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## The Power of the Word in the Maya Epic *Popol Vuh*

### ABSTRACT

The article examines the word and acts of speaking in the *Popol Vuh*, a 16th century document written by the Quiché Maya in order to preserve their native beliefs. Particular episodes of the story are explored from the perspective of powerful words and speeches, revealing their potential to create, unite, glorify and deceive. Interpretations of some of the more enigmatic passages of the account are proposed.

### KEY WORDS

*Popol Vuh*, Creation, Word, Maya, Quiché, ancestors, Hero Twins, Underworld

Blessings and curses, charms, vows and prayers – humanity has always attached value to words, believing in their power and hoping for their effectiveness. Indeed, cultures express themselves through words in the form of their languages and various texts, but they can also be understood on a deeper level through reflection on their concept of ‘the word’ itself.

The aim of this article is to consider this notion in the context of the Maya culture. The research is based primarily on an analysis of the 16th century document called *Popol Vuh*, translated into English and lavishly commented upon by Allen J. Christenson<sup>1</sup>. Although written in the Latin alphabet by representatives of the Quiché<sup>2</sup> people at the time of the Spanish

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<sup>1</sup> *Popol Vuh: Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya People*, trans. A. J. Christenson, 2007. Electronic version of original 2003 publication: <http://www.mesoweb.com/publications/Christenson/PopolVuh.pdf> [accessed: 14.08.2015].

<sup>2</sup> I follow the author of the translation in using the form ‘Quiché’, instead of the contemporary ‘K’iche’.

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conquest, the text contains little European influence, as its main purpose was to protect ancient beliefs from falling into oblivion<sup>3</sup>. The perspective of the ‘word’ and an in-depth examination of acts of speaking are hoped to provide an insight into the particular episodes of the story, clarifying their meaning and allowing for a better understanding of the people and culture that lie behind this account.

The ‘word’ is one of those concepts that are easy to understand, but somehow troublesome to define. Linguists probing into this issue have encountered considerable difficulties, but their struggle has not been fruitless. There are no objective criteria that would define the ‘word’ in a way suitable for all languages, as these all vary considerably in their characteristics. In fact, only a minority of the languages seems to possess such a term at all<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, however, there are examples of concepts covering a broader sense, encompassing for instance ‘talk, speech’<sup>5</sup> or ‘language, saying, Bible, message’<sup>6</sup>. Such a wider perspective is also the subject of consideration in this article, as only such an approach can embrace the meaning of the word and acts of speaking in the social and cultural dimension. As it turns out, even the word has its own, intriguing story to tell.

### *POPOL VUH*

In the form that is known to us today, *Popol Vuh* was composed in the mid-16th century, with the aim of preserving native beliefs and cultural identity and in reaction to the Spanish oppression. Conversely, as it may be observed, such difficult circumstances contributed to the conservation of this story into a more complete form, for it was recorded in the way it would be retold, judging by the mnemonic structures and repetitions used throughout the text. Thus, in all likelihood it reflects an oral tradition, although written records in hieroglyphic form undoubtedly existed as well<sup>7</sup>. For this reason, the document constitutes an unprecedented and invaluable source for exploring the thought

<sup>3</sup> *Popol Vuh...*, op. cit., pp. 50, 55–56.

<sup>4</sup> R. M. W. Dixon and A. Y. Aikhenvald, *Word: a typological framework*, [in:] *Word: A Cross-Linguistic Typology*, eds. R. M. W. Dixon and A. Y. Aikhenