



The Morphological Reading of the Mesoamerican Myth *Popol Vuh*

CHEN Ning^{[a],*}

^[a]Ph.D., Professor, Department of Spanish Language, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Popol Vuh, which means “book of the counsel”, is traditionally considered a mytho-history of the “quiché” (written as “Ki’che” some times), Mayan Indians who lived in Central America (it’s territory coincides today with Guatemala). This text registers the myth about the creation of the Universe and the quiché people, and the geneology of the tribe, beginning with a narration like the biblical Genesis and ending with the conquest by the Spanish soldiers.

Popol Vuh mainly has been considered the best reflection of the pre-Hispanic native voice and studied like the history and the anthropology of the Mesoamerican tribe, always with emphasis on its native facets. Nevertheless, many common points can be found in the story of *Popol Vuh* and the traditional European folktale. In this paper, we try to analyze this Mesoamerican myth using the theory formulated by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale*. This morphological reading of the text conduces us to the hypothesis, that is, far away from being a native myth and Indian auto-etnography, *Popol Vuh* much possibly may be a “mestizo” of two cultures: not only the Indian and the European cultural mixture, but also the official religion mix with the popular tales.

Key words: *Popol Vuh*; V. Propp; *Morphology of the Folktale*; Mesoamerican myth; Structuralism

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1. POPOL VUH: IT'S VERSIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

Popol Vuh, which can be translated as the “book of the counsel”, is traditionally considered a mytho-history of the “quiché”, who were Mayan Indians in Central America (it’s territory coincides today with the Republic of Guatemala). Called “Maya Bible”, it is the most studied text because scholarship considers it as the most important cultural legacy of the pre-Hispanic society of America. The mythology and history narrated by *Popol Vuh* has had great influence in the modern latin american literature, among which figures *Hombres de maíz (Man of Maize)*, narrative created by the Noble-Prize winner Miguel Ángel Asturias. The *Popol Vuh* “has become a symbol of Guatemalan national indigenouness and was officially declared Guatemala’s national book in 1971” (Quiroa, 2011, p.467).

Despite of the significance of *Popol Vuh*, about this text there are much contradictions and incognizance. Firstly, there is still no conclusion about the original form of the text. Some scholars sustain that the Mayan mythology was registered in one o several books with hieroglyphic scripts, which probably were destroyed o lost with the Spanish conquest in 16th century. For the devotion to their traditions and religion, the quiché aristocracy conserved the history in memory, and after the proselyte, some instructed Indian transcribed the traditions from memory in quiché language using the Roman script (Recinos, 1947, p.22; see also Himelblau, 1989, p.98). This manuscript was obtained by the Spanish friar Francisco Ximénez at first of the 18th century. As great knower of the Indian languages and cultures, Ximénez made a copy of the quiché language manuscript and a translation to Spanish. Later, the manuscript in quiché language disappeared. About the copies and the Spanish translation there is discrepancy, because some scholar think there were three different manuscripts, while the

other sustains that only existed two copies (Himmelblau, 1989, p.114). The fact is that after a series of peripeteia, today the only manuscript survived is housed in Newberry Library of Chicago.

In the middle of 19th Century, the French hispanist Brassuer de Bourbourg and the Austrian investigator Karl Scherzer made their translation taking the quiché text and Ximenez's transcription as reference (Recinos, 1947, p.46). Their works awake the enthusiasm about the pre-Hispanic culture in European scholarship. Being considered the representative manifestation of the ethnology, *Popol Vuh* was rescued from the obscurity and became the main resource in the investigation both of the literature and the anthropology of Mesoamerica.

2. THE STORY TOLD BY *POPOL VUH*

All modern editions of *Popol Vuh* come from the transcription and translation of Ximénez. His manuscript has no organizational capitulation. Brasseur de Bourbourg divided the text in four parts and this formulation is followed by other scholars like Adrián Recinos.¹ Thus, popularly, the story has the following structure:

a) Preamble

The preamble consists of an announcement of the redaction of the text in first person plural: "Aquí escribiremos y comenzaremos las antiguas historias, el principio y el origen de todo lo que se hizo en la ciudad de Quiché, por las tribus de la nación"² (p.81); and also an introduction to the quiché gods (pp.81-82).

b) First Part

This part narrates the creation of the universe and of human beings with the maize, and the defeat of Vucub-Caquix and his sons by the hero twins, that is, the gods Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué.

c) Second Part

The story goes back to the adventure and death of the fathers of the hero twins, named Hum-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú. They spend all day playing the rubber ball and the noise disturbs the gods of Xibalbá, some kind of malignant gods. The gods of Xibalbá call them to play together, and finally defeat and kill them, putting their skulls on a "jícara" tree.

