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Indigenous Peoples of the Americas

Popol Vuh

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Anonymous K'iche' author; summary by Lewis Spence

Lewis Spence (1908), resumo

Credits

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About:

The Popol Vuh ("Book of the Council" or "Book of the Community") is the sacred book of the K'iche', a Maya people of the Guatemalan highlands.

It was written in the K'iche' language in the Latin alphabet about 1550 by anonymous Indigenous authors who wished to preserve the ancient tradition after the Spanish conquest, and it has come down to us through the copy made around 1701 by the Dominican friar Francisco Ximénez, together with a Spanish translation.

It tells of the creation of the world by the gods Hurakan and Gucumatz, the failed attempts to make human beings (of mud and of wood), the deeds of the hero twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque against the proud Vukub-Cakix and against the lords of Xibalba, the underworld, the creation of the first men from maize, and the wanderings and history of the K'iche' peoples.

Please note: this text is not a complete translation but a summary of the four books published in 1908 by the Scottish writer Lewis Spence. Complete modern translations are still under copyright.

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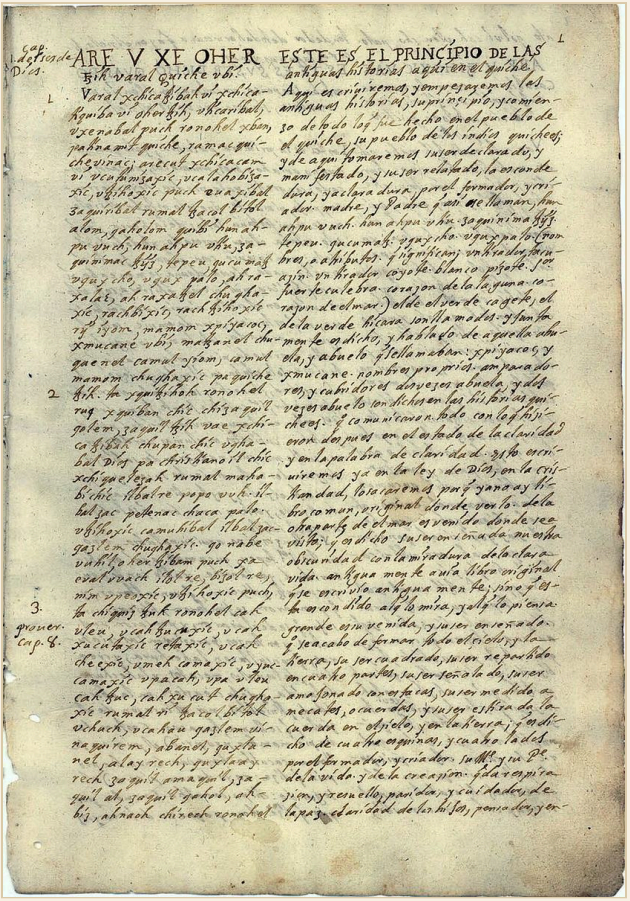

First page of the oldest manuscript of the Popol Vuh, copied in K'iche' and translated into Spanish by Friar Francisco Ximénez in the early 18th century (Newberry Library, Chicago).

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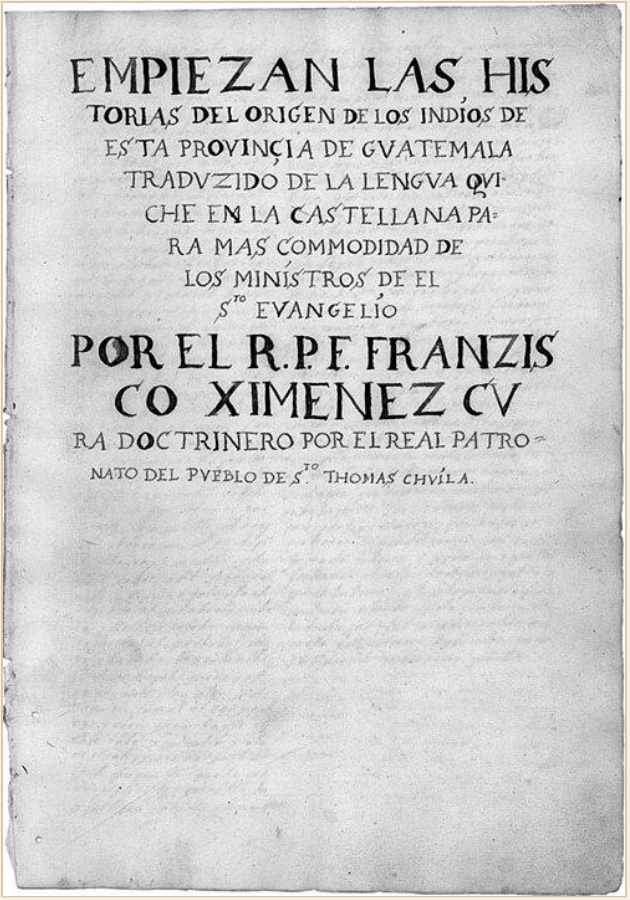
EMPIEZAN LAS HIS
TORIAS DEL ORIGEN DE LOS INDIOS DE
ESTA PROVINÇIA DE GVATEMALA
TRADVZIDO DE LA LENGVA QVI-
CHE EN LA CASTELLANA PA-
RA MAS COMMODIDAD DE
LOS MINISTROS DE EL
S^TO EVANGELIO
POR EL R.P.F. FRANZIS
CO XIMENEZ CV
RA DOCTRINERO POR EL REAL PATRO-
NATO DEL PVEBLO DE S^TO THOMAS CHVILA.

