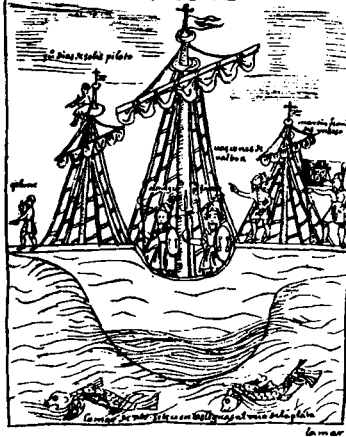


Dennis Tedlock

Writing and Reflection among the Maya

DISCOVERING
THE AMERICAS



1992 LECTURE SERIES

Working Papers

No. 4

Department of Spanish and Portuguese

University of Maryland

College Park

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Writing and Reflection among the Maya

After three tries, the gods finally succeeded in designing beings who not only wore the measure of a score on their very bodies, having toes and fingers that totaled twenty, but who knew how to act as the gods had always wanted vigesimal beings, who knew more than monkeys, to act. As it says in the *Popol Vuh*, the Book of Those Who Sit Together on the Mat, the Book that was written on this side of the Atlantic, this side of the Pacific, in the very middle of the Americas:

"Xech'awik, xetzijon puch. Xemuqunik, xetaoj puch. Xeb'inik, xechapinik. They talked and they made words. They looked and they listened. They walked, they worked."

And they knew how to walk to the right places on the right days, how to do the right work on the right days, how to speak the right words on the right days, from among all the days with thirteen numbers and twenty names, two-hundred-sixty in all, the days it takes from the time a vigesimal being first makes its presence known in the womb till the time it sees the light. The children and grandchildren of the first four couples have been counting the thirteen numbers and twenty names all the way down to the present day, thousands of times over, and we know that today is *Julajuj Aj*, Eleven Caneplant, day of the house, and if we could go south to the mountain of Tamanku, on the south side of the Town of Altars in the Guatemalan highlands, we would find the head of the day counters and keepers of that place burning copal incense and speaking the right words, completing the third stage in marking the middle of the world with a forty-day cross. Thirteen days ago, on *Julajuj Junajpu*, Eleven Marksman, he completed the east-to-west line he had started thirteen days before that, on *Julajuj Kej*, Eleven Deer. And thirteen days from now, on *Julajuj Kame*, Eleven Death, if we went to the mountain of Pipil on the north side of the Town of Altars, we would see him again, completing the south-to-north line he started today. These forty days and the way he marks them out in space are called "the sowing of the town," just as the marking out of the earth itself, all the way back at the beginning of time, is called "the sowing" in the Book.

The flesh of the first eight vigesimal beings was made of maize, the first of all maize, maize that came from a mountain whose name in the Book is *Pan Paxil*, Broken Place. It's not just

somewhere over the horizon, it's a real enough place to the west of the Town of Altars, over near the Mexican border, north of the town of Cuilco and south of the Pan-American highway, and the people who live over there still call it by the same name, still say it's the place where maize came from. And it's true that teosinte grows on that mountain, the only wild grain that crossbreeds with maize today, the closest thing to an ancient maize that would still know how to reseed itself without any help from vigesimal beings. It was yellow maize and white maize that went into their flesh, ground between slabs of basalt to nine degrees of fineness by a goddess named *Xmukane*, She Who Does a Favor, the midwife who came before all motherhood, wife of *Xpiyakoq*, He Who Puts in Order, the matchmaker who came before all marriage, the two of them so old the counting of days began with them.

And when the midwife had done her grinding, the fat for the first vigesimal beings came off her hands when she rinsed them. Around and out beyond that mountain and this one today, and countless mountains from the Rockies to the Andes, are people who keep their flesh and fat by eating maize, who grind it fine between two stones, who remember it cannot reseed itself. At the very beginning there weren't even eight beings made of maize, but only Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar. Each of the four, in and of herself/himself, was called a "motherfather," spoken as just one word. But they had no children, no need of children, and they had no need to go on long walks that took them up in the mountains or across the plains, no need to know whether it was Eleven Caneplant or some other day. Here are the words of the Book itself:

"Their vision came all at once. Perfectly they saw, perfectly they knew everything under the sky, whenever they looked. The moment they turned around and looked around in the sky, on the earth, everything was seen without any obstruction. They didn't have to walk around before they could see what was under the sky; they just stayed where they were." And there is more:

"Their sight passed through trees, through rocks, through lakes, through seas, through mountains, through plains." And finally:

"They sighted the four sides, the four corners in the sky, on the earth," so says the Ancient Word.

Their limits, then, were those of the world itself. The only thing such beings might miss would be something that lay outside what sky and earth could comprehend—or "skyearth" as the Book

often has it written, bringing the world to a single word. Or else these beings might miss something that happened even faster than they could turn their heads to look around, or look up in the air or into the earth. Whatever space may have been for them, it was no more than turnings and twistings of their heads; there was no need for the measures of hand or foot. Whatever time may have been, it was no more than the time it took to do those twistings and turnings; there would have been no need for the measures made by celestial lights, even if the sun, moon, and stars we see today had already been there at the beginning.

