

Chol (Mayan) Folktales

A COLLECTION OF STORIES FROM THE
MODERN MAYA OF SOUTHERN MEXICO

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with Ausencio Cruz Guzmán

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The Chol Maya and Their Folktales

NICHOLAS A. HOPKINS AND J. KATHRYN JOSSERAND

Since its discovery by explorers in the nineteenth century, Maya civilization has held a fascination for Europeans and Americans. As archaeological investigations and ethnohistorical research proceeded, it became clear that this was one of the world's most advanced civilizations for its time, with sophisticated knowledge of mathematics and astronomy and magnificent works of art and architecture. As the mysteries of Maya writing began to be untangled, the details of Maya history were revealed. All in all, this new world civilization rivaled those of the old world in complexity and achievement.

What has gone little noticed, as Classic period hieroglyphic inscriptions have been dissected for their historical data, is the fact that the Classic Maya also had great literature. The history of Maya kings and queens, their exploits in warfare and their attention to ceremonial affairs, is not simply stated as a sequence of events. The story is narrated in a highly structured literary style, the details of which are only now becoming clear.

With the conquest of the Maya by the intrusive Spanish culture, much of the culture of the Maya elite disappeared. The contexts in which elite culture thrived ceased to exist. There were no longer schools to prepare the rulers and their families for lives devoted to governance, to science, art, and religion. The books that recorded knowledge and preserved the models for ritual activity were collected and destroyed. The ruling classes were eliminated or absorbed into the emerging Colonial society. Without royal courts, there was no context in which courtly living

could survive. Introduced diseases decimated the population. New rulers subjugated the remaining peoples and converted them to servants of the Christian crown and its administrators.

But the Maya survived. And in many places, key elements of Maya culture survived with them. Adaptations were made that allowed native customs to be integrated into the new reality. Native gods took on new guises and joined the Christian pantheon. Native practices were reinterpreted and understood to be popular Christianity. Now cloaked in Christian doctrine, Maya folk religion persisted, and it lives on today.

Studying the modern Maya of Yucatán, the anthropologist Robert Redfield (1941) developed the idea of the Great and Little Traditions. The Great Tradition is practiced by the elite—elaborate ceremonies supported by complex, esoteric explanations of the world, a proliferation of deities corresponding to a complex of interests, a culture that requires writing, formal study, specialization of roles, extensive investment of resources—the culture of the Classic Maya and their descendants up until the sixteenth century.

The Little Tradition is a pale reflection of the culture of the elite, carried on by the common folk. Ceremonial activity may be performed at the level of households rather than in huge public performances. Community celebrations are far less elaborate than those directed by the elite. The rationale behind ceremonial activity may be a simple appeal to tradition or a sense of community identity and not be motivated by philosophical or ideological principles. In place of writing, formal study, and specialized roles, folk culture is passed on informally through the oral tradition, from generation to generation within the family, within the community, and without major investment of scarce resources. However, since both the Great and the Little Traditions have a common origin and a symbiotic relationship, the Little Tradition may encode in its behaviors—often unrecognized by its practitioners—the same underlying principles as its elite counterpart.

In this collection of modern Maya folklore, tales told by the Chol Maya of southern Mexico, we see elements of the elite Classic culture we know from archaeological excavations and scholarly research. Such elements have taken on new meanings, and they exist in a distinct context. But they have been preserved, and a greater understanding of them may well shed light on Classic society. In interpreting these elements, we must keep in mind that they are derived from the Little Tradition and have survived as folk culture; they are not directly descended from the related elements as expressed in the elite culture of the Classic Great Tradition but are collateral descendants, derived from the Little Tradition of Classic times.

One such element is the modern Earth Owner, or Earth Lord, a figure known across Mesoamerica under various names but with similar characteristics. At present,

he is surely the most prominent deity in Maya folk culture and religious practice, and he appears in many ethnographic studies. In Zinacantan, a Tzotzil community in Chiapas, for example, he appears as Yahval Balumil, the Owner/Lord of the World/Earth. For the Chuj of northwestern Guatemala he is Witz-ak'lik, Mountain-Plain, a metonym for "Earth." Elsewhere in Guatemala he is known simply as Mundo "Earth/World." In Guatemala he also appears under the guise of Maximón, "Saint Simon." In Yucatán his rain-bringer aspect is emphasized, and he is known as Chaak, and Chajk is one of his various avatars in the Chol area.

