
Book Review

The Myths of the Popol Vuh in Cosmology, Art, and Ritual. Edited by Holley Moyes, Allen J. Christenson, and Frauke Sachse. 2021. Louisville: University Press of Colorado. 348pp. \$108.95 (hardcover), \$38.95 (paperback), \$32.95 (e-book).

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Published some fifty years after Michael D. Coe (1973) first used the *Popol Vuh* (PV) to study the iconography of Maya painted ceramics, *The Myths of the Popol Vuh in Cosmology, Art, and Ritual* invites reflection on the role this narrative has played in shaping Maya studies. Through twelve thematically grouped chapters, editors Holley Moyes, Allen J. Christenson, and Frauke Sachse bring together leading experts on Maya art, mythology, and archaeology to examine the PV's influence across an array of disciplines and its seminal importance in interpreting Maya cosmology and mythological imagery. It is an ambitious and highly successful endeavor to bring focus to the myriad ways the PV has been used to craft our understanding of the Maya—highlighting both successes and times when the sixteenth-century narrative has overdetermined our understanding of ancient material.

For those unfamiliar with the PV, this colonial period K'iche'-language manuscript describes the various creations of the world that led to the present epoch, the discovery of maize, and the formation of people and cultural institutions, among other things. It then moves on to the foundation of the K'iche' lineages and instructs on ritual and the use of devotional images of deities, who depart with the first dawn. It is a complex narrative that offers differing descriptions of what are likely the same event. For example, the first dawn is described twice: once presumably with the Hero Twins' apotheosis and again when the K'iche', in their quest for heat and light, bring about the first dawn by performing the proper ritual protocols. The repetition of themes within the narrative and the homology between the lifecycle of plants, particularly maize,

and people echoes the poetic parallelism that Christenson (2003, 2012) has discussed elsewhere at the level of the line or verse. As a number of the contributing authors point out, it is at once both a mythological and political account that as a historical document is an instance of indigenous agency that stands against the processes of colonization.

Following a preface by the late Michael D. Coe, Christenson and Sachse's introductory chapter details the likely source for and complex history of the PV manuscript, its many translations, and the volume's contribution to Maya studies. They show that unlike other indigenous language documents that were designed for the colonial bureaucracy, the PV seems to have been intended solely for an internal K'iche' audience. For this reason the authors hid their identities—they likely would have been known to their audience but desired to remain anonymous to colonial authorities. The near total absence of Spanish in the text and the celebration of Maya deities make it a nearly unique document in any Maya language and similar to the *Ritual of the Bacabs* and the Books of the Chilam Balams, which also seem to have had a primarily Maya audience. From this introductory chapter the book divides into four parts, each composed of two or three chapters each. These parts are grouped into such topics as the Highland Maya worldview (part 1), the PV in the archaeological record (part 2), its use in interpretations of art and epigraphy (part 3), and continuities and change (part 4). Naturally, it is impossible in a review of this length to attend to each chapter at the level of detail they deserve, but I will discuss some of the highlights and touch on specific issues as they occur in each chapter.

Part 1 focuses on the Highland Maya cultural context of the PV and the mythological and conceptual world that it unfolds. This is especially significant because, while many have used the PV to buttress claims, such as iconographic identifications, few studies focus on the narrative itself and its underlying logic and cultural context among K'iche' Maya. Christenson's chapter begins this section and describes the different moments of creation in the first half of the PV and speaks to issues of translation and cultural meaning. This deep cultural analysis is continued in Sachse's chapter that investigates theological coherence, cosmology, and the singular place maize holds as a structuring metaphor in the PV's narrative and in Highland Maya culture. Her study echoes elements found in the work of Raphael Girard (1948, 1952) who also commented on the parallels between the human lifecycle, maize, and characters within the PV. Despite some of Girard's methodological failings, it would have been interesting to hear Sachse's perspective on this earlier, related work. Finally, part 1 concludes with Iyaxel Cojtí Ren's close examination of foundation rituals under the umbrella of the concept of *saqirik* ('dawning') episodes described in the PV and other

