



## Gendering the Hero Twins in the Popol Vuh

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### Introduction

The Popol Vuh, an epic historical narrative authored by K'iche' Maya peoples in highland Guatemala, has been widely judged as the "most distinguished example" of surviving native American literature (Morley in Recinos, 1950:ix). It was written in European script in the K'iche' language, most likely between 1554-1558, three decades after the Spanish invasion and consequent destruction of the principal K'iche' capital, Utatlan. That original document is now presumed lost, but it was copied by a Dominican friar, Francisco Ximénez (Estrada, 1973), at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Carmack, 1973:25; Recinos, 1950:23).

Narrated in third person, the story opens with cosmic creation: the lifting of the earth out of the sea, followed by several attempts by primordial gods to create humans to populate the earth's surface. Early in the story creation is threatened by three monstrous, disorderly beings who introduce chaos and must be destroyed. The nefarious trio is defeated by two youthful demiurges, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, tricksters now often referred to as the Hero Twins and comparable to similar characters in North and South American folklore. The "myth" section of the narrative ostensibly ends when the Hero Twins defeat the Death Lords of the Underworld (Xibalba) and rise up as the sun and moon, after which true humans are created and "history" begins.

Within Maya scholarship the Popol Vuh is treated as *the* authoritative reference on ancient religion and cosmology. It has been called "the single most important document of Maya mythology" (Schele and Miller, 1986:31), a veritable "New World Bible" (Edmonson, 1985:107; Freidel *et al.*, 1993:43). Nevertheless, conventional wisdom has also emerged that this "Bible" has a major flaw, an error in the gendered qualities attributed to Xbalanque, the younger of the two youths. Whether the mistake originated with the erstwhile K'iche' Maya elites of Utatlan who composed the mid-sixteenth-century manuscript or with Fr. Ximénez as its later copyist, the centuries-old putative error has seemed to require a modern solution. That solution has been to rewrite portions of the Popol Vuh to fit contemporary scholarly opinion, disregarding what is written in the manuscript.

This chapter reviews and then critiques the arguments made by Maya scholars that the K'iche' Popol Vuh manuscript requires such correction. Any "fault" lies not with the K'iche' authors or with the Dominican friar but with the embedded assumptions upon which modern Western notions of gender are constituted,

assumptions which most Popol Vuh scholarship has not addressed. The first is the common sense Western notion –despite being subjected to withering critiques by feminist scholarship (*e.g.*, Butler 1993), including in archaeology (*e.g.*, Meskell, 2001)– that gender is a dyadic, essentialized, fixed, isolable, and compartmentalized quality embedded in biology and manifest in distinctive cultural forms in order to maintain a natural separation. Boys will be boys and girls will be girls. In a number of works, Joyce (1992, 1996, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Gillespie and Joyce, 1997) has demonstrated how these gender notions, embedded in post-Enlightenment ideologies, do not apply to Mesoamerica. Indeed, gender status in ancient Mesoamerica was quite fluid (Joyce, 2000a:5).

The second assumption is that the storylines within which the Hero Twins appear are irrelevant to their identity. Although the youths are major characters in two separated series of episodes occurring in different stages of cosmic creation, the conventional belief is that they are identical and unchanging throughout the narrative (*e.g.*, Bruce, 1976/7:197; cf. Tarn and Prechtel, 1981). Arguments against this assumption require more explanation. These supra-human beings engage in acts of creative destruction within the early portion of a cosmogonic myth that narrates the establishment of world order –through various trial-and-error attempts– necessary for the consequent emergence of true humans and organized society.

An ostensible function of the narrative is to explain the origin of gender difference as well as other societal features (*e.g.*, Girard, 1979). The sequential episodes should reveal how gender came into existence integrated with the creation of other constituent parts of sociocosmic order. Taking this into account, one should expect that characters or qualities appearing earlier in the story might be gender-ambiguous, gender neutral, transgendered, or able to change their gender assignments from one episode to the next. It was through these trial-and-error experiments that gendered roles, agencies, relationships, and ideologies appropriate for late prehispanic K'iche' society came into being. The narrative explains how these transformations occurred across the episodes, thereby legitimating current social practices by grounding them in unquestionable cosmic foundations.