This earth deity lives underground, inside mountains and in caves, and he is the owner of all material resources, as some of his names imply. He owns the earth, the water, the land, the trees, the animals, the minerals, and all other material things. To make use of his properties—an absolute necessity for survival—people must ask his permission, treat his possessions with respect, make proper gifts in return for their use, and in general keep up an equitable relationship with him. He is not only the source of wealth and health, he is also dangerous and potentially deadly. Since he has so many properties to manage—great herds of animals, plantations, deposits of minerals, and the like—he needs laborers, and he takes the souls of transgressors as eternal slaves. Or, if the violation of contract is a lesser offense, he may simply withdraw his support and deny benefits by withholding rain, sending destructive winds, and so on.

In the Chol area, he appears in several guises. Chajk is the distant rain god and has little direct interaction with people. He brings the rain. He also rumbles in the distance when rain is coming; now an old man, he does not throw lightning as much as do his sons, who precede him, throwing flashing bolts of lightning and generally acting up. Physical evidence of his existence is seen in the polished stone axes found in the fields, called *'acha Lak Mam*, "Our Grandfather's axes," thought to be the results of his lightning bolts, and in the slivers of obsidian blades, *yejb'ak Lak Mam*, "Our Grandfather's fingernails," that he breaks off while digging caterpillars out of rotten trees. Under the rubric of "Our Grandfather," Lak Mam, he is known to take human form and interact with people, as in one of the tales that follows. He is also widely known as Don Juan, a title derived from the identification of John the Baptist as the rain-bringer (he sprinkles water to bring blessings on humans; by his festival day, June 24, rains should be coming regularly). Tales of encounters with Don Juan are especially prominent along the Río Tulijá valley, separated from Palenque by the mountain range known as the Sierra de Don Juan, where we have been told he maintains many "branch offices" in the caves scattered throughout the limestone massif (see *A Visit to Don Juan*). Pilgrims have visited these caves for hundreds of years (Bassie 2001). We have also argued that the Earth Lord has been incorporated into the persona of the Black Christ of Tila (Señor de Tila), who may be prayed to in caves as well as in churches (Josserand and Hopkins 2007).

Since this underworld deity is more important to farmers and hunters than to the urban elite, his presence in Classic art is somewhat subdued. However, Maya stelae often represent the three levels of the universe—the sky above (with ancestors and supernaturals), the earth (with the stela's human protagonist), and the underworld (on which the protagonist stands). At the base of many stelae the underworld is represented by the Earth Lord. These images are known in art history literature as the Earth Monster, the Cauac Monster (from the stone/cave markings that also appear in the glyph for the day name Cauac) or, more recently, as Witz “Mountain.” The representation may be a generalized Mountain, or it may be a reference to a specific nearby location, but this motif is a ubiquitous icon that appears on architecture as well as stelae. The evidence does not tell us much about what the Classic Maya thought about the Earth Lord, but it surely suggests that he was present in the pantheon, and we are probably safe if we project backward from the widespread modern beliefs to attribute many of the same characteristics to him in the Classic period.

A second element that appears fleetingly in modern folktales but is more prominent in Classic iconography is the Celestial Bird, sometimes called the Principal Bird Deity. This elaborate avian frequently appears atop trees, as on the Palenque Sacophagus Lid, where he sits at the apex of the “world tree” that dominates the scene. Celestial birds appear in Maya art as early as the San Bartolo murals (Taube et al. 2010:96–102), where one (in this case, a Laughing Falcon) sits in a tree, tearing the head off a sacrificial snake while humans make offerings representing the other three major classes of animals. Maya ethnozoology recognizes four classes of vertebrates, based on locomotion (Hopkins 1980): mammals (walkers), reptiles and amphibians (crawlers), birds (flyers), and fish (swimmers). These four classes are present in excavated Classic offering caches as well as in offerings depicted in the Dresden Codex. Birds sometimes appear at the top of stelae as the representation of the celestial level of the world, as on Stela 11 at Piedras Negras (Schele and Miller 1986:112). The role of the Celestial Bird appears to be one of harbinger, a messenger of the gods, descending to the earth from the heavens.