ethnohistoric documents from the Guatemalan Highlands that also refer to the successive epochs (or suns) of pan-Mesoamerican creation accounts. In this way she places key elements of the PV and contemporary ritual practices into dialogue with Mesoamerican-wide cultural practices and speaks to issues of cultural continuity. She also ties the concept of *saqirik* to various political configurations and allows us to see these within a more subtle cultural framework than is often the case. This nicely demonstrates the importance of correctly framing specific social phenomena within a cultural context, as opposed to simply positing the usual rationales for the use of mythology in expressive culture. Through this she makes the critical point that mythology is never separate from other spheres of social life, a point revisited in Julia Guernsey's chapter. Collectively the chapters in part 1 situate the PV in the web of cultural connections and metaphors that is necessary for the reader to more fully appreciate its significance and other colonial Indigenous-language documents.

Part 2 turns to how the PV relates to and has been used as a lens through which to interpret the archaeological record, a theme also explored in part 4. Jaime Awe analyzes a Preclassic burial and caches at Cahal Pech to suggest that creation mythology, similar to that described in the PV, is also present at this earlier period based on the vertical and horizontal ordering of specific materials. He associates the skull found in a lip-to-lip cache assemblage with the severed head of Jun Junajpu which is in turn often linked to the maize seed. Through this he contends that the cache recreates the narratives of the Hero Twins and the rebirth of First Father. The early date of this material would add to the already substantial evidence that Maya etiological accounts arise from beliefs deeply rooted in Mesoamerican history, a point also discussed more explicitly in chapters 12 and 13. While it is a minor point, it should be noted that figure 5.7 is mis-identified as both a greenstone tablet from Guerrero and the Humboldt Celt, which are two distinct objects. It actually depicts the Arroyo Pesquero Celt, a Middle Formative greenstone celt excavated from the Gulf Coast Olmec site of the same name. Despite this issue, this celt does speak to Awe's argument about the vertical and horizontal ordering of the Burial B4-3 assemblage and Middle Formative worldview. It depicts a central figure, often interpreted as the Olmec Maize God (or perhaps more accurately as a fertility deity), who holds a serpent bar. Its legs are formed by the head of a crocodilian reminiscent of similar images from the Middle Formative period corpus and reliefs from the site of Izapa. The figure is surrounded by four cleft seeds at the four directions or intercardinal points. Together the scene shows a quadripartite and vertical organization of the world strikingly similar to the elements in the burial. However, there is more that can be said

about this image that directly ties to the material arrangement of Burial B4-3 discussed in this chapter that underscores some of the differences between Maya, Olmec, and other Middle Formative period versions of these concepts and their visual articulation. In the Maya case, the Maize God sprouts from a seed-like element or skull (see fig. 5.8), whereas on the Arroyo Pesquero Celt a fertility or maize deity emerges from a crocodilian whose head forms the figure's legs in a way similar to examples from Izapa (see fig. 11.2). Thus, Burial B4-3 participates in both ways of articulating these concepts through its use of the cache assemblage, including a skull and crocodilian sculpture. Its physical arrangement bears a striking likeness to the central image on Tonina Monument 160, which depicts GI, or a figure in the guise of this deity, seated on a jaguar-skin cushion that itself rests on a skull within a seedpod-like element that resembles a lip-to-lip cache vessel. This excursion into these iconographic details also points to a perennial issue with the use of the PV in the interpretation of the archaeological and iconographic record, namely, that other lines of evidence closer in date and, in this case, arrangement to the burial offer compelling points of comparison and indeed allude to narratives that are not clearly present in the PV beyond general structures that are found in many narratives throughout Mesoamerica.

In the following chapter Thomas H. Guderjan and Colin Snider provide a useful summation of the PV narrative and its link to the local interests of the K'iche'. From this they suggest that just as this narrative is one particular manifestation of core Maya mytho-historic narratives, architecture whose formal symbolism recreates the mythological landscape is a local instantiation of similar ideas. Through this observation they make the important methodological point that is raised throughout the volume: that there are core patterns that reoccur in a variety of Mesoamerican and Maya cultural expressions and that specific buildings or narratives are particular incarnations of these patterns. They examine this premise through a close reading of the archaeological and architectural record of the site of Blue Creek.

