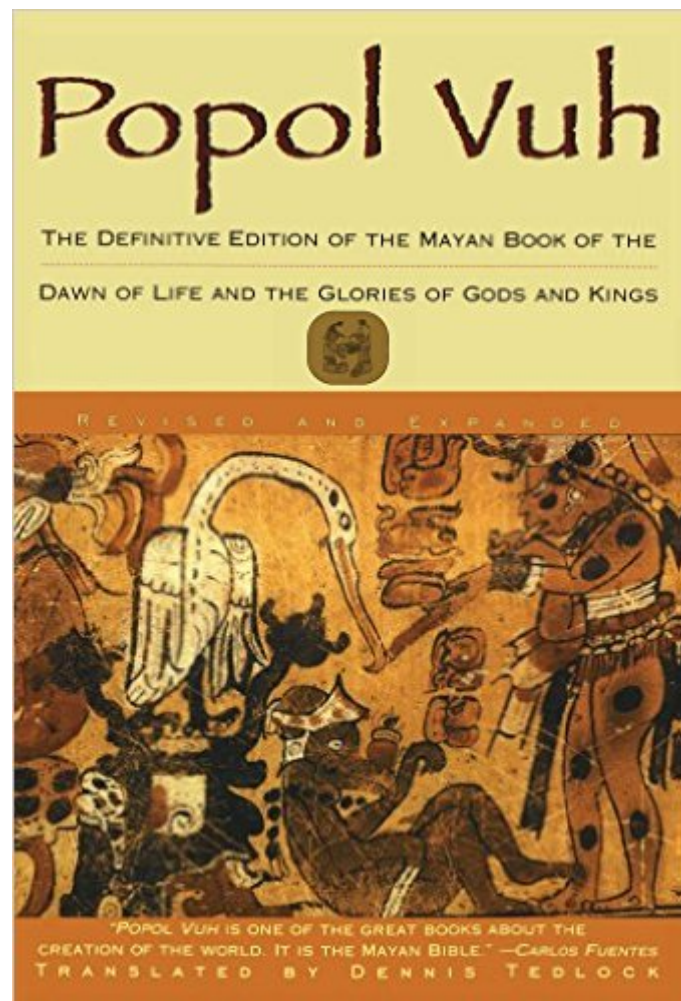


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# Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition Of The Mayan Book Of The Dawn Of Life And The Glories Of Gods And Kings



## Synopsis

Popol Vuh, the Quiché Mayan book of creation, is not only the most important text in the native languages of the Americas, it is also an extraordinary document of the human imagination. It begins with the deeds of Mayan gods in the darkness of a primeval sea and ends with the radiant splendor of the Mayan lords who founded the Quiché kingdom in the Guatemalan highlands. Originally written in Mayan hieroglyphs, it was transcribed into the Roman alphabet in the sixteenth century. This new edition of Dennis Tedlock's unabridged, widely praised translation includes new notes and commentary, newly translated passages, newly deciphered hieroglyphs, and over forty new illustrations.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The "Popol Vuh," written in a Mayan language but a European script, is the most substantial surviving account of the Maya view of their own history, including that of their gods and divine ancestors, and has presented a host of problems for translators. The Tedlock translation of 1985 added new information to the work of many distinguished predecessors, and made substantial parts of the narrative clear (or at least much clearer). The fact that a fairly extensively revised edition of this book was not only possible, but necessary, in 1996, a decade after its first publication, might have discouraged the publisher from continuing to call the new version "Definitive" on the cover. The title page more precisely calls it a Revised Edition of "Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life ... with commentary based on the ancient knowledge of the modern Quiche Maya." However,

"Definitive" seems to be the marketing buzzword. But how would a third edition be described? (Dennis Tedlock has recently -- 2003 -- returned to the writings of the post-Conquest Maya aristocrats who actually produced the existing "Popol Vuh," in "Rabinal Achi: A Mayan Drama of War and Sacrifice," so it is clear that his work in the area continues.) In fact, the work of Dennis and Barbara Tedlock with living Quiche Maya ritualists (priests / diviners / shamans), which, in the first edition, added so much to understanding this early post-Conquest text, was part of a larger expansion of Maya studies, including a more complete decipherment of ancient inscriptions, and greatly improved studies of Maya art. It is now possible to recognize events, and even characters, of the "Popol Vuh" in art centuries older, and their prototypes a millennium earlier. Meso-American cultures have been re-analyzed, and lost details recovered, as part of a major, and very rapid, shift in understanding. As an example: a large part of the story of "Popol Vuh" involves games played in ball-courts, in this world and the world of the dead; a major collection of papers on this theme, in Mayan and other cultures, "The Mesoamerican Ballgame," was based on a conference held the same year the first edition of Tedlock's translation appeared (Scarborough and Wilcox, 1991). Another change was the adoption of a new official system for writing Mayan languages in the Roman alphabet, one devised, for the first time, by native speakers of the various languages. This adds considerably to etymological and grammatical precision, but enormously complicates recognizing words and names in older systems. (Anyone familiar with the juggling of Wade-Giles and Pinyin transliterations of Chinese will be only too familiar with the kind of adjustment process for ordinary readers.) Tedlock has attempted, with considerable success, to incorporate this new information, and the new transcription system, into the old structure of the book. In the process, besides adding fascinating illustrations and fine-tuning the translation, he has restructured the introduction and notes. Some interesting personal observations are gone, or greatly reduced. References to older literature, often with Tedlock's reconsiderations, have generally been replaced by citations of more recent studies. Once debatable points have been given firm answers, and new questions have been raised. Some material which, at a first glance, I assumed to be missing, turned out, on close examination (with copies of both editions open in front of me, and the help of a lot of post-it flags), to have been broken up or consolidated in different contexts. In a few places, however, the strain shows, as a once-clear line of argument is disrupted. The sheer complication of the material explicated, in which social, cosmic / astronomical, and agricultural references are constantly intertwined, probably made this inevitable. Archeological and epigraphic material has somewhat eclipsed in prominence the modern Maya contribution to this edition, although for fuller information it was always necessary to turn to Barbara Tedlock's "Time and the Highland