But as for us today, we cannot see what is on top of Tamanku until we climb up there, and we cannot see around to the other three mountains before we get up high enough, or before we find a break in the trees, nor can we see much sky. Even from the top we cannot see as far as the sea, nor can we see what lies behind the next mountain, nor even inside the forest all around us, nor beneath the dirt and broken basalt we stand on. According to the Book it was the gods who put us in this position. It wasn't anything we did, unless we made a mistake in just being the way we were when they made us, nor was it anything anyone persuaded us to do, unless it was the gods themselves who persuaded us, back in the time when it was a matter of mere conversation to talk with the gods. If we're to get any answers from anyone, up there in the sky or down in this ground, it'll have to be in our minds' ears, or we'll have to decipher an animal's ominous cry, or read an animal's sudden move, or smell the wind if it blows the smoke of our offerings back in our faces, or feel an answer in our very blood.

It was the gods who began the conversation with the first vigesimal beings, the same gods whose works and designs they were. In the Book the opening words of the makers are written this way:

"What do you know about your being? Don't you look, don't you listen? Isn't your speech good, and your walk? So you must look, to see out under the sky. Don't you see the mountainplain clearly? So try it." And what did Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar see when they used their own eyes?

"Then they saw everything under the sky perfectly." And having taken a look around, they took their turn in the dialogue that was opened by the gods, saying:

"Truly then, double thanks, triple thanks, now we have twenty

and now we have mouths, have faces, we speak, we listen, we wonder, we move, our knowledge is good and we've understood what is far and near, and we've seen what is great and small under the sky, on the earth. Thanks to thee we've been formed, we've come to be made and modeled, thou grandmother of ours, thou grandfather of ours."

The gods should've been pleased with this performance. For the first time they had succeeded at making beings who could weave the sounds of their voices into patterns of sameness and difference, who could speak in paradigms. They had been disappointed in birds, who made sounds that resembled words but merely repeated themselves, over and over. Vigesimal beings didn't just say something like "thanks, thanks, thanks" and so on, but could say, "double thanks, triple thanks." Most of their paradigms were double, but they could also say things like, "we speak, we listen, we wonder, we move." They could even take a phrase like "now we have twenty," and instead of making a paradigm by changing "twenty" to some other word, they could weave in another, smaller paradigm, saying "now we have mouths, have faces." And all by itself, at the very head of this tapestry of sound and meaning, they formed a word the gods heard as "truly."

Yet the makers and modelers heard something in this first human speech that led them to hold a conversation among themselves, as gods in the plural seem to do whenever anything's afoot. The Book, as it comes down to us, doesn't say whether the four motherfathers could hear the discussion. Perhaps it took place behind their backs, quicker than they could turn around and lean forward to hear it. Even so, the words of the gods came to be written in the Book. Someone among them began as follows:

"What our works and designs have said is no good."

What could the gods have read as "no good" in the words of their works and designs? Was there too much variation in the patterns of sameness and difference, should all the paradigms have been simple dual ones? Worse yet, was the paradigm consisting of "double thanks, triple thanks" an ironic comment on duality? And were triple thanks not enough, was it some kind of sacrifice that was wanted?

Or was it rather something the works and designs omitted to say, their failure to mention feet and hands for walking and working, did these creatures think they had nothing but mouths and faces? Should they have called the gods by proper names and glorified them with epithets, instead of calling them grandmother

and grandfather? As it happens, the same god who found fault with words of the motherfathers gives us some help here, quoting just what it was that caused concern:

“‘We’ve understood everything, great and small,’ they say.”

That’s more of an interpretation than a quotation, taking the form of a summary that turns on a word that doesn’t even occur in the original statement, namely, “everything.” Elsewhere in the Book the same sort of thing happens to the words of the gods themselves, as their own messengers unfailingly fail to quote them exactly. The scribes who transmitted and retransmitted the Book from one manuscript to another could’ve made all these quotes match up with their sources, but they didn’t. For that matter, they didn’t make one copy of the Book itself exactly match another. The ancient scribes who only read and wrote characters of the New World kind, proceeding by word and syllable, added comments and noted recent events. So did the later scribes who read the ancient characters but rewrote them as the consonants and vowels of Old World letters, creating the version of the Book we’ve been reading here. We seem to be entering a world where there is no reproduction, where every act of representation is also an act of interpretation.

One thing is plain, and that is that one of the gods interprets the statement of the motherfathers as meaning they’ve “understood everything.” He goes on as follows:

“What should we do with them now? Their vision should at least reach nearby, they should at least see a small part of the face of the earth, but what they’re saying isn’t good. Aren’t they merely ‘works’ and ‘designs’ in their very names? Yet they’ll become as great as gods, unless they procreate, proliferate at the sowing, the dawning, unless they increase.”

What was meant by “the sowing, the dawning” was the setting and dawning of the sun, moon, and stars, and the sowing and sprouting of yellow maize, white maize, spotted maize, all of which had yet to happen. Another god continues:

“Let it be this way: now we’ll take them apart just a little, that’s what we need,” and this, according to the Book, is what happened to the foursome, to Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar:

‘Xmoyik keje ri xuxlab’ix uwach lemo’, x moyomob’ik ub’aq’ kiwach. Xa naqaj chik xemuqun wi xere chi q’alaj ri e c’o wi’. They were blinded as the face of a mirror is breathed upon. Their vision flickered. Now it was only when they looked nearby that

things were clear.”