Title page of Ximénez's manuscript: "Empiezan las historias del origen de los indios de esta provincia de Guatemala".

Francisco Ximénez, Newberry Library — Wikimedia Commons · High resolution

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- More images of the manuscript and the Popol Vuh (Wikimedia Commons)
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BOOK I

✦

Over a universe wrapped in the gloom of a dense and primeval night passed the god Hurakan, the mighty wind. He called out "earth," and the solid land appeared. The chief gods took counsel; they were Hurakan, Gucumatz, the serpent covered with green feathers, and Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, the mother and father gods. As the result of their deliberations animals were created.

But as yet man was not. To supply the deficiency the divine beings resolved to create mannikins carved out of wood. But these soon incurred the displeasure of the gods, who, irritated by their lack of reverence, resolved to destroy them. Then by the will of Hurakan, the Heart of Heaven, the waters were swollen, and a great flood came upon the mannikins of wood.

They were drowned and a thick resin fell from heaven. The bird Xecotcovach tore out their eyes; the bird Camulatz cut off their heads; the bird Cotzbalam devoured their flesh; the bird Tecumbalam broke their bones and sinews and ground them into powder.

Because they had not thought on Hurakan, therefore the face of the earth grew dark, and a pouring rain commenced, raining by day and by night. Then all sorts of beings, great and small, gathered together to abuse the men to their faces. The very household utensils and animals jeered at them, their mill-stones, their plates, their cups, their dogs, their hens.

Said the dogs and hens, "Very badly have you treated us, and you have bitten us. Now we bite you in turn." Said the mill-stones (metates), "Very much were we tormented by you, and daily, daily, night and day, it was squeak, screech, screech, for your sake. Now you shall feel our strength, and we will grind your flesh and make meal of your bodies."

And the dogs upbraided the mannikins because they had not been fed, and tore the unhappy images with their teeth. And the cups and dishes said, "Pain and misery you gave us, smoking our tops and sides, cooking us over the fire, burning and hurting us as if we had no feeling. Now it is your turn, and you shall burn." Then ran the mannikins hither and thither in despair.

They climbed to the roofs of the houses, but the houses crumbled under their feet; they tried to mount to the tops of the trees, but the trees hurled them from them; they sought refuge in the caverns, but the caverns closed before them. Thus was accomplished the ruin of this race, destined to be overthrown. And it is said that their posterity are the little monkeys who live in the woods.

After this catastrophe, ere yet the earth was quite recovered from the wrath of the gods, there existed a man "full of pride," whose name was Vukub-Cakix. The name signifies "Seven-times-the-colour-of-fire," or "Very brilliant," and was justified by the fact that its owner's eyes were of silver, his teeth of emerald, and other parts of his anatomy of precious metals.

In his own opinion Vukub-Cakix's existence rendered unnecessary that of the sun and the moon, and this egoism so disgusted the gods that they re-

solved upon his overthrow.

His two sons, Zipacna and Cabrakan (earth-heaper (?) and earthquake), were daily employed, the one in heaping up mountains, and the other in demolishing them, and these also incurred the wrath of the immortals.

Shortly after the decision of the deities the twin hero-gods Hun-Ahpu and Xbalanque came to earth with the intention of chastising the arrogance of Vukub-Cakix and his progeny.