Maya."Among more recent publications of considerable value for understanding the mythological and astronomical material, Susan Milbrath's "Star Gods of the Maya: Astronomy in Art, Folklore, and Calendars" (1999) is exhausting, but I found it particularly illuminating. A series of books of which the late Linda Schele was co-author or co-editor ("The Blood of Kings," 1986; "The Forest of Kings," 1990; "Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path," 1993; and "The Code of Kings," 1999) are more popular in style, and very rewarding; unfortunately, like everything else in Mayan studies, they have dated very quickly, and the reader should always keep the date of publication in mind. Technical studies -- linguistic, epigraphic, archeological, art-historical -- are now abundant, but also harder for me to judge.[Addendum, June 2014: At about the time I was writing this review in 2004, a two-volume translation-with commentary-and-texts was being published by O Books in the UK and US; Allen J. Christenson's "Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya" (2003), and "Popol Vuh: Literal Poetic Version" (2004). This treatment was reprinted by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2007-2008, and is still in print. As the reader of these reviews will notice, some feel called upon to rank the two translations. I don't (although I have reviews of Christenson's two volumes in progress as I add this note).][Addendum February 2015: For some reason, in 2014 I left out any mention of the blog "Maya Decipherment," which contains fascinating material from the ongoing exploration of Maya (and other Meso-American) civilization; some of it is fairly technical, but not impenetrably so.]

The Maya did not divide their everyday lives and religion. In fact, they didn't have a religion in our sense at all. Their everyday lives were bound up in visions, stories of the heavens, earth, past, and future that were not separate from the reality of their everyday experience. This book, the "Popol Vuh" means Council Book. That is, it is a book for the Lords to consult. One of its other titles is "The Light That Came From Beside the Sea". It is a document of the Quiche Maya who lived (and still live) in a portion of what is present day Guatemala. The "Popol Vuh" tells the essential myth of the ball game and the hero twins. Its story is far too involved and strange to try and explain it in this review. The story explains things about the Sun, Moon, and Venus in their play across the heavens. It prepares the living for what awaits them in Xibalba (the awful place below the earth). And there is constant gratitude for the knowledge of the creation of men from maize and the light of understanding this book brings them. The various sacred places of mountains, caves, and of ritual sacrifice are all here and powerfully expressed. Dennis Tedlock translated the text into clear and very readable English. However, that is not sufficient for the uninitiated to understand. So, Tedlock provides us with an introductory essay to help us understand the context of these stories. At the

back he also provides notes on the text arranged by page number, a glossary of terms (which we desperately need to read the book), a wonderful bibliography for further reading, and an index. Now, a couple of things to keep in mind when you read this book (and you should). This text has one written source, and it is written in the Mayan language with a Western alphabet. Also, this copy is post Conquest so there is no real way to know how the story was changed or influenced by the Christian stories that were also (forcibly) taught to the Maya, if at all. If you end up believing that this story is an intact retelling of the true Myth without Christian influences, there are some pretty strange and wonderful parallels. If you are uncomfortable with some of the parallels, then you will want to explain them away by claiming corruption by the Christian conquerors. Take your pick. No one really knows. Terrific edition of an important text that you can really enjoy reading and adding to your understanding of the world and the total range of the human experience.

If you are fascinated by the stories various peoples have told (and still tell) to explain who and why they are, this is essential reading. This Mayan genesis presents a new world, a new reality, peopled by heros, monkeys, and macaws, triumph and treachery. The translation will hold your attention, and the translator's notes on how the story happened to survive contribute to our understanding of this exotic and intriguing material.

There's something here for the serious student of Mesoamerican culture, the historian, and those who just like mythology. Rather than relying solely on academic translations, Tedlock has employed the services of native speakers of the Quiche Mayan language to give not only the words, but the \*feel\* of the stories. The first section is a synopsis of the people and events in the Popol Vuh itself from the time of the "creation" all the way to the coming of the Conquistadores, but rather than detracting from the story itself (as such synopses all-too-often do), it adds depth and understanding. I would have appreciated seeing more of the original glyphs, as well as the original forms of many of the names (which have been translated whenever possible), but this is a very minor quibble. Overall, highly recommended!

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