In the Chol folktales, we see this messenger transformed to a more humble creature in the brief tale of the Celestial Bird, the *tyaty muty* “father-bird” that tells earthly roosters when to crow in the morning. But he also appears in the most sacred of narratives, the story of the Moon and her sons (Our Holy Mother), where he is described as *ixi lekoj bā 'ajtzo'*, literally, “that exotic turkey/peacock.” Here he plays his role of celestial messenger, as he descends from heaven in the night to tell the plants to stand up again (after they were felled by the Sun's older brother).

Finally, these tales are populated by a number of strange and frightful creatures not seen in Classic period public art but very much present on ceramics (see the

Kerr archive of Maya ceramics, www.mayavase.com, or www.famsi.org/research/kerr/). These are the creatures of the underworld, although they are not necessarily restricted to appearances down under. Death gods, skeletal creatures, severed heads, supernatural animals, and enough monsters to populate a dozen horror movies are seen on Classic ceramics and find counterparts in the Chol folktales. They are especially prominent in the “ghost stories” told while men are camped out in the fields on extended work periods, like the tales we tell our children at summer camp.

Beyond the inferences that may be gleaned from the cast of characters, there are valuable insights into Maya morality and worldview that emerge from these stories and that can be hypothesized to represent the values of common folk in earlier times. Certainly, they are not introduced from Europe, although many of the principles of Chol belief are compatible with Christian ideals (if not Christian practice). The emphasis in religious practice of making offerings to the gods is certainly common in the Classic period as well as modern times. Perhaps an understanding of what underlies modern practice—keeping up a harmonious relationship with the universe and its natural forces, paying for what we receive—could inform our ideas about the Classic, so thoroughly contaminated by the demonization of native cultures during the Colonial period and, for that matter, during modern campaigns to missionize and change the culture of modern Mayas. It is instructive to compare two descriptions of the “cave god,” that is, the Earth Lord, one from a dictionary compiled by Christian missionaries, one from a reworking of that dictionary by secular Chols (translations from the Spanish and the Chol by the authors):

ajaw 1. Evil spirit of the earth (called “our father”). It is believed that a person can make a pact with him. This person can make petitions to this spirit in favor [of] or against another person. The man who has relations with the *ajaw* is called the *sacristán*. If a man or a woman offends the sacristan, he goes to this spirit to curse the person, and within a short time that person dies . . . The spirit of water . . . If we enter the water, the spirit of water will eat us . . . A companion of the devil: The evil of the *ajaw* is the same as that of the devil. (Aulie and Aulie 1978:27–28)

ajaw The lord of the mountains and caves who is the owner of all there is on earth; our lord, to whom we pray; welfare, health, and good comes with the end of offense . . . he is prayed to for good weather at the mouth of the cave. (López et al. 2000:42)

MODERN CHOL COMMUNITIES AND CULTURE

In historic times, the Chol Maya have occupied a continuous area in southern Mexico, in the state of Chiapas and adjacent parts of the state of Tabasco, with concentrations in the Chiapas *municipios* (county-like political subdivisions of the

state) of Tila, Tumbalá, Salto de Agua, Yajalón, Palenque, and Sabanilla (Hopkins 1995). Chols have expanded in modern times into jungle areas to the southeast (in Ocosingo) and into a small area in the southern part of the state of Campeche, to the east (in the new municipio of Calakmul). The great majority live in small rural settlements with only a few hundred residents, but several urban centers are dominated by Chols, notably Tila, Tumbalá, and Salto de Agua.

Census figures for 1980, representing the period when these folktales were gathered, registered 26,000 Chol speakers among 35,000 residents in Tila; 16,000 residents, almost all Chol speakers, in Salto de Agua; 12,000 Chols of 16,000 residents in Tumbalá; 13,000 Chols among 35,000 residents in Palenque; 8,000 Chols, 12,000 residents in Sabanilla; and 5,000 Chols, 10,000 residents in Yajalón. Approximately 5,000 Chols resided in the new municipio of Calakmul, in the state of Campeche. These figures total only 85,000 speakers. Now, thirty-plus years later, the Chol population has increased significantly. The Instituto Nacional de las Lenguas Indígenas (2000) reported 145,000 Chol speakers in 2000 and a few years later (Instituto Nacional de las Lenguas Indígenas 2008) credited Chol with 185,299 speakers in a catalog of indigenous languages. Allowing for more recent growth and some undercounting in the census, the Chol-speaking population may now number close to 200,000. These figures are not unreasonable given the tremendous increase in the territory occupied by Chol speakers, brought about by the continual creation of new settlements (de la Torre Yarza 1994).