The third assumption motivating the Maya scholars who have proposed rewriting the Popol Vuh is more insidious because its premise and negative consequences are too seldom examined (*e.g.*, Carmack, 1983): namely, that modern Euro-American scholars have knowledge superior to that of the premodern K'iche' elites who lived centuries ago, even when it comes to interpreting their lore. For example, discovery of archaeological information concerning Maya beliefs dating deep in the prehispanic past has led some to believe they can identify early

“uncorrupted” versions of Maya cosmology (Lounsbury, 1985:52), revealing the probable “non-Maya influences” (Thompson, 1970:368) that must have tainted the composition of the Popol Vuh. This is yet another manifestation of Western bias in approaching non-Western, non-modern cultural manifestations, alongside the assumption of Western gender constructs. Unpacking these assumptions is crucial to understand and appreciate the Popol Vuh in its original context.

### **Questioning Xbalanque’s Gender**

In 1981 Tarn and Prechtel (1981:118) observed that old “arguments about whether Xbalanque is a male or a female are one of the cruxes of Maya scholarship still.” Over three decades later, the situation has not improved. Two reasons are commonly given for questioning the gender of Xbalanque (1981:118). The first is the “x” (or “ix”) prefix of his name, which more often goes with female appellations, a prime example being his mother, Xquic (“x” + *quic* or *kik*; “blood”; modern orthography from Sam Colop (1999)). The second and more contentious reason is the assignment of his ultimate fate to be associated with the moon, an entity most often gendered female in Maya belief.

From their first to last appearances in the story, Hunahpu and Xbalanque are referred to together as “boys” in the K’iche’ text, although the word is *q’ahol* (*k’ajol*), which more literally means someone’s “son” (Edmonson, 1971:34). The “x” prefix for the youth always named second has been considered curious, but it is not a solid argument for gender assignment. The Popol Vuh creation story opens with a recitation of the names of the primordial gods, including a male and female dyad who both have the “x” prefix (Xpiyacoc as male, Xmucane as female). Moreover, this prefix also marks the diminutive (Recinos, 1950:94; Tedlock, 2010:301), conflating gender and relative status in this usage. As such it is suitable for the presumably younger brother, and when the youths are first introduced it serves to demarcate a junior member of the pair. Tarn and Prechtel (1981:119) further suggested that the “ambiguous position” of Xbalanque indicated by the “x” prefix may reflect his role as an “assistant” to his older brother, in the way that modern Maya ritual officials have a male assistant referred to as “wife.”

Taking into account the nuanced meanings of the “x” prefix and the notion of a male assistant or junior partner as “wife” in Maya usage may seem to clarify the presumed gender ambiguity of Xbalanque while simultaneously providing a needed cultural contextual balance against the dominant Western notions of gender. However, these arguments are not entirely satisfactory. Among the various older brother/younger brother dyads in the Popol Vuh, Xbalanque is the only younger brother with the “x” prefix. As for the suggestion that this addition to his name indicates his role as junior “assistant” to his older brother, in the various episodes

the two brothers work at the same tasks and assist each other. Indeed, it is always Xbalanque who engages in certain actions on his own while his brother Hunahpu is debilitated (in one instance having been beheaded), actions that save his brother and move the story forward.

Furthermore, it is seldom observed that towards the end of the Hero Twins portion of the Popol Vuh, when the youths agree to be put to death by the Lords of Xibalba (knowing they will be transformed and brought to life again), Hunahpu is given the "x" prefix alongside his brother, while continuing to be named first. "Xhunahpu" appears six times in the manuscript (Christenson, 2004; Edmonson, 1971; Sam Colop, 1999). Most translators have ignored this variation or mentioned it only in a footnote, not changing the translated text itself (*e.g.*, Christenson, 2003:178; Edmonson, 1971:129; Recinos, 1950:160; Sam Colop 1999:107). The common suggested explanation is that the "x" prefix is to be read as the diminutive, but only Tedlock (1996:130ff), in his revised translation, names the elder brother "little Hunahpu" each time to correspond to the manuscript.

His younger brother, however, is never referred to as "little Balanque" to match this usage. Edmonson (1971) ignored the "x" prefix in Xbalanque's name altogether, referring to the second youth as "Jaguar Deer" based on his translation of the name. However, he translated the name of the twins' mother, Xquic, as "Blood Girl," treating the "x" prefix as a combined gender and diminutive reference that needed to be made explicit. Tedlock (1985:114) called her "Blood Woman," marking gender but not diminutive status, while Christenson (2003:135) ennobled her feminine quality as "Lady Blood." Thus, in these translators' hands the ambiguity concerning the "x" in Xbalanque's name remains.