Moyes and Awe's chapter on cave ritual concludes part 2. They discuss an assemblage of ritual artifacts from the main chamber of the Actun Tunichil Muknal cave in Belize. They view this material as evidence for the reenactment of Maya creation as presented in the PV, specifically focused on the sacrifice of the Maize God. Elements found within the cave, such as the three speleothem pieces that resemble the three-stone hearth of Classic period creation narratives, sacrificial victims, and directionally arranged offerings are marshalled to support their reading of the archaeological record. Moyes and Awe make a compelling case that renewal rituals similar in structure to those in the Classic period texts and the PV occurred in the cave.

It should be noted that chapters 4 and 6 rely on earlier interpretations of Classic Maya hieroglyphic mythological texts. For example, the readings of 'First Father', 'lying-down-Sky', and 'stood-up-sky' that interpret GI as entering and erecting the sky are no longer the dominant interpretations of those passages. Rather than describing the sacrifice of the Maize God, the Classic period narratives speak of the erection of the hearth and use the three-stone hearth glyph, *ti' chan* collocation (either 'mouth' or 'edge' of the sky), or the word *k'ob* ('hearth'; but see Stuart 2011 who views this term as referring to 'image') to refer to this location. Such changes in interpretation impact how one would use Classic period narratives in the interpretation of the materials presented in chapter 6. Naturally, one might not agree with current interpretations, but they nevertheless should be engaged. In studies attempting to link the PV to the archaeological record, in part through the use of glyphic narratives, it is essential to base those analyses on the most accurate readings available for Classic period texts, which would logically be the main link between the distant past and the colonial-era PV. These issues do not detract from the authors' main contributions nor the rich and significant material they have presented from their archaeological investigations, but they are an indication of both the complexity involved in viewing specific, historically contingent instances through broader patterns constructed from distinct datasets and the appeal of finding answers through the hermeneutics of the PV.

Collectively, these chapters present rich archaeological datasets and raise a number of important points about the interpretation of such material when we lack or possess few accompanying inscriptions. However, in each case there is not always a clear connection to the PV, and at times the relationship seems forced, lacks specific ties to the PV narrative and imagery, or are only related at a general level (i.e., tiered cosmos, importance of directions, etc.). To put it another way, what are the distinct advantages of using the PV, and how does doing so enrich our understanding of the archaeological record beyond general cosmological structures that are found across Mesoamerica? It is precisely this similarity and difference between the archaeological, iconographic, and textual record and the PV that generates some of the fundamental questions examined in these chapters and the volume more broadly. That is, what is gained by thinking about the PV in relation to the other kinds of data from earlier periods? The concluding idea for all these chapters is similar to Guderjan and Snider's point that the PV offers one manifestation of core myths. Therefore, a conversation between the PV and other datasets helps create a denser picture of Maya and Mesoamerican mythology. However, the danger is that PV narrative is so compelling that it overdetermines the analysis of period material. This is an issue

that is taken up more fully in Oswaldo Chinchilla's chapter and part 4 more generally.

The two chapters that compose part 3 consider Classic period epigraphy and iconography and the PV. They again reveal the complexity of working between earlier evidence and the PV. In the first, chapter 8, Barbara MacLeod presents a detailed discussion of the mythological narratives from the codex-style ceramic corpus that fall outside those recorded in the PV and offers a decipherment of the "seven vase" glyph as *tzin* ('sustenance'). Although space here is not sufficient to do justice to MacLeod's deep, multitiered analysis and discussion of the mythological episodes of the Baby Jaguar and Snake Lady, it is important to note that this kind of detailed work is beginning to make narratives not present in PV available for study and comparison with other contemporaneous datasets. MacLeod shows that the PV does not exhaust the Maya mythological corpus and therefore care must be taken not to shoehorn Classic period iconography into the narratives therein.

In chapter 9, Karen Bassie-Sweet and Nicholas A. Hopkins examine the eagle and laughing falcon in Classic-period Maya and Mesoamerican art and narrative, as well as these raptorial bird's relationship to a variety of deities. They astutely contest the blanket and often unsupported claim that many raptorial birds in Maya art are eagles and compellingly contest the identification of the *men* glyph as 'eagle'. Likewise, they critique the existence of the Principal Bird Deity and suggest that this label disguises distinctions between avian entities. I couldn't agree more with their assessment that the term should be retired. The diversity of avian creatures in Maya visual culture not only possibly represent avian avatars of specific deities but also distinct birds keyed to particular settings, which would parallel patterns seen in other Mesomeric visual traditions. Take, for example, the different birds that sit atop the directional trees on page 1 of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer or those found on the year-bearer pages in the Dresden Codex.