At the end of the sixteenth century, Chol settlements, including some large towns, were located along the Usumacinta River and its lowland tributaries as well as in the areas mentioned above. These lowland settlements resisted the Spanish, including Christian missionary activity, and carried out raids on highland areas pacified and controlled by the Spanish crown. As a consequence, they were subjected to a 100-year military effort (1590–1690) that conquered and resettled Chols area by area, beginning with the lower Usumacinta and Río Tulijá areas and proceeding upriver in successive campaigns, concluding with the conquest of the Mopán and Itzá Maya to the east (de Vos 1980, 1988, 1990).

Chols who survived pacification were resettled among highland Maya Indians along the border of the conquered lowlands, including the new town of Palenque as well as Tila, Tumbalá, and Bachajón in Chiapas and Retalhuleu in Guatemala. The only Chol populations to survive into the twentieth century were those that had been resettled in the highlands surrounding Tila and Tumbalá. Other Chols either assimilated or disappeared in all other areas. Distinct dialects of Chol developed in Tila, Tumbalá, and nearby Sabanilla (Aulie and Aulie 1978). In the late Colonial period, Salto de Agua was founded with Chols who had colonized the Río Tulijá valley from the highland towns.

John Lloyd Stephens, an American explorer who passed through the Chol area in 1840 (Stephens 1841), remarked that the Indians there lived in essentially aboriginal conditions, with little sign of Spanish influence. He encountered men in loincloths carrying crude clubs. However, after mid-century, German and North American interests founded coffee plantations and incorporated Chols in a system of debt peonage (Alejos García 1994; Alejos García and Ortega Peña 1991). This system gradually disappeared after the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century, and Chols eventually gained control of many coffee plantations through land reform in the 1930s, under the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas. These lands became the first dozen or so Chol *ejidos* (federally sanctioned collective farms).

About 1960, a major new development took place when the federal government authorized the expansion of highland populations into lowland jungle areas left essentially unpopulated since the seventeenth century. Hundreds of new settlements have resulted as groups organize and petition for lands under the ejido system, and the population expansion has taken Chols back to virtually all of the Mexican territory their ancestors occupied at the time of the Conquest (de la Torre Yarza 1994).

Ejido settlements tend to be small, as the laws governing land reform specify how many heads of family will have land rights and restrict inheritance to one child, usually a son. Land-poor younger sons are a major factor in the formation of newer ejidos. As a consequence, ejidos tend to be peculiar demographically, as they are founded by young generation-mates and initially have few elders. By the same token, they are innovative socially, and little traditional life survives in the ejidos. A great majority are dominated by Protestant sects, in contrast to the well-entrenched Catholicism of the older highland settlements and evidenced by biblical place names like Jerusalén and Babilonia rather than saints' names like Santa Maria and San Miguel or Chol place names like Tiemopa and Joloniel.

The economy of Chol settlements is diverse, although there is a strong component of subsistence agriculture based on the Mesoamerican triad of maize, beans, and squash, with the addition of manioc, chile peppers, tomatoes, and other vegetables, as well as tropical fruits. Cacao was prominent in early Colonial times but was replaced by coffee. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century plantations also produced cattle, mahogany and other tropical hardwoods, rubber, and vanilla. In Colonial times there was a lucrative business exporting *zarzaparrilla* (*Smilax* spp.) to Spain as a medicinal (West, Psuty, and Thom 1985). (Ultimately, in the United States this vine yielded a refreshing drink: sasparrilla.) Commercial agriculture is now centered on coffee production, but low market values have recently resulted in the destruction of established coffee plantations and their replacement by maize and other crops.

Weaving and embroidery, once essential crafts for women, have disappeared almost entirely, replaced by sewing. Western-style dresses of brightly decorated satin-like cloth, worn with rows of beads and numerous hair clips, are a hallmark of ejido Chol women. Males do most agricultural work, women do domestic work—that is, men produce food, women process it, as in other Mayan communities. Family units are important and positively valued. Relations between brothers are said to be strained and competitive (as in mythology, see *Our Holy Mother*), while relations with cousins are friendly. People with the same surname are assumed to be related and can be called on for aid if necessary, a reflection of the now-defunct system of patrilineal clans (Hopkins 1988, 1991; Josserand and Hopkins 2002a). Uncles are counselors and helpers, grandparents are treated with respect and are sought out for advice.