Once the gods had done this, they made a second set of four vigesimal beings so that the eight together could procreate instead of simply remaining complete to themselves for all time. The first woman named in the Book, Celebrated Seahouse, became the wife of Jaguar Quitze, and the second, Prawn House, became the wife of Jaguar Night. The name of the wife of Not Right Now seems to be *Tz'ununija*, Hummingbird House, but it might also be read as *Tz'ununija'*, Water Hummingbird, that hovering, darting bird we know as the kingfisher. The fourth woman, Macaw House, became the wife of True Jaguar. Those who had been motherfathers became fathers, and those who were newly created became mothers. Except for the fourth couple.

Macaw House and True Jaguar had no children, or at least no sons, but neither did they give up their vision. They became the first human diviners of the kind called “those who look into the middle,” reaching beyond the time and place where they were by gazing into water.

There have been motherfathers in every generation since the time when people were divided into wives and husbands, here in these mountains and on the plains all around and between them. The man who taught my wife and myself the ways of a daykeeper is a motherfather, the living bearer of the visible face of whichever motherfather may have stood at the beginning of his line of descent, long before the birth of his father's father's father, past the point where the memory of the names of the men and their wives blacks out. He knows what all motherfathers know: that the left side of everyone's body is female and the right side is male, though only half of this is true, for any particular vigesimal being, when people insist on thinking in strictly physical terms. He looks after the holy places on his own lands and those of his brothers, praying for the increase of their children, their animals, their crops, their money. He knows how to investigate the unseen events of days behind and ahead of the present one, counting day numbers and names and reading their portents. If someone stops him in the street to tell a puzzling dream that came in the darkness, in the night, he is obligated to help them give it the clarity of day.

Once vigesimal beings could no longer see everything under the sky and on the earth just by turning their heads, they wandered around in darkness, in the cold before the sun first rose, somewhere over near the eastern edge of the sky. They “mul-

tiplied and flowered," in the words of the Book, until there were many tribes, all walking around. They prayed to the gods who had made them, naming their names, but they stood in front of nothing while they prayed. They kept watching the east for Sunbringer, the great star that would rise before Sun himself was born. The only stars at that time were those of Seven Macaw and his wife, Shield, or what we call the Big and Little Dipper, and a little later came the Fistful of Boys, the Pleiades. That was all the light they had from the sky, and the only way they had of making offerings to the gods was to fast.

Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar were weary of having no destination and praying in front of nothing. The Book says they spoke to one another like this:

"Let's just go. We'll look and see whether there is something to keep as our sign. We'll find out what we should burn in front of it. The way we are right now, we have nothing to keep as our own."

They heard of a great city, a city that was somehow already there, and went to it. People from all the different tribes gathered in the city, and each was assigned to its own district. The Book says they called the place by several different names, one of which was *Tulan* or *Tolan*. That word meant Place of Cattails in the Mexican language from which it came, but in the Mayan language spoken by the four motherfathers and their tribe it came to mean Abandoned Place, Lonely Place, Place with Only the Sounds of Insects. They also called it *Suyua*, a word from a language no one understands in our own time, a word that came to mean "riddle." And they called it Seven Caves, Seven Canyons. All of these are names of great fame in the middle of the Americas, but they always seem to gather themselves around a city that has already receded into the past, a city not quite of this earth. After the Old World Book came across the Atlantic, some people thought that city was Babylon. Still later, there were people who preferred to look across the opposite ocean, toward Shambala. And still others turned the tables, insisting that the real Babylon or the real Shambala had been right here in this misnamed New World all along.

The New World Book makes it clear that we should look for Tulan to the east of the town where it was written, which is east of the Town of Altars. Further clues are given by another document, written by members of a tribe that entered Tulan shortly after the first four motherfathers, the Fire Trees, the

Cakchiquels. They say there were four cities named Tulan, one in each of the four directions. All the tribes whose lands are now in the Guatemalan mountains went to the eastern Tulan and paid tribute there. Then comes the best clue:

'Xa jun chi sotz' chapib'al ri chij ri Tulan. The insignia of the royal line of Tulan was a bat."

So there we are. Straight to the east, over on the other side of the border with Honduras, still in the mountains but not far above the lowland rain forest, are the ruins of a great city, the easternmost member of an ancient confederation of four Mayan cities. Today it is known as Copán, but its ancient heraldic emblem was written as shown here. The original name of the city may be included in the characters of the emblem, and very soon we may know how to read that name aloud. What we can read already is the head in profile at the center, which is that of a leaf-nosed bat.



According to the scribes who transcribed the Book into alphabetic writing, during what we call the sixteenth century, the prior method of writing came from the great eastern city. Nothing on paper survives there today, except perhaps as thin strata of black and white specks in a spadeful of earth, but the stone monuments and buildings are covered with inscriptions. Sometimes the language that speaks from the glyphs seems to be lowland Mayan, like the language of the cities in the rain forest itself, but there are other glyphs that seem to make no sense unless they are sounded out in a highland Mayan language like that of the Book. Either way, numerous dates can be read in the numbers, running from the 1,195,200th day to the 1,429,845th day of what the Maya reckoned as the present era—or, to put that in terms of the present era of the Old World, from December 16, 159 A.D. until February 8, 822 A.D. The fifty years before that last date saw the reign of the greatest in a long line of kings, but his name, New Sky on the Horizon, must've seemed ominous in retrospect. During the reign of his successor, Sire of the Dagger, the confederation collapsed and all four cities were abandoned. The Book casts the shadow of disaster backward over the entire history of the eastern city, consigning it to the darkness before the sun first rose.

