while resonating with contemporary cultural essence and continuity.

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