As noted above, the more profound gender error with regard to Xbalanque, according to contemporary scholarship, is his association with the moon. After the youths' final defeat of the Death Lords in Xibalba, they ascended into the sky. According to the different modern translations, one became, or arose as, or is, or was given the sun, and the other the moon (Christenson, 2003:191; Edmonson, 1971:144; Recinos, 1950:163; Sam Colop, 2008:126). Tedlock (1985:160) was slightly more conservative, reading the line as "the sun belongs to one and the moon to the other," and Girard (1979:225) disagreed with the usual interpretation that the two youths literally became the sun and moon.

Although the boys are not named in this part of the story, the presumption is that they always go in sequence, so Hunahpu must be associated with the sun and Xbalanque with the moon. That assignment has not set well with a number of Maya scholars because the Moon is female in most Maya ethnoastronomies (*e.g.*, Bruce, 1976/7:196; Coe, 1989:180; Himelblau, 1989:36; Lounsbury, 1985:52; Schele and Miller, 1986:252, 303; Thompson, 1960:219, 1970:368-369). Partly on

that basis in 1948 Girard (1979:187ff, 338) identified Xbalanque as female and as a lunar goddess. No other prominent scholar has adopted this extreme position.

A minority but well researched opinion is that in K'iche' belief the moon, in its multiple phases, is a complex entity that cannot be assigned to a single gender (Tedlock, 1985:296). Tedlock (1985:297) suggested that Xbalanque was associated with the full moon, which in K'iche' belief is considered to be an underworld or nocturnal sun, an opinion later reiterated by Sam Colop (2008:45). Carmack (1983:59) had earlier demonstrated how the boys could have been associated with the sun and moon in Postclassic K'iche' cosmology. Nevertheless, the more popular solution to this problem has been to determine an alternative celestial assignment for the two brothers on the presumption that the Moon cannot be male and Xbalanque is male.

Evidence from elsewhere in the Maya area, –contemporary folklore, calendric-astronomical data, Classic period imagery and hieroglyphs, and some ascribed logic of Maya belief– has been used to argue that the Hero Twins must instead be avatars of Venus and the Sun, who are related as elder and younger brother in Mesoamerican astrology (Bruce, 1976/7:197; Lounsbury, 1985:51; Thompson, 1970:368). This means that the Popol Vuh manuscript got it wrong. Other scholars have accepted this “compelling logic” (Coe, 1989:180). As a result, a new “Popol Vuh” is now being written and promulgated as *the* Popol Vuh in Maya textbooks (Demarest, 2004:182; Sharer and Traxler, 2006:729) and popular books (Schele and Mathews, 1998:36-37). Although still called the Popol Vuh –claiming the same name– it is a conflation of interpretations by contemporary iconographers with readings of the sixteenth-century document. The major focus in the new “Popol Vuh” is on the Maize God, the Hero Twins and their association with Venus and the Sun, and other episodes and characters not found in Fr. Ximénez’s manuscript but appearing in earlier, Classic period Maya imagery (Reilly, 2002:55).

It would seem that the conundrum of Xbalanque’s gender has been solved by contemporary scholarship by disregarding the original text. The learned arguments favoring this “correction” apparently no longer require repeating, and twenty-first-century audiences are exposed to a rewritten “Popol Vuh” without being informed of its hybrid authorship. While this rewrite may satisfy some, it turns out that the early colonial K'iche' elites, whose putative errors have condemned them to irrelevancy, are not so easily silenced. In 1971 in the town of Totonicapán a companion manuscript to the Popol Vuh came to light along with six other early manuscripts written in K'iche' (Carmack and Mondloch, 1983:9). *El Título de Totonicapán* relates the epic tale of K'iche' cosmogony and history similar to that of the Popol Vuh. The portion given to the Hero Twins (1983:174) is unfortunately very abbreviated, but extremely pertinent to this discussion. The author(s)

unequivocally wrote that Hunahpu became the sun and Xbalanque the moon, and further stated that Xbalanque was a girl.

### **Gender in the Context of Marriage Exchange**

Resolving the “gender ambiguity” of Xbalanque, and of Hunahpu as well, depends on rejecting Western assumptions of gender assignment and allowing for gender fluidity as well as the integral linking of gender with other contextualized and performed aspects of identity. These include relative age –the “x” prefix can conflate gender and relative age or rank– and especially kinship (*e.g.*, Meskell, 2001:202), whereby gender is realized as a relational rather than an essentialized quality (*e.g.*, Strathern, 1988). From a relational perspective wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters are different categories of being that vary with the social context, even if Westerners would lump them all together as immutable females. By “kinship” I do not mean simple genealogical relationships of descent or siblingship. I refer instead to the enactment of the proper kinds of rituals and recognition of obligations that link consanguineal and affinal kinsmen to one another within social fields. Kinship, alongside other forms of social relations, emerges from strategic and coordinated practices, not mere biology (*e.g.*, Bourdieu, 1977; Gillespie, 2000; Joyce, 2000c:190). In this light, the more pertinent question for analysis should be which kinds of gendered practices become salient in the Hero Twins episodes.