Whoever was king when the first four motherfathers arrived in that city, they got what they had come for. Along with the motherfathers of all the other tribes that had flowered by then,

they each received "something to keep" as a sign. That something was a being with divine power, but an animate being who could live among people here on the earth—a daimon, or what those who live by the Old World Book call a demon, a particular species of daimon that slowly revealed itself to have a large appetite, a daimon whose name in this part of the New World means "gaping mouth." Even in the Guatemalan mountains the species is no longer living, if living the life of an animate being means keeping body and spirit together in the same place at the same time, and in fact it had already ceased to live by the time the bearers of the Old World Book got here. The living daimon belonged to the darkness before the sun first rose.

Each individual daimon had a name, and the one given into the keeping of Jaguar Quitze was named *Tojil*, or at least that's what he ended up being called. It means "having the character of Toj," and Toj is one of the twenty day names. Jaguar Night received *Awilix*, whose name has too much patina to give us even a hint of his character. *Jaqawitz*, the name of the daimon received by Not Right Now, came from the lowland language, but the scribes who rewrote the ancient characters of the Book as letters of the alphabet, seven centuries after the great eastern city was abandoned, still remembered that it meant "Open Mountain."

As for True Jaguar, the name of his daimon, *Nik'aj Taq'aj*, is plainly "Middle of the Plain." When he and his wife Macaw House carried on their practice as seers, "looking into the middle," perhaps it was Middle of the Plain they looked into.

Among all the daimons received by the first four mother-fathers, only one of them, *Tojil*, seems to allow us to get any closer than we already have. Only *Tojil* seems risky, if looking for signs of life in a dead god is risky. I say dead because no one prays to him or sends him the smoke of offerings today, unless perhaps they call him by other names. Two score and four days ago was the day named *Waqib' Toj*, Six Toj, and if we had gone up on the hill at the very middle of the Town of Altars on that day, we would've heard a whole crowd of people calling out to the lord who rules that day. Instead of saying, "Come hither, Lord Eleven Canepant," the words we might hear on Tamanku today, we would've heard them saying, "Come hither, Lord Six Toj." But the name Toj may have been around before there ever was a *Tojil*, and it goes on without him today. Unless the day got its character from him, rather than the other way around. There was once a time when people owed *Tojil* great debts, and Toj remains

a day of payment.

If the name Tojil came from the same language as Jaqawitz, there may have been a time when it meant "having the character of clouds massing together," or even "of thunder." But when the speakers of that language carved the names of gods in stone, more than a thousand years ago, they wrote Tojil as *Tajil*, which gave him the character of a burning splint of fat pine and, by way of a play on words, a mirror made of obsidian. When his image was sculpted in stone or stucco he could be read either way: he had a torch in his forehead, and the forehead itself was a black mirror. Sometimes there was a stone ax head in place of the torch, and just as an ax has one handle, so Tajil was often shown with only one leg, a long handle in the form of a serpent. Tajil was a mere boy or even a baby in size, but his ax was a lightning-striking ax with a flaming blade. Or else Tajil himself was an ax, handle and all.

Tajil cannot be thought, cannot be looked at all at once.

Tajil the ax, Tajil the torch, Tajil the flaming blade.

Tajil the boy whose leg becomes a serpent.

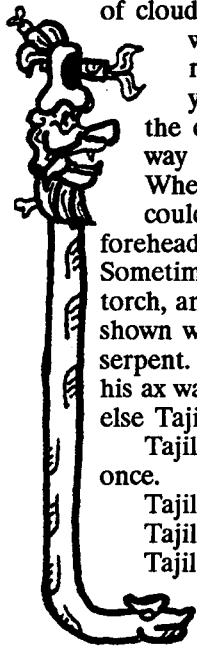
Tajil the serpent who grows a leg, grows a boy.

By the time Jaguar Quitze received Tajil as his sign, his daimon, his gaping mouth, Tajil had already become Tojil. No one knows precisely what he looked like by that time. No likeness in wood or stone survives, or on plaster or paper, unless some object in a museum somewhere or some figure in a document is Tojil and we don't know it, at least not yet. So far we have only the words of the Book, and they tell us that Tojil, like Tajil, had his fire. When Jaguar Quitze and his people were still in the eastern city where they received Tojil, a great hailstorm came and put everyone's fire out. They told him:

"Tojil, we'll be finished off by the cold," and he said,

"Well, do not grieve." He started a fire by doing a pirouette while his sandal stayed put. So there he was, standing on one leg, and his foot was the point of a fire drill and his sandal held the socket. If Tajil had the handle of an ax in the place of a leg, Tojil had the shaft of a fire drill. Either way there was fire where a foot would have been.

So the people whose daimon was Tojil were warmed by Tojil's



fire, and it seems that all the other people with the first four motherfathers were also warmed by Tojil. As for the people of other tribes, they just went on chattering and shivering. Finally, with "great pain in their hearts," they came to Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar, saying,

"Perhaps we wouldn't make ourselves ashamed in front of you if we asked to remove a little something from your fire?" The motherfathers then had a private conversation with Tojil, asking him what they should ask in exchange for a share in the fire he had started with his foot.