Now Vukub-Cakix had a great tree of the variety known in Central America as "nanze" or "tapal," bearing a fruit round, yellow, and aromatic, and upon this fruit he depended for his daily sustenance.

One day on going to partake of it for his morning meal he mounted to its summit in order to espy the choicest fruits, when to his great indignation he discovered that Hun-Ahpu and Xbalanque had been before him, and had almost denuded the tree of its produce.

The hero-gods, who lay concealed within the foliage, now added injury to theft by hurling at Vukub-Cakix a dart from a blow-pipe, which had the effect of precipitating him from the summit of the tree to the earth. He arose in great wrath, bleeding profusely from a severe wound in the jaw.

Hun-Ahpu then threw himself upon Vukub-Cakix, who in terrible anger seized the god by the arm and wrenched it from the body. He then proceeded to his dwelling, where he was met and anxiously interrogated by his spouse Chimalmat.

Tortured by the pain in his teeth and jaw he, in an excess of spite, hung Hun-Ahpu's arm over a blazing fire, and then threw himself down to be-

moan his injuries, consoling himself, however, with the idea that he had adequately avenged himself upon the interlopers who had dared to disturb his peace.

But Hun-Ahpu and Xbalanque were in no mind that he should escape so easily, and the recovery of Hun-Ahpu's arm must be made at all hazards. With this end in view they consulted two venerable beings in whom we readily recognise the father-mother divinities, Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, disguised for the nonce as sorcerers.

These personages accompanied Hun-Ahpu and Xbalanque to the abode of Vukub-Cakix, whom they found in a state of intense agony. The ancients persuaded him to be operated upon in order to relieve his sufferings, and for his glittering teeth they substituted grains of maize.

Next they removed his eyes of emerald, upon which his death speedily followed, as did that of his wife Chimalmat. Hun-Ahpu's arm was recovered, re-affixed to his shoulder, and all ended satisfactorily for the hero-gods.

But their mission was not yet complete. The sons of Vukub-Cakix, Zipacna and Cabrakan, remained to be accounted for. Zipacna consented, at the entreaty of four hundred youths, incited by the hero-gods, to assist them in transporting a huge tree which was destined for the roof-tree of a house they were building.

Whilst assisting them he was beguiled by them into entering a great ditch which they had dug for the purpose of destroying him, and when once he descended was overwhelmed by tree-trunks by his treacherous acquaintances, who imagined him to be slain.

But he took refuge in a side-tunnel of the excavation, cut off his hair and nails for the ants to carry up to his enemies as a sign of his death, waited until the youths had become intoxicated with pulque because of joy at his supposed demise, and then, emerging from the pit, shook the house that the youths had built over his body about their heads, so that all were destroyed in its ruins.

But Hun-Ahpu and Xbalanque were grieved that the four hundred had perished, and laid a more efficacious trap for Zipacna. The mountain-bearer, carrying the mountains by night, sought his sustenance by day by the shore of the river, where he lived upon fish and crabs. The hero-gods constructed an artificial crab which they placed in a cavern at the bottom of a deep ravine.

The hungry titan descended to the cave, which he entered on all-fours. But a neighbouring mountain had been undermined by the divine brothers, and its bulk was cast upon him. Thus at the foot of Mount Meavan perished the proud "Mountain Maker," whose corpse was turned into stone by the catastrophe.

Of the family of boasters only Cabrakan remained. Discovered by the hero-gods at his favourite pastime of overturning the hills, they enticed him in an easterly direction, challenging him to overthrow a particularly high mountain. On the way they shot a bird with their blow-pipes, and poisoned it with earth. This they gave to Cabrakan to eat. After partaking of the poisoned fare his strength deserted him, and failing to move the mountain he was bound and buried by the victorious hero-gods.

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BOOK 2

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Mystery veils the commencement of the Second Book of the "Popol Vuh." The theme is the birth and family of Hun-Ahpu and Xbalanque, and the scribe intimates that only half is to be told concerning the history of their father.

Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, the father and mother deities, had two sons, Hunhun-Ahpu and Vukub-Hunahpu, the first being, so far as can be gathered, a bi-sexual personage. He had by a wife, Xbakiyalo, two sons, Hunbatz and Hunchouen, men full of wisdom and artistic genius.

All of them were addicted to the recreation of dicing and playing at ball, and a spectator of their pastimes was Voc, the messenger of Hurakan. Xbakiyalo having died, Hunhun-Ahpu and Vukub-Hunahpu, leaving the former's sons behind, played a game of ball which in its progress took them into the vicinity of the realm of Xibalba (the underworld).