Significantly, much of the detail in the lengthy Hero Twins portion of the Popol Vuh concerns their parents and the propriety– or lack thereof– of the exchange relationships that signal a legitimate marriage linking wife-taker and wife-giver houses. These practices, which involve specific material goods, certain obligated labors, and multi-generational social and ritual ties between allied houses, have a long history among Maya peoples which can be traced deep into the prehispanic past and survived well into the twentieth century (Gillespie and Joyce, 1997). Among the Maya, as well as many other peoples around the world, exchange items were “gendered” based on which family (wife-taker or wife-giver) was obligated to present them to its marriage partner. Asymmetry is built into the system in that wife-providers are typically ritually superior or higher in status relative to their wife-receivers. Wife-givers are often considered the “source of life,” providing the “blood” that flows through their daughters or sisters to recipient families (1997:199).

The Hero Twins episodes reveal the gradual development of gendered agency, roles, relations, and goods in connection with asymmetrical marriage exchange that would lead, ultimately, to political power in the separation between elites and non-elites. Space limitations preclude elaboration of this entire

development. However, a few pertinent details should suffice to demonstrate how marriage exchange permeates events in this portion of the narrative, setting an archetypal model for true humans to follow once cosmic creation is complete.

It is important to note that Hunahpu and Xbalanque appear in the Popol Vuh in two distinct series of episodes, separated by a recounting of the meeting of their father and mother to beget them. The intervening story of how their father (One Hunahpu) and his younger brother (Seven Hunahpu) came to journey to the Underworld is usually treated as a “flashback” (*e.g.*, Sam Colop, 1999:14; Tedlock, 1985:47, 1996:43), a Western literary device, given that the youths are introduced and tasked by the creator gods with defeating destructive beings prior to the telling of the story of their birth. However, this is another imposition of Western concepts that is at odds with the narrative’s inherent structural logic.

The youths first appear at a time of cosmic conjunction when the sky has fallen to the earth, and emerge out of the same generative chaos that produced the monstrous beings they are charged with defeating. Their actions prepare the world for what is to come, including the origin and peopling of the underworld (Xibalba). The youths appear a second time in the narrative as the products of the union of One Hunahpu and Xquic, the daughter of a Xibalba lord. Only at this point in the story can they accurately be called twins, and they are transformations of the boys of the same names mentioned earlier in the narrative.

The intervening account is of interest here because the episodes deal with the unusual “marriage” of One Hunahpu and Xquic, an exchange among putative affines that was highly flawed in comparison with the practices of true humans who came later. One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu are introduced as the elder and younger sons of the two creator deities, Xpiyacoc (their father) and Xmucane (their mother). They spent their days playing ball, disturbing the lords who ruled Xibalba below.

The lords sent a messenger to the brothers to come play ball with them, and to bring their rubber ball. They departed for Xibalba, but left the requested ball behind in their mother’s house. Having descended into the underworld, they were tricked and then killed by the Lords of Death. One Hunahpu’s head was placed in a tree where it came to resemble a tree gourd. The head attracted the daughter of one of the lords, who, approaching the tree, was told by the severed head to hold out her hand. The maiden did so, and the bony head spat its saliva into her hand, impregnating her thereby.

This story is well known to Popol Vuh aficionados. What happened next has received less attention in terms of gender and marriage exchange. Having conceived in an illegitimate manner, Xquic was condemned to sacrificial death by the Xibalba lords, who demanded that their servants remove her heart and present

it to them in a bowl to consume. As her name indicates, Xquic is "blood" as an anthropomorphized substance, the literal incarnation of the metaphorical quality assumed by any woman entering marriage. She embodies the premier exchange "good" provided by wife-givers as the "source of life" (Gillespie and Joyce, 1997:199). But nothing was given in return by the wife-taker family. The rubber ball, made from congealed tree sap, which One Hunahpu failed to bring to the lords of Xibalba, was the potential bride-price for Xquic. Its substitute would be her heart, and the marriage alliance would fail with her death.