"Very well. You will tell them:

"Don't they want to be suckled on their sides and under their arms? Isn't it their heart's desire to embrace me? I, who am Tojil? But if there is no desire, then I'll not give them their fire," says Tojil. "When the time comes, not right now, they'll be suckled on their sides, under their arms," he says to you, 'you will say,' they were told.

Talking was something Tojil never did except with the four motherfathers. The tribes without fire only heard his words in a quotation inside a quotation inside a quotation, as Jaguar Quitze told them that Tojil had told him to tell them that he had told them the words in the innermost quote marks, words he said to say were said "to you," even though they were said in the third person plural. To all of which the tribes replied,

"Very well. Let him suckle. And very well, we shall embrace him." As if they were consenting to the adoption of an infant. Tojil the infant, this Tojil we see in crumbling stucco relief now the color of bone, down in the ruins of the westernmost of the four great cities of the confederation, the one now known as Palenque, close to the Gulf of Mexico. Tajil, cradled on the arm of a lady in one panel, on the arm of a lord in another. His left leg, just where his foot would begin, becomes a snake, the only part of the sculpture that still has its color, a blue snake whose head is held on the palm of the lady's or lord's left hand. Tajil the infant is not shown at the moment of being suckled by anyone, but Tajil's blue snake has a wide enough gape to swallow a person.

The tribes without fire consented to the request of the infant Tojil without knowing that even the innermost quote marks concealed one last layer, without knowing what it would mean, in the end, to embrace the gape named Tojil and let him suckle. What he wanted was their blood and their very hearts. The day

would come when the White Dagger, a knife of chert chipped down to a fine edge, would make an incision that began below the armpit, between the sixth and seventh ribs, running all the way across the chest to the same spot on the opposite side, and out would come the heart in exchange for fire.

Once the matter of fire had been settled, the first four motherfathers left the eastern city and took their whole tribe with them. All the other tribes left too, making that city indeed the Place with Only the Sounds of Insects. It wasn't easy to leave, at least not for Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar: the Book says "they tore themselves away from there." Tojil was the one who wanted to go. "He actually spoke to them," he was still a living member of his species of daimon, not a voice in the ear or an apparition.

Now the four motherfathers and their wives and all their tribe, together with other tribes, set off on the long journey that would lead them westward and upward, away from the edge of the rain forest and into the forests of oak and pine. Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar were all bent under the weight of backpacks, leaning forward on their walking sticks. Seated in their backpacks, riding high enough to look over their shoulders, were the beings with the gaping mouths, daimons who did favors for vigesimal beings, who gave them advice about things that were too far away to be clear to beings whose mirror of the world had been breathed upon. And perhaps they had a copy of the Book with them, too.

When the tribes came as far as the region now known as Vera Paz, they passed a place named *Nim Xol Karchaj*, Great Abyss at Fish Place, somewhere near the town now known as St. Peter Fish Place. Perhaps the people of the tribe that stayed there instead of coming all the way up into the highlands still know precisely where the Great Abyss is. But everything under foot there is karst, rotten limestone full of round depressions, some of them shallow and some of them hundreds of meters deep, pools at their bottoms or else black holes that drain them down. There are long depressions that look like gulches, but this kind of gulch heads up on the side of a hill, winds its way along, and then stops dead against the side of another hill. There are rivers, too, but this kind of river has a way of dropping into a cave and then, miles away, coming back out in the light again. Or else it never comes out.

Whichever hole or cave is the Great Abyss itself, the Book

speaks of a sheer drop, of churning water, and a tricky choice among four paths. One of those paths, the black one, goes down to the Place of Fear, the underworld whose highest-ranking rulers, named *Jun Kame* and *Wuqub' Kame* or One Death and Seven Death, are lords of all the days named Death. And it was them, down beneath the very feet of the people who walked on by the Great Abyss, who stood in the way of the dawning, who held it back. Dead at their hands were *Jun Junajpu* and *Wuqub' Junajpu* or One Marksman and Seven Marksman, lords of all the days named Marksman, sons of the first matchmaker and midwife, the old couple who started the very counting of days. The dead brothers were destined to rise as the evening and morning star, but they had entered the Great Abyss and gone down to the Place of Fear as daimons of the kind who still had flesh and blood in those days. Seven Marksman now lay buried and so, except for his head, did One Marksman. His head was up in the fork of a tree that grew in the west, put there by order of the lords of Death on a day named Death.

The tree had always been barren, but on that day it became the first calabash tree, covered with pale fruit the size of a human skull, and the name of the day was henceforth written as a skull.



On the day after Death, the one named Deer, a woman went to look at the tree. She was *Xkik'*, Moonblood, daughter of *Kuchuma Kik'*, Blood Gatherer, one of the lesser lords of the Place of Fear. From out of the tree the skull of One Marksman spoke to

her, and when she insisted that she wanted to pick some fruit, he asked her to hold out her right hand where he could see it. The name of that day came to be written as a cupped right hand. The



skull spit in Moonblood's palm. She saw it happen, but when she took a look there was nothing in her hand. He told her,

"It's just a sign I've given you, my saliva, my spittle." The spit gave its sign at the moment it vanished, pointing to Moonblood's right hand, her male hand. She had wanted fruit and the palm of her hand said it was hers. And the right side said the fruit would be male. Seven days short of nine moons later, she gave birth to twin boys, destined to avenge the slaying of their father and uncle.