This reached the ears of the monarchs of that place, Hun-Came and Vukub-Came, who, after consulting their counsellors, challenged the strangers to a game of ball, with the object of defeating and disgracing them.

For this purpose they dispatched four messengers in the shape of owls. The brothers accepted the challenge, after a touching farewell with their mother Xmucane, and their sons and nephews, and followed the feathered

heralds down the steep incline to Xibalba from the playground at Ninxor Carchah.

After an ominous crossing over a river of blood they came to the residence of the kings of Xibalba, where they underwent the mortification of mistaking two wooden figures for the monarchs. Invited to sit on the seat of honour, they discovered it to be a red-hot stone, and the contortions which resulted from their successful trick caused unbounded merriment among the Xibalbans.

Then they were thrust into the House of Gloom, where they were sacrificed and buried. The head of Hunhun-Ahpu was, however, suspended from a tree, which speedily became covered with gourds, from which it was almost impossible to distinguish the bloody trophy. All in Xibalba were forbidden the fruit of that tree.

But one person in Xibalba had resolved to disobey the mandate. This was the virgin princess Xquiq (Blood), the daughter of Cuchumaquiq, who went unattended to the spot. Standing under the branches gazing at the fruit, the maiden stretched out her hand, and the head of Hunhun-Ahpu spat into the palm.

The spittle caused her to conceive, and she returned home, being assured by the head of the hero-god that no harm should result to her. This thing was done by order of Hurakan, the Heart of Heaven.

In six months' time her father became aware of her condition, and despite her protestations the royal messengers of Xibalba, the owls, received orders to kill her and return with her heart in a vase. She, however, escaped

by bribing the owls with splendid promises for the future to spare her and substitute for her heart the coagulated sap of the blood-wart.

In her extremity Xquiq went for protection to the home of Xmucane, who now looked after the young Hunbatz and Hunchouen. Xmucane would not at first believe her tale. But Xquiq appealed to the gods, and performed a miracle by gathering a basket of maize where no maize grew, and thus gained her confidence.

Shortly afterwards Xquiq became the mother of twin boys, the heroes of the First Book, Hun-Ahpu, and Xbalanque. These did not find favour in the eyes of Xmucane, their grandmother. Their infantile cries aroused the wrath of this venerable person, and she vented it upon them by turning them out of doors.

They speedily took to an outdoor life, however, and became mighty hunters, and expert in the use of their blow-pipes, with which they shot birds and other small game. The ill-treatment which they received from Hunbatz and Hunchouen caused them at last to retaliate, and those who had made their lives miserable were punished by being transformed by the divine children into apes.

The venerable Xmucane, filled with grief at the metamorphosis and flight of her ill-starred grandsons, who had made her home joyous with their singing and flute-playing, was told that she would be permitted to behold their faces once more if she could do so without losing her gravity, but their antics and grimaces caused her such merriment that on three separate occasions she was unable to restrain her laughter and the men-monkeys appeared no more.

Hun-Ahpu and Xbalanque now became expert musicians, and one of their favourite airs was that of "Hun-Ahpu qoy," the "monkey of Hun-Ahpu."

The divine twins were now old enough to undertake labour in the field, and their first task was the clearing of a milpa or maize-plantation. They were possessed of magic tools, which had the merit of working themselves in the absence of the young hunters at the chase, and those they found a capital substitute for their own directing presence upon the first day.

Returning at night from hunting, they smeared their faces and hands with dirt so that Xmucane might be deceived into imagining that they had been hard at work in the maize-field. But during the night the wild beasts met and replaced all the roots and shrubs which the brothers—or rather their magic tools—had removed.

The twins resolved to watch for them on the ensuing night, but despite all their efforts the animals succeeded in making good their escape, save one, the rat, which was caught in a handkerchief. The rabbit and deer lost their tails in getting away.

The rat, in gratitude that they had spared its life, told them of the glorious deeds of their great fathers and uncles, their games at ball, and of the existence of a set of implements necessary to play the game which they had left in the house. They discovered these, and went to play in the ball-ground of their fathers.

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It was not long, however, until Hun-Came and Vukub-Came, the princes of Xibalba, heard them at play, and decided to lure them to the Underworld as they had lured their fathers. Messengers were despatched to the house of Xmucane, who, filled with alarm, despatched a louse to carry the message to her grandsons.