Ejidos are governed by prescribed structures (a commissioner and councils) but often function more democratically, with men meeting daily for public discussions and more formal weekly public assemblies, with decisions made by consensus. Religious authorities exercise considerable authority over community members. Highland and urban settlements have legally prescribed systems of governance under federal law, balanced against a traditional “cargo” system, which now has mainly religious functions but nonetheless constitutes a political power base capable of opposing civil authority (Josserand and Hopkins 2007).

The cargo system survives best in Tila, where more than fifty citizens at a time hold ritual offices for one-year terms, with responsibilities for organizing festivals, caring for sacred images, and receiving and interceding on petitions from supplicants, including pilgrims from outside the community. Marriage is a prerequisite for these offices, and wives share the privileges and responsibilities of office with their husbands. Apart from legal institutions introduced from outside, social control is largely accomplished through socialization and internal social control. Individuals believe they are responsible for their acts not only to others but to the supernatural world and that bad actions will result in illness and other forms of supernatural discipline.

Traditional syncretic Maya-Catholic beliefs, as manifested in the Chol area, have merged the Sun with Christ and the Moon with the Virgin Mary, in accordance with precolumbian mythology, where the Moon is the mother of the Sun (see *Our Holy Mother*). Tila is the center of a syncretic tradition featuring a Black Christ, the *Señor de Tila*, and Tila is a major pilgrimage site for southern Mexico, similar to Santiago Esquipulas, the pilgrimage site of the *Señor de Esquipulas*, at the other extreme of precolumbian Cholan territory in eastern Guatemala. Both of these Christian icons have incorporated elements of the precolumbian Earth Lord (*ibid.*).

Caves figure prominently in religious practice as the domain of the principal earth deity, the owner of earthly goods who must be petitioned for reasonable use of his plants and animals. An overriding philosophy reigns that gifts must be repaid,

and evil will turn back against its agent. Offerings in caves for success in hunting and other pursuits continue to be made (see *A Visit to Don Juan*). Apart from priests and pastors serving mainstream Christian churches, shamanistic curers are the principal religious practitioners. Summoned to their responsibility in dreams, curers visit caves to solidify their powers (Pérez Chacón 1988).

Curing practices involve invoking supernatural powers, both good and evil (the latter must be controlled by the shaman and made to act positively). Petitions to supernaturals are made through intermediaries and are accompanied by offerings of candles, incense, and liquor. An essential element is the pledge (*promesa*) made by the interlocutor, in effect a contract exchanging offerings and good behavior for divine assistance. Most shamans are male, but a similar position is held by female midwives, who likewise draw their powers from the supernatural and are destined to serve from birth. Men who have held a series of ceremonial offices and become respected elders, *tatuches*, also serve as intercessors for petitioners to the saints (Josserand and Hopkins 1996).

Major illness results from souls being imprisoned by earth powers (such as caves, rivers). Shamans cure with a combination of spiritual and herbal treatments; curers bargain for release of the soul with prayers, offerings, and threats and treat with herbs. Some illness may result from witchcraft, accomplished by pacts with earth powers. Principal illnesses are caused by fright, envy, and wrong thoughts, all involving disharmony with the spirit world. Curing techniques include ritual bathing, spraying (from the mouth) or sprinkling with herbal preparations, herbal remedies and diets, prayers and offerings. All utilize the shaman's special relation with good or harnessed evil powers. Midwives care for pregnant women and assist in deliveries.

Death is considered a natural process; people must die to make room for others, and this is part of God's plan. Burial is within twenty-four hours, in wooden coffins, in cemeteries, with Christian rites. (This was not always the case; a Colonial official reported in 1737 that the priest in Tila had not heard a confession in nine years of service and deaths were not reported to the church to avoid Christian burial [Breton 1988].) A wake features prayers and offerings on behalf of the soul of the departed. Gifts of food and candles are received by a designated family member of the same sex as the departed, and money, candles, and incense are ritually presented to the cadaver. The dead are recalled on All Saints' Day, when house altars are supplied with food for the dead and religious services are held in the graveyards.

THE PRACTICE OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling takes place in various contexts—at least where traditional ways have not been altered by new circumstances. A key element is not locational but temporal.

Stories are not told during the workday, which starts well before dawn and begins to wind down in the afternoon. Men—the principal storytellers but by no means the only ones—go out to work as soon as (and sometimes before) they can see the trails, to take advantage of the cool early morning hours. They will have broken their fast with a few tortillas and perhaps some coffee, and they carry with them a ration of *pozol* (Chol *sa'*, essentially the same as the ground maize dough tortillas are made of) and some additives or flavoring, varying from sugar to chiles, as well as a gourd bowl in which to mix the dough and other ingredients with water. This refreshing drink they will consume about the time the heat begins to rise, after several hours of labor, around 9:00 or 10:00. They return to work for another few hours, and when the heat becomes intense or the rains begin, they will rest, perhaps work a little more, and then return home to clean up.

By late afternoon the men are back in the settlement, rested and bathed, and they begin to gather in a central location, perhaps a town square or a grassy central clearing that serves the same purpose. They might hang around an ejido headquarters building if such exists. This is a time devoted to the discussion of civil affairs and the exchange of news, but important decisions await the weekly Sunday afternoon assembly ideally attended by all men (and no women). When the light fades it is time to head home for an evening meal and family time, the family gathered inside the single-room home around the cooking fire. Now, before the children are put to bed, is a good time for storytelling.

We learned early on that it was useless to ask informants to tell us stories in the morning. If they even tried, the results were disappointing. After trying repeatedly all day to elicit stories, we would give up and in the late afternoon decide to have a beer and forget it. As soon as the day's work was over and we were all relaxed and comfortable, the stories would come out. It just didn't feel right to spend work time in entertainment. The context was not right. It was like asking someone to tell bawdy jokes in a church. You might try to do it, but you wouldn't do it well. Of course, after we had been working with specific individuals for a few years and they treated storytelling as part of their employment, we might have better results. But still, the best time to get stories was in prime time, as part of the evening's activities. Several of the stories presented here were recorded after a long day's work thatching Merle Greene Robertson's house in Palenque, when the workers (including us) were kicking back and having a little refreshment.

During parts of the agricultural calendar, men may go out to distant fields and stay for several days, sleeping in makeshift huts in the fields they are working. At night they gather around the fire and tell stories. A similar context was provided by the canoe-making expeditions Ausencio Cruz Guzmán participated in with his father and brothers. They would camp for several days at the site of the tree they

had felled while they carved the trunk into a canoe. Other men present would tell tales they hadn't heard. Mayas in general are wary of being out in the woods alone, especially at night, and the anxiety inspired by being away from the protection of the village may encourage the recitation of tales of things that come out of the woods. These stories are frightening, but all are resolved in the same way. The savage creatures that are likely to appear at your campfire are dangerous, but they can be outwitted, and these tales revolve around the ways that might be done. They are at once frightening and reassuring, a surefire formula for a good story.

Other contexts may be appropriate to storytelling. Cruz reports hearing about the Lightning God's encounter with fishermen while out fishing with a pair of adult men when he was just a young boy. There are probably other circumstances that would elicit certain kinds of stories, since one motivation for telling a story is to instruct, and the context might be appropriate for instruction.

The majority of the stories we have recorded were told by men, in part because men deal more with the outside world than do their female counterparts. However, when we have had the confidence of the family, we have recorded tales told by females, and they are every bit as well told as those we elicited from men. That is, women know how to tell a story as well as men do, they just don't get out as much. While we have had little opportunity to observe it, women probably tell each other stories as much as men do.

Storytelling does require an audience; it is an interactive activity. On several occasions we have recorded in the absence of other people, but only with informants who are used to such activities and can imagine an appropriate audience is present. Bernardo Pérez, for instance, a schoolteacher, was used to working out and rehearsing his classroom presentations (at least to himself). He was completely comfortable sitting down and dictating to a tape recorder (see *The Blackman*).

Imagine, then, as you are reading these stories, that it is evening and you are in a dimly lit thatch-roofed hut in the American tropics, the sounds of insects rising in the dusk. A small fire is smoldering in the three-stone hearth on the dirt floor in the center of the room to keep the mosquitoes away. It gives just enough light to get around in but not enough to illuminate all the nooks and crannies. The light flickers against the rafters and the ears of corn hanging there, waiting to be planted next season. The males of the family are resting in hammocks or sitting around the fire on small chairs, the women still working on domestic tasks, and it's not quite time to go to sleep. The children are about to be put down, the little ones already asleep. Conversation has lagged, and then from one side of the fire an elderly man begins to speak:

A long time ago, they say, our ancestors used to tell this story. I heard it from my mother and father. They say there once was a man . . .