The twins were born up here on the surface of the earth. One of them was Marksman, named after One and Seven Marksman but without any number, and the other was *Xb'alanq'e*,

Little Jaguar Sun or Little Hidden Sun. In their youth they played ball near the Great Abyss, but by the time the tribes came by they may well have been away on one of their adventures, down in the place their mother came from. They really went through hell, finding their way through each of the practical jokes, booby traps, fun houses, and rigged ball games devised by the lords of that place, all of which were calculated to kill. If they succeeded in only seeming to be killed, the way would be open for the dawning all the tribes had been waiting for. Marksman would rise as the sun, and Little Hidden Sun would rise as the full moon.

But the face of the earth was still dark when the four motherfathers and their tribe left the Great Abyss behind and continued up into the highlands. They still had three other tribes with them when they got as far as the mountain that came to be named *Chi Pixab'*, Advice, after what was about to happen there. It seems that all those people knew, even before their gods told them so, that the time had come for them to divide and go their separate ways. For the first time the tribes took on names. Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar called themselves and all their descendants *K'iche* or Quiché, a name that means "Many Trees." They are called Quiché today, and their language is Quiché, and the town they were destined to build southwest of Advice was and still is Quiché. When Mexicans came to these mountains from the west in later times they called the whole country Guatemala, which meant "Many Trees" in their language.

When the Quiché motherfathers and their wives went up on the peak named Advice they fasted. They had only a single gourdful of atole, a gruel made of maize. Perhaps the gods were getting harder to hear from by now. But on that mountain they did speak, saying,

"Let's just go, let's just get up, let's not stay here. Please give us places to hide. It's nearly dawn. Wouldn't you look pitiful if we became mere plunder for warriors?"

And the motherfathers all went out searching from there, packing the gods on their backs again. One by one they entered the forest that covers what is known today as the Sierra de Chuacús. Jaguar Quitze, first in rank among the four motherfathers, was the last to come away from Advice and last to find a place for his god. He climbed a peak not far east of Quiché, and there, in a small clearing, he lifted Tojil from his backpack and gave him a place to sit. The mountain was then called *Patojil*,

“Tojil’s Place,” and it still is.

The Book says there were “masses of serpents and masses of jaguars, rattlesnakes, yellowbites” all around Tojil’s Place when he was first hidden there. And they say today that if you come to such a place, to any high place that has a hearth for offerings, a gaping mouth, and if you have touched your woman or man on that day, or quarreled or fought on that day, or if you have let your gods go thirsty and hungry too long, then a puma will show his face here, or a jaguar, a rattler, or that viper with the yellow lower jaw, the fer-de-lance. The Lord of the World, the lord of this earth, the lord of this mountain, the lord of this day, whatever their names, they all have mouths.

Once Tojil, Awilix, Open Mountain, and Middle of the Plain were all in place, the four motherfathers came back together to go on waiting for the dawn, this time on the mountain called Open Mountain, and just one tribe, their own Quiché people, came up and waited with them. Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar kept on looking eastward into the darkness, waiting for the coming of Sunbringer, but the sight of the great star didn’t give itself up with ease. The Book makes the object of their quest sound more like a dream than a dawn, but a difficult dream, the kind that is sought with the waking will:

“There was no rest, no sleep for them. They cried their hearts and their guts out, there at the dawning and clearing, and so they looked terrible. Great sorrow, great anguish overcame them; they were marked by their pain.” Perhaps they dreamed the star even before they saw it come out from behind the eastern horizon, catching sight of a light that does not rise but is suddenly there. It could even be that they saw the light both ways on the same morning, one way and then the other, or even sought to make the one light coincide with the other. One great star in the east, back in the same direction as the city they’d deserted. From out of the past, the light of dawn.

If the people on Open Mountain could’ve known everything that was happening during the last year before the coming of Sunbringer, a year that would have begun on the day *Oxlajuj Iq’*, Thirteen Wind, they might’ve lost their nerve. Everything depended on the deadly games Marksman and Little Jaguar Sun were playing with the lords of Death, and just five days before *Jun Kej*, One Deer, the first day of what ought to have been a new year and the first real year, they would meet their death—and would even seem to embrace it. The day of their death was Nine

Wind; it was marked by an appearance of the great star, but in its western role as the bringer of night.

But perhaps the motherfathers *did* know what had been going on all this time. If they had had a copy of the Book with them, they could have *read* about it. In the days when the Book was written by words and syllables rather than by letters, and when it was amply illustrated, it was called by the same term as a crystal used for gazing, and by the same term that is used for eyeglasses and telescopes and microscopes today: *ilb'al*, "instrument for seeing." It offered a way of compensating for the damage the gods had done to the distant vision of vigesimal beings. Indeed, it served as a field guide to the gods themselves, describing their habitats, ranges, tracks, and identifying marks.