However, Xquic convinced the servants to provide yet another substitute. She gathered the red sap of the croton tree, which congealed and glistened like blood in the bowl. It fooled the Death Lords while Xquic escaped to the earth's surface. In Maya practice past and present, the important foodstuff wife-takers were obligated to present to their future in-laws was chocolate beverage served in a bowl. Prepared chocolate took on a reddish color that was iconically linked to blood (Gillespie and Joyce, 1997:200). Thus, the red sap of the croton tree presented in the bowl was a false or pre-creation version of chocolate beverage, cacao not yet having been discovered.

But Xquic still had to deal with the wife-taker family. Having arrived at the house of her mother-in-law, Xmucane, she announced her impending pregnancy and relationship to the older woman. Xmucane refused to accept her, demanding that she fill a net bag of maize ears to prove her status. Although wife-provider families in Maya societies did feed their wife-receivers, for instance at marriage feasts (Gillespie and Joyce, 1997:201), it is important to note that Xquic must harvest the maize, a man's job par excellence. In presenting the full bag, Xquic was accepted by her mother-in-law.

These acts of ritual prestation, which Xquic uniquely took upon herself, formed the nascent beginnings of marriage exchange and the gendered relationships of wife-taker and wife-giver families. When her sons retraced their father's journey to Xibalba, they took the rubber ball, an ostensible late payment on the bride-price, although they managed to keep it for themselves when they defeated the lords in the rubber ball game. The boys also presented the lords with the flowers used to flavor chocolate beverage (Gillespie and MacVean, 2002), part of the obligation owed to the wife-providers and a reference back to the partial offering made by their mother (the ersatz "cacao" drink).

These episodes reveal that, despite all the proper nominal markers of gender, Xquic was an ambiguous female within the complex configuration of the gendered aspects of marriage exchange. The story of Xquic and One Hunahpu is marked by an absence of the normal ritual acts of reciprocity between wife-takers and wife-givers that would be familiar to the story's audience. After she gave birth to the



twins, Xquic is not mentioned again. Her role in the epic was over, and the boys were raised instead by their grandmother, who accepted them into her (wife-taker) house. Only after Xibalba was defeated would true women appear whose social gender identity is unambiguous, (the four women each named "house" who were created as wives for the four first true human men). Three of them were ancestors of the three ruling families, the "great houses" of the K'iche' state. The early intermarriages among these three noble houses, allying them with one another and separating them thereby from their commoner subjects, were established with "payments" of maize and drink, following the example set in the pre-creation era by Xquic.

### **Conclusion**

The gender of Xbalanque has long been a point of contention in Maya studies. Rather than treat it as a problem requiring some solution to disambiguate Xbalanque's masculinity, this chapter has discussed the importance of respecting the original text to discover what it reveals about the nature of the Popol Vuh as a cosmogonic narrative and about gender ideology in elite K'iche' society. Attending to the gendered associations of marriage exchange makes clear that many "pre-creation" characters display ambiguities or fluidities of various personal and social qualities, although space allowed only for brief discussion of Xbalanque, Hunahpu, and Xquic. This is what one should expect from a cosmogony: true human society with its appropriate distinctions of roles and relationships was still taking shape through the actions of these supra-human beings. A final point concerning Xbalanque's identity that could not be elaborated here is how "he" changes across the episodes, taking on more responsibility to save his older brother, who keeps coming apart and has to be put back together.

The "problem" of Xbalanque's gender exists as such only in the context of Western notions of gender as fixed in biology and isolable from other aspects of being. Popol Vuh scholarship has failed to take into account the fluidity of gender in Mesoamerican society (Joyce, 2000a) compared to what modern Western ideology (if not practice) would allow. The unfortunate result of these modern misunderstandings has been an imposed "solution" that is out of proportion with the gravity of the supposed error. The integrity of the Popol Vuh manuscript and its K'iche' aristocratic authors has been denied or deemed irrelevant. Taking its place is a new story composed by modern analysts to conform to their logic, an act that is reminiscent of the imperialist ambitions within which the discipline of anthropology emerged (Fabian, 1983). The embedded assumptions of Maya scholars who emphasized the gender ambiguity of Xbalanque, while neglecting the more encompassing issues of gendered agencies and relationships, require

exposure to rescue the Popol Vuh from the "distortions" imposed on it by those who would correct its "mistakes" (Carmack, 1983:45). That exposure will also open new lines of Maya gender research.

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