When Ixquic, daughter of one of the Xibalbá's gods, knows the adventures and death of Hum-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú, she goes to see the skulls on the tree, and one of the skulls spits on her hand, making her pregnant.

After the birth of the hero twins, a rat informs them

about the adventure and death of their fathers in Xibalbá, showing them the rubber ball playing kit. The hero twins get the kit and begin to play, provoking those malignant gods of Xibalbá, who call them to play together. They repeat the adventure of their fathers and overtake all the challenges put by the gods of Xibalbá, and finally defeat them. The hero twins let themselves killed by the gods of Xibalbá, but resurrect later and acquire magical power, with which they kill the gods of Xibalbá tearing them. Thus, they revenge the death of their fathers.

Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué become into the Sun and the Moon respectively.

d) Third and Fourth Parts

This part of the text mainly registers the geneology and the history of the quiché people.

As we can observe, the First and the Second part are merely mythological, contrary to the Third and the Fourth part which are historical testimonies despite of its fantastic elements. This paper mainly concerns with the mythological content and our analysis will primarily focus on the structure of the story.

3. THE MORPHOLOGICAL READING OF TEXT WITH THE THEORY OF PROPP

The story told by *Popol Vuh* has a very loosely organized structure, that is to say, there is faint coherence in the arguments. Here are the main plots:

a) The introduction of quiché gods.

b) The creation of the universe.

c) The creation of the human beings with maize.

d) The confrontation between the hero twins and Vucub-Caquix, and the defeat of Vucub-Caquix.

e) The confrontation between the hero twins and the sons of Vucub-Caquix and the defeat of the sons.

f) The adventure and death of the fathers of the hero twins in Xibalbá.

g) The magical birth of the hero twins.

h) The repeat of the adventure by the hero twins in Xibalbá.

i) The death and resurrection of the hero twins.

j) The hero twins revenge the death of their fathers by killing the bad gods of Xibalbá.

k) The hero twins venerate their fathers; one of them converts into the Sun, and the other, into the Moon.

Actually, the narration looks more like a compilation of folktales, of which everyone could be dissected using the method formulated by Propp in the *Morphology of the Folktale*³. For example, in the tale of the magical birth of the hero twins, several functions⁴ of *dramatis personae*

¹ For this paper we use the edition in Spanish made by Adrián Recinos, the Guatemalan historian, essayist, Mayanist scholar and translator, whose translation is the one of the best. For the other translations see also: Dennis Tedlock: *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of The Mayan Book of The Dawn of Life and The Glories of Gods and Kings*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1985.

² "Here we write the ancient history and the beginning and the origin of the Quiché city", the translation is ours.

³ For this paper we use the English translation by Laurence Scott and published by the University of Texas in 1968. The original Russian edition was published in Leningrad in 1928.

⁴ "Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the cause of the action", see Propp, 1968, p.21.

can be founded. On the other hand, a certain number of the tales could constitute a more coherent history, in which more complicated and various functions could be applied to the structure. Finally, the whole story could be analyzed with the morphological method. It means that *Popol Vuh* can be read in the morphological form in three levels.

Firstly we choose the tale about the magical birth of the hero twins as an independent micro-narrative: The daughter of Cuchumaquic, one of the bad gods of Xibalbá, knows the adventures and death of Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú (the future fathers of the hero twins), whose skulls have been hanged on a jícaro tree. She feels great curiosity and goes to see the skull-fruit. One of the skulls spits on her hand, making her pregnant. But when

her father and other bad gods of Xibalbá get knowing about her pregnancy, they send four messengers to kill her for the dishonor, requiring that the messengers bring back the heart of the maid. The heroine implores piety and the messengers forgive her. In stead of getting her heart, they pick a jícaro fruit because it looks and smells like human's heart. The bad gods are cheated and the maid survives. She leaves home to encounter her mother in law, who at first refuses to recognize their relation. The old lady orders the girl to collect a lot of maize when there is only one plant of corn in the field. The girl passes the test with the divine's help and the old lady accepts her as daughter in law. Thus, the heroine finally obtains the protection and gives birth to the hero twins.