One copy of the complete guide to Sunbringer survives today, far away in Dresden. One of its chapters is an astronomical table that predicts both the evening and morning comings and goings of the great star, as observed by the naked eye. In the columns that give the dates on which the star was due to come out of hiding and reappear in the east, the day Seven Marksman is easy to find. What comes as a surprise is that there was only one date in all of Mayan history when a Seven Marksman morning star would've been expected in a One Deer year that began five days after a Nine Wind evening star. We seem to have entered a world where a story that goes along sounding like a myth may suddenly make a claim on history.

The dawn the four motherfathers had long been waiting for fell on the 1,596,780th day of the New World's present era, or on June 5, 1259 of the Old World's. Interpreted as history, it wasn't the first of all dawns but the dawn of the Quiché kingdom, whose first capital was located at Open Mountain. The promise the other tribes had made long ago, to embrace the gape named Tojil and let him suckle, was about to fall due.

When the day Seven Marksman dawned on Open Mountain, after the long darkness, Sunbringer looked really bright to the four motherfathers, Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Not Right Now, and True Jaguar. With their hearts now set at rest, they held out dishes of burning copal, eastward toward the great star, shaking them back and forth and side to side to keep the smoke coming. They were standing, facing the same direction they'd come from, and the Book says they were "crying sweetly." But then they called out for the birth of Sun himself.

As the moment neared all the animals came up on mountain

peaks and looked toward the light, greeting the dawn with cries as they do now. The first sound came from a parrot, then pumas and jaguars were heard. And while eagles, white vultures, and smaller birds were spreading their wings, vigesimal beings knelt down, whether they were there on Open Mountain or up on some other peak. In the words of the Book,

“There were countless peoples, but there was just one dawn for all tribes.” It was the same dawn even for tribes the Quiché people hadn’t seen since the time when all of them left the city, and it was the same day on the calendar. Vigesimal beings know how to count, how to keep track of where they are in time. Even though the people on Open Mountain couldn’t see the people on other mountains, some of them far beyond the horizon, they could imagine just what those people might be doing at this very moment, on the damp morning of Seven Marksman. When the next day came, *Wajxaqib’ Imox*, Eight Lefthanded, they humbled themselves before the ruler of the current year, Lord One Deer, and again they could imagine what other people might be doing far away. And on and on for as long as there was light, as long as there were days to count.

All the earth was soggy when Sun himself came up, but even when he’d risen a short distance it got drier. He wasn’t just a face but looked like a whole burning person, and he was every bit as hot as that. Some animals were turned into small stones, especially the ones with powerful mouths—puma, jaguar, fer-de-lance—and they remained as gapes, or gods, who need food and drink from vigesimal beings to this very day. And the daimons who were still on the earth, the ones with human form, were also turned to stone. Awilix, Open Mountain, and Tojil himself all turned to stone. In other places it happened to all the other daimons. All except one.

It was *Saq K’oxol*, Shining Sparkstriker, who escaped, a daimon who has never been only female or only male, who has never belonged to any particular tribe, who has never been put in an arbor or house. The Book says s/he fled into the deep shade of the forest, taking the petrified animals with her/m, and so does Mateo Uz Abaj, a man who lives near Tojil’s Place. S/he remains today as a gamekeeper for these stones with hungry mouths, but s/he her/mself is some other species of daimon.

But the heat of the first dawn did leave its mark on Shining Sparkstriker. Whenever people catch a glimpse of her/m in a forest, in a cave, or on a back street late at night, s/he is red all

over, from her/s hat right down to her/s shoes, or rather the one shoe. S/he lost the other one fleeing from the heat, and it shrank and turned to stone. One day not so many years ago, while don Mateo was out walking, he happened to find it in a clearing. It's a smooth, heavy, reddish stone of obvious igneous origin, about the size of a rabbit's foot, and very much in the shape of a shoe. He keeps it in the bundle that holds his divining equipment, the red seeds he uses to count the days. Why there? Because Shining Sparkstriker is also a daykeeper.

Back when the New World Book was written, the word sparkstriker all by itself, *k'oxol*, was the term for stones that were used to strike fire. So Shining Sparkstriker escaped into the forest with her/s own kind of fire, not the distant fire of Sun, not the fire off the wooden foot of Tojil as he spins in his sandal, but fire made with stones. Today s/he carries a stone ax that strikes lightning.

Everyone who lives in these mountains has heard of Shining Sparkstriker, whether or not they've ever caught a glimpse of her/m. But no one gives the name Tojil to any daimon they dream or call upon today, much less the name Tajil, left behind a thousand years ago. These names turn up only in archives, only in excavations—and yet, once we've read them, even spoken them aloud, we start catching glimpses of Tajil the lightning-striking ax, or hearing the echo of Tojil whose name was once Thunder. Tajil/Tojil, with one odd foot. This hard little shoe that weighs in the hand. It looks like something smelted from ore. If we read it as a sign, a character recovered from a shattered inscription, it tells us Tojil got his sandal really hot.

Or else Sun got Sparkstriker's shoe really hot. Never again has he felt so hot as on that first day. After all, that was the only day Sun himself has ever been seen. In the words of the Book,

“Since he revealed himself only when he was born, it is only his reflection that now remains.” The scribes who transposed these words from characters into letters felt the need to add an interpretation—or, to phrase the matter more the way it is phrased in Quiché, they felt the need to tell the reader *what these words would say if we could hear what was hidden inside them*, namely,

“The sun that shows itself is not the real sun.”