The louse, wishing to ensure greater speed to reach the brothers, consented to be swallowed by a toad, the toad by a serpent, and the serpent by the great bird Voc. The other animals duly liberated one another; but despite his utmost efforts, the toad could not get rid of the louse, who had played him a trick by lodging in his gums, and had not been swallowed at all.

The message, however, was duly delivered, and the players returned home to take leave of their grandmother and mother. Before their departure they each planted a cane in the middle of the house, which was to acquaint those they left behind with their welfare, since it would wither if any fatal circumstance befel them.

Pursuing the route their fathers had followed, they passed the river of blood and the river Papuhya. But they sent an animal called Xan as avant courier with orders to prick all the Xibalbans with a hair from Hun-Ahpu's leg, thus discovering those of the dwellers in the Underworld who were made of wood—those whom their fathers had unwittingly bowed to as men—and also learning the names of the others by their inquiries and explanations when pricked.

Thus they did not salute the mannikins on their arrival at the Xibalban court, nor did they sit upon the red-hot stone. They even passed scatheless

through the first ordeal of the House of Gloom. The Xibalbans were furious, and their wrath was by no means allayed when they found themselves beaten at the game of ball to which they had challenged the brothers.

Then Hun-Came and Vukub-Came ordered the twins to bring them four bouquets of flowers, asking the guards of the royal gardens to watch most carefully, and committed Hun-Ahpu and Xbalanque to the "House of Lances"—the second ordeal—where the lancers were directed to kill them.

The brothers, however, had at their beck and call a swarm of ants, which entered the royal gardens on the first errand, and they succeeded in bribing the lancers. The Xibalbans, white with fury, ordered that the owls, the guardians of the gardens, should have their lips split, and otherwise showed their anger at their third defeat.

Then came the third ordeal in the "House of Cold." Here the heroes escaped death by freezing by being warmed with burning pine-cones. In the fourth and fifth ordeals they were equally lucky, for they passed a night each in the "House of Tigers" and the "House of Fire" without injury. But at the sixth ordeal misfortune overtook them in the "House of Bats." Hun-Ahpu's head being cut off by Camazotz, "Ruler of Bats," who suddenly appeared from above.

The beheading of Hun-Ahpu does not, however, appear to have terminated fatally, but owing to the unintelligible nature of the text at this juncture, it is impossible to ascertain in what manner he was cured of such a lethal wound. This episode is followed by an assemblage of all the animals, and another contest at ball-playing, after which the brothers emerged uninjured from all the ordeals of the Xibalbans.

But in order to further astound their "hosts," Hun-Ahpu and Xbalanque confided to two sorcerers named Xulu and Pacaw that the Xibalbans had failed because the animals were not on their side, and directing them what to do with their bones, they stretched themselves upon a funeral pile and died together.

Their bones were beaten to powder and thrown into the river, where they sank, and were transformed into young men. On the fifth day they reappeared like men-fishes, and on the sixth in the form of ragged old men, dancing, burning and restoring houses, killing and restoring each other to life, with other wonders.

The princes of Xibalba, hearing of their skill, requested them to exhibit their magical powers, which they did by burning the royal palace and restoring it, killing and resuscitating the king's dog, and cutting a man in pieces, and bringing him to life again.

The monarchs of Xibalba, anxious to experience the novel sensation of a temporary death, requested to be slain and resuscitated. They were speedily killed, but the brothers refrained from resuscitating their arch-enemies.

Announcing their real names, the brothers proceeded to punish the princes of Xibalba. The game of ball was forbidden them, they were to perform menial tasks, and only the beasts of the forest were they to hold in vassalage. They appear after this to achieve a species of doubtful distinction as plutonic deities or demons. They are described as warlike, ugly as owls, inspiring evil and discord. Their faces were painted black and white to show their faithless nature.

Xmucane, waiting at home for the brothers, was alternately filled with joy and grief as the canes grew green and withered, according to the varying fortunes of her grandsons. These young men were busied at Xibalba with paying fitting funeral honours to their father and uncle, who now mounted to heaven and became the sun and moon, whilst the four hundred youths slain by Zipacna became the stars. Thus concludes the second book.

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BOOK 3

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The beginning of the third book finds the gods once more in council. In the darkness they commune concerning the creation of man. The Creator and Former made four perfect men. These beings were wholly created from yellow and white maize.

Their names were Balam-Quitzé (Tiger with the Sweet Smile), Balam-Agab (Tiger of the Night), Mahucutah (The Distinguished Name), and Iqi-Balam (Tiger of the Moon). They had neither father nor mother, neither were they made by the ordinary agents in the work of creation. Their creation was a miracle of the Former.

But Hurakan was not altogether satisfied with his handiwork. These men were too perfect. They knew overmuch. Therefore the gods took counsel as to how to proceed with man. They must not become as gods (note here the Christian influence). Let us now contract their sight so that they may only be able to see a portion of the earth and be content, said the gods.

Then Hurakan breathed a cloud over their eyes, which became partially veiled. Then the four men slept, and four women were made, Caha-Paluma (Falling Water), Choimha (Beautiful Water), Tzununiha (House of the Water), and Cakixa (Water of Aras or Parrots), who became the wives of the men in their respective order as mentioned above.

These were the ancestors of the Kichés only. Then were created the ancestors of other peoples. They were ignorant of the methods of worship, and

lifting their eyes to heaven prayed to the Creator, the Former, for peaceable lives and the return of the sun. But no sun came, and they grew uneasy.

So they set out for Tulan-Zuiva, or the Seven Caves, and there gods were given unto them, each man, as head of a group of the race, a god. Balam-Quitzé received the god Tohil. Balam-Agab received the god Avilix, and Mahucutah the god Hacavitz. Iqi-Balam received a god, but as he had no family his god is not taken into account in the native mythology.

The Kichés now began to feel the want of fire, and the god Tohil, the creator of fire, supplied them with this element. But soon afterwards a mighty rain extinguished all the fires in the land. Tohil, however, always renewed the supply. And fire in those days was the chief necessity, for as yet there was no sun.

Tulan was a place of misfortune to man, for not only did he suffer from cold and famine, but here his speech was so confounded that the first four men were no longer able to comprehend each other. They determined to leave Tulan, and under the leadership of the god Tohil set out to search for a new abode. On they wandered through innumerable hardships.

Many mountains had they to climb, and a long passage to make through the sea which was miraculously divided for their journey from shore to shore. At length they came to a mountain which they called Hacavitz, after one of their gods, and here they rested, for here they had been instructed that they should see the sun. And the sun appeared.

Animals and men were transported with delight. All the celestial bodies were now established. But the sun was not as it is to-day. He was not strong, but as reflected in a mirror.

As he arose the three tribal gods were turned into stone, as were the gods—probably totems—connected with the wild animals. Then arose the first Kiché city.

As time progressed the first men grew old, and, impelled by visions, they began to offer human sacrifices. For this purpose they raided the villages of the neighbouring peoples, who retaliated. But by the miraculous aid of a horde of wasps and hornets the Kichés utterly routed their enemies. And the aliens became tributory to them.

Now it came nigh the death-time of the first men, and they called their descendants together to hearken unto their last counsels. In the anguish of their hearts they sang the Kamucu, the song "We see," that they had sung when it first became light. Then they took leave of their wives and sons, one by one. And suddenly they were not. But in their place was a huge bundle, which was never unfolded. And it was called the "Majesty Enveloped." And so died the first men of the Kichés.

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BOOK 4

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The Fourth Book brings us down to what is presumably history. We say "presumably," because we have only the bare testimony of the "Popol Vuh" to go upon. We can note therein the evolution of the Kiché people from a comparatively simple and pastoral state of society to a political condition of considerable complexity.

This account of the later periods is extremely confused, and as the names of many of the Kiché monarchs are the same as those of the gods, it is often difficult to discriminate between saga and history.

Interminable conflicts are the subject of most of this book, and by the time the transcriber reached the twelfth chapter he seems to have tired of his labours and to have made up his mind to conclude with a genealogical list of the Kiché kings. He here traces the genealogies of the three royal houses of Cavek, Nihaib, and Ahau-Kiché.

The state of transition and turmoil in which the country was for many years after the conquest must have tended to the disappearance of native records of any kind, and our author does not appear to have been as well versed in the history of his country which immediately preceded his own time as he was in her mythology and legends.

According to a tradition recited by Don Domingo Juarros in his "History of the Kingdom of Guatemala," the Toltecs emigrated from the neighbourhood of Tula in Mexico by direction of an oracle, in consequence of

the great increase of population in the reign of Nimaquiché, fifth King of the Toltecs.

"In performing this journey they expended many years and suffered extraordinary hardships." Nimaquiché was succeeded by his son Aexopil, from whom was descended Kicab Tanub, the contemporary of Montezuma II. This does not at all agree with the "Popol Vuh" account.

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