Table 1
Morphological Reading of the Tale of Magical Birth of the Hero Twins

Functions	Argument correspondent	Our observation
<i>Initial situation: the future hero is introduced by mentioning his name and indication of his status</i> (Propp, 1968, p.25).	Presenting the heroine and her family: "Esta es la historia de una docella, hija de un Señor llamado Cuchumaquic" (This is the story of a maid, daughter of one of the bad gods of Xibalbá).	
<i>I. Absentation: one of the members of the family absents himself from home</i> (Propp, 1968, p.26).		When the maid leaves home to see the strange tree, her father does not prohibit her. That can be interpreted as an absentation of the father (If he were with her, he should have prohibited her).
<i>II. Interdiction: An interdiction is addressed to the hero</i> (Ibid.).	The maid has hesitation when she is going to pick the fruit of the jícaro tree: <i>Would I lose chastity if I pick the fruit?</i>	There is no typical explicit interdiction in folktales ("don't do this, otherwise you'll be punished"), but her hesitation reveals an implicit interdiction: those fruits are prohibited to pick up.
<i>III. Violation: the interdiction is violated</i> (Propp, 1968, p.27).	The maid insists in picking one fruit, and the skull spit on her hand, making her pregnant.	
<i>VIII. Villainy: the villain causes harm to a member of the family</i> (Propp, 1968, p.30).	The gods of Xibalbá and her father want to kill the maid for the dishonor of her pregnancy.	
<i>IX. Mediation: misfortune is made known, the hero is allowed to go</i> (Propp, 1968, p.36).	Four messengers are ordered to kill the maid to bring her heart to the bad gods. But they spare her and bring a fruit of jícaro to the bad gods as proof of her death.	This plot coincides with the B ⁶ of this function: The hero condemned to death is secretly freed ("A cook or an anchor spares a young girl, frees her, and instead of killing her, slays an animal in order to obtain his heart and livers as proof of the murder" (Propp, 1968, p.38).
<i>XI. Departure: the hero leaves home</i> (Propp, 1968, p.39).	The maid goes to meet the mother of the dead brothers, that is, her mother in law.	
<i>XII. The first function of the donor: the hero is tested, interrogated, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either of a magical agent or helper</i> (Ibid.).	The mother refuses to recognize their relation and orders her to pick a lot of maize when there is only one corn plant.	
<i>XIII. The hero's reaction: the hero reacts to the action of the future donor</i> (Propp, 1968, p.42).	With the help of the divines the maid picks a lot of maize, withstanding the test.	This plot coincides with the E ¹ of this function: the hero withstands the test.
<i>XVIII. Victory: the villain is defeated</i> (Propp, 1968, p.53).	The mother in law recognizes the relation and gives her protection.	In this tale, the villain is bad gods of Xibalbá, who try to interrupt the magical pregnancy. The survival of the maid and childbirth means the defeat of the bad gods
<i>XIX. The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated</i> (Ibid.).	The maid gives birth to the hero twins	The birth of the hero twins is the symbol of resurrection of the dead fathers, just like what demonstrate the further actions.

Now, if we take a series of the tales, there will be a narrative more complicated, therefore, more functions could be applied to the morphological reading. Actually, the history that begins with the adventure and death of the fathers of the hero twins and ends with the final defeat and decapitation of the bad gods of Xibalbá is an independent and congruent narrative. This story begins with an introduction to the origin of Hun-hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú:

He aquí la historia. He aquí el nombre de Hun-Hunahpú, así llamado. Sus padres eran Ixpiyacoc e Ixmucané (...)

Ahora bien, Hun-Hunahpú había engendrado y tenía dos hijos, y de estos dos hijos, el primero se llamaba Hunbatz y el segundo Hunchouén.

La madre de estos se llamaba Ixbaquiyalo; así se llamaba la mujer de Hun-Hunahpú. Y el otro Vucub-Hunahpú no tenía mujer; era soltero.⁵

This description corresponds perfectly the “initial situation”. After the introduction of the family, the story can be analyzed in the following sketch according to the functions of *dramatis personae* of Propp:

Table 2
Morphological Reading of the History of the Fathers and the Hero Twins

Functions	Argument correspondent	Our observation
I. Absentation		As Propp pointed that not all functions can be founded in one tale, here there’s no plot of absentation.
II. Interdiction		The interdiction is not declared explicitly, but from the development of the actions it can be deduced that there must be some interdiction like this: don not playing rubber ball in the road to Xibalbá, disturbing the bad gods; otherwise they will punish the players.
III. Violation	Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú spend all days playing rubber ball	
IV. Reconnaissance: The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance. (Propp, 1968, p.28)	The gods of Xibalbá ask: <i>What are they doing up there? Who are shaking the earth?</i>	
VI. Trickery: the villain attempt to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him o of his belongings. (Propp, 1968, p.29)	The bad gods invite them to play together, manifesting their Admiration for Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú’s skill. But actually what they want is kill them and get their ball-playing kit.	
VII. Complicity: the victim submits to the deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy. (Propp, 1968, p.30)	Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú accept the invitation.	
VIII. Villainy	The gods of Xibalbá put a series of challenge that Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú can not overtake and are killed by the gods.	The action matches for A ¹⁴ of this funtion: the villain commits murder (Propp, 1968, p.33).
IX. Mediation	The history of Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú is knew by the daughter of one of the bad gods. She goes to see the jícaro tree, and she is pregnant when one of the skull spit her hand. The hero twins born.	Thus, the fathers play the roll of victimized heroes; and the hero twins, seeker heroes (Propp, 1968, p.36).
XI. Departure	The hero twins encounter accidentally a rat in the forest.	Just as Propp pointed that “now a new character enters the tale: This personage might be termed the <i>donor</i> , or more precisely, the provider. Usually he is encountered accidentally—in the forest, along the roadway, etc. It is from him that the hero obtains some agent which permits the eventual liquidation of the misfortune” (Propp: 1968, 39). So the rat is the donor who reveals the history of the twin’s fathers.

To be continued

⁵ “Here begins the history. His name is Hun-Hunahpú. His parents are Ixpiyacoc and Ixmucané. Hun-Hunahpú gives birth of two sons, Hunbatz and Hunchouén. Their mother’s name is Ixbaquiyalo. Vucub-Hunahpú has no wife”. The translation is ours.

Continued

Functions	Argument correspondent	Our observation
<i>XIV. Provision or receipt of a magical agent: the hero acquires the use of a magical agent.</i> (Propp, 1968, p.43)		The twins have magical blowpipe, and also magical powers. So in this plot the agent is directly transferred (Propp, 1968, p.44).
<i>XV. Spatial transference between two kingdoms: the hero is transferred, delivered or led to whereabouts in an object to search.</i> (Propp, 1968, p.50)	The hero twins go to Xibalbá.	
<i>XVI. Struggle: the hero and the villain join in direct combat.</i> (Propp, 1968, p.51)	The same adventure of their fathers are repeated exactly, but the hero twins overtake all the challenges	As Propp noted that “the hero and the villain engage in a competition. The hero wins with the help of the cleverness” (Propp: 1968, 56).
<i>XVII. Branding, marking: The hero is branded.</i> (Propp, 1968, p.52)	The hero twins let themselves killed by bad gods and then resurrect with special powers in the form of fish-man.	Fish-man can be interpreted as a special form of branding.
<i>XVIII. Victory</i>	The hero twins kill the bad gods tearing them.	
<i>XIX. The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.</i>	The hero twins revenge to the death of their fathers. They rescue the fathers’ body and venerate it.	
<i>XX. Return: the hero returns.</i> (Propp, 1968, p.55)	The hero twins leave the Xibalbá and go to the sky, becoming the Moon and the Sun	It can be understood like a metaphoric return.

Finally, if we take the whole story like a macronarrative, the first five plots—that is, from the creation of the universe to the defeat of the sons of Vucub-

Caquix— serve as an “initial situation”, presenting all necessary for the development of actions. The text can be read in this form:

Table 3
Morphological Reading of the Whole Story

Functions	Argument correspondent	Our observation
<i>Initial situation</i>	The creation of universe and human beings, the defeat of Vucub-Caquix and his sons.	
<i>VIII. Villain</i>	The gods of Xibalbá kill Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú	
<i>IX. Mediation</i>	The magical birth of the hero twins	
<i>XVI. Struggle</i>	The hero twins repeat the adventure that their fathers suffered in the Xibalbá and defeat the bad gods.	
<i>XVIII. Victory</i>	The hero twins kill the bad gods	
<i>XIX. The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated</i>	The hero twins revenge to the death of their fathers. They rescue the fathers’ body and venerate it.	
<i>XX. Return</i>	The hero twins leave the Xibalbá and go to the sky, becoming the Moon and the Sun	

CONCLUSION AND HYPETHESIS

As we have tried to demonstrate, the morphological reading can be applied in three levels to the text of *Popol Vuh*, which confirm the great structural similarity between the Mesoamerican myth and European folktales. Previous studies also have compared *Popol Vuh* with the *Old Testament*, particularly in the myth about the creation of universe and human beings. It is difficult to think that such similarity both in structure and in motif dues to mere coincidence. On one hand, the similarity between *Popol Vuh* and the *Old Testament* has been

widely discussed and the text is considered missionary exposition as some scholars have proposed (Woodruff, 2000, p.98). On the other hand, our investigation shows that under the exotic native superficialities, the functions of dramatis personae of European folktales always remain. In fact, not only the Catholic tradition can be noted in this story, but also the European folktales have greatly influenced the text in question. Thus, the morphological reading of the text conduces us to the hypethesis: Far away from being a native myth and Indian auto-etnography, *Popol Vuh* much possibly may be a “mestizo” of two cultures: not only the Indian and the European

cultural mixture, but also the official religion mix with the popular tales.

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