Down around the Great Abyss today, in a tribe whose members the Book reckons as relatives of the Quiché, they at least allow us the sight of Sun for half of each day. They say that

when he reached noon on the day of his first appearance, he placed a mirror at the center of the sky and then doubled back, unseen, to the east. During the second half of that day only his reflection was seen, and so it has been on every day since.

"Reflection," those people say, and so says the Book. *Lemo'* is the word, and it's also the term for mirror. But this mirror reflects, during the second half of the day, what Sun did during the first half. Or else it reflects, during our own times, what Sun did only once, and long ago. Coming here among these Mayan tribes, we seem to have entered a world where reflections are not simultaneous with the things reflected. Reading the Book, we may guess that reflections ceased to be simultaneous the moment vigesimal beings lost their perfect vision, when "they were blinded as the face of a mirror is breathed upon."

And what about the reflection in an ordinary mirror, seen close up? Leaving the land where they say *lemo'* and coming back home won't help. If any face is the true face of a vigesimal being, it's the one we all see in the mirror.

Bibliographical Note

This essay is excerpted from *Breath on the Mirror*, a work in progress. November 10, 1988, the day the essay was read aloud at the University of Maryland, was Eleven Caneplant on the Mayan calendar. For more on the calendar, and on the daykeepers and motherfathers of the "Town of Altars" (Momostenango) in Guatemala, see Barbara Tedlock, *Time and the Highland Maya*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1982.

Words in Quiché and Cakchiquel are written here in the new alphabet of the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, as described in *Lenguas mayas de Guatemala: documento de referencia para la pronunciación de los nuevos alfabetos oficiales*, Guatemala, Instituto Indigenista Nacional, 1988. Sounds are approximately as in Spanish, except that *q* is like Hebrew *qoph*, *tz* is like English *ts*, *x* is like English *sh*, and ' indicates the glottal stop (when it follows a vowel) or glottalization (when it follows a consonant). Quotations from the text of the Popol Vuh incorporate my own emendations and have been converted to the new alphabet; they are based on the manuscript in the Newberry Library in Chicago, which has been published in facsimile in Francisco Ximénez, *Popol Vuh*, Guatemala, José de Pineda Ibarra, 1973. The Cakchiquel quotation, again with emendations and orthographic changes, is from Daniel G. Brinton, *The Annals of the Cakchiquels*, Philadelphia, Library of Aboriginal American Literature, 1885, p. 70.

Translations from Quiché, with some revisions, are from Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1985. I base my translation of the Cakchiquel passage, which is quite different from all previously published versions, on the entries under *chapbal* and *chij* in Francisco de Varela, "Calepino en lengua cakchiquel," manuscript copy (1699) by

Francisco Cerón, in the library of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, typescript paleography (1929) by William Gates, in the library of Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

The present-day Maya who know the location of Broken Place are the Mam, as revealed in Suzanne W. Miles, "Mam Residence and the Maize Myth," in *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, edited by Stanley Diamond, New York, Octagon Books, 1981, pp. 430-36.

The ancient Mayan cities in league with Copán were the ones now known as Tikal, Calakmul, and Palenque (Joyce Marcus, *Emblem and State in the Classic Maya Lowlands*, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, 1986, pp. 11-22). The dates cited for Copán are the earliest and latest known for a line of kings that ruled the city at its height; the site was already very old when they took over, but earlier dates have yet to be found among its inscriptions (Linda Schele, "Stele I and the Founding of the City of Copán," *Copán Notes* 30, 1987, and "U Cit Tok, the Last King of Copán," *Copán Notes* 21, 1987). The equivalent dates on the Christian (Julian) Calendar are given according to the 584283 correlation, which is the one that fits ethnohistorical sources. I have retranslated the names of the last two kings. It is Floyd G. Lounsbury who has found words that can only come from a Quichean language (here called a "highland" language) at Copán (paper delivered at the Northeast Mesoamerica Conference, Buffalo, 1988, and personal communication).

My interpretation of the sign given to Moonblood follows contemporary Quiché divinatory practice (see Barbara Tedlock, *Time and the Highland Maya*, chap. 6). The main arguments for my astronomical and calendrical interpretations of events in the story of Moonblood and her twin sons are given in Dennis Tedlock, "The Sowing and Dawning of All the Sky-Earth: Sun, Moon, Stars, and Maize in the Popol Vuh," in *New Theories on the Ancient Maya*, edited by Elin Danien, University Museum Monographs, Philadelphia (in press). The Julian date for the Seven Marksman rising of the morning star in a One Deer year is based on the Mayan Venus calendar that took effect on June 13, 1227 (584283 correlation), set forth in the hieroglyphic book known as the Dresden Codex (see Floyd G. Lounsbury, "The Base of the Venus Tables in the Dresden Codex, and its Significance in the Calendar Correlation Problem," in *Calendars in Mesoamerica and Peru: Native American Computations of Time*, edited by Anthony F. Aveni and Gordon Brotherston, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 174, Oxford, 1983).

For more on the mirror and its relationship to discourse, see Dennis Tedlock, "Mayan Linguistic Ideology," in *On the Ethnography of Communication: The Legacy of Sapir*, edited by Paul V. Kroskity, Los Angeles, University of California at Los Angeles, Department of Anthropology (1988), pp. 92-101.



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