Part 4 begins with Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos's thoughtfully considered plea for greater methodological sophistication in the use of the PV in the interpretation of ancient imagery. He convincingly argues for an alternative interpretation of imagery built instead on Alfredo Lopez-Austin's idea of nodal and episodic Mesoamerican mythology which acknowledges core commonalities across Mesoamerica and the particular use of these narratives in specific historical contexts. Julia Guernsey reviews a range of imagery concerning the Principal Bird Deity, Seven Macaw (Vucub Caquix, *Wuqub' Kaqix*) from the PV, and imagery at Izapa. In particular, she attends to the division between mythology, history, and politics to make the important point that previous categorization of Mesoamerican imagery and narratives into these

slots conceals the ways in which such material was deployed in specific contexts to achieve specific political goals. Building on her observation that different elements of narratives can be emphasized by particular groups for a variety of political ends, I think it would also be interesting to contemplate the common motif of the hero figure—often a child—who is presented as having an antagonistic relationship with an evil step-grandmother at the beginning of the present epoch who corresponds in key ways to Vucub Caquix. Among the Teenek (Huastec Maya), this grandmother sometimes takes the form of a cannibalistic eagle who is eventually defeated by the hero Thipaaq, a maize and fertility deity. Such narratives present similar structures but emphasize specific elements to fit particular cultural needs. The final chapter, by Jesper Nielsen, Karl A. Taube, Christophe Helmke, and Héctor Escobedo, examines severed arm imagery that is often seen as related to the episode in the PV in which Vucub Caquix bites off the arm of one of the Hero Twins. They bring this narrative and imagery from ancient sources in the Maya area into conversation with data from across Mesoamerica to make a compelling argument that this moment in the PV emerges from a deep pan-Mesoamerican mythological tradition. I find it fascinating to think about this scene and their argument in relation to the equally widely distributed severed foot or footless entities that often are associated with telluric entities, such as Cipatli who in some narratives bites off Tezcatlipoca's foot or, in the Maya region, the Nah Kaan serpent who is the *way* or co-essence of the foot of the deity K'awiil.

Although a single volume can never exhaust the richness of the PV, the absence of some topics provokes a number of issues that are worth pointing out. That this volume excites such further questions is a testament to its success. First, although some chapters mention the founding of the K'iche' lineages and the events that happened once these founders received their patron gods, I was surprised that relatively little attention is paid to the second half of the PV. Indeed, one recent translation of the PV completely elided the second half of the narrative, seemingly neglecting to realize that it parallels key elements of the first 'mythological' half. This is a critical foundation upon which the book builds and it is a shame that this section of the narrative is not engaged more. Second, the PV as a literary object is not a major focus of analysis, apart from some portions of part 1 and some comments about the performative nature of the text. Much more could be done were the PV itself made the object of study rather than its use as a lens through which to view other datasets, periods, and regions within Mesoamerica. That would, of course, be a different kind of book—but one that would likely produce important insights for Maya literature, poetics, narrative, and mythology. Third, a key issue that this book brings to the fore is that we

need to better understand that narratives can have similar structure but nevertheless be used differently depending on their historical context. This comes through with clarity when the PV is placed into a larger Mesoamerican context. Finally, and in a similar vein, while a number of chapters work with Classic period narratives it is surprising that there is not a chapter that compares these earlier narratives to those in the PV, given that we have a much better understanding of the glyphic texts and Classic period mythology than we did even just a decade ago.

In total, this volume offers a highly compelling, multidisciplinary assessment of the research that has followed from Coe's initial use of the PV in his analysis of the iconography of painted Maya ceramics. It will be a valuable companion to any reading of the PV and opens a number of additional questions for future exploration. Collectively, the chapters offer a step forward in studies not only of the *Popol Vuh* but also of Maya mythology more broadly. It goes beyond many treatments wherein mythology is understood more as a tool for social control or legitimation rather than as an object of study in its own right and a window into a world conceptualization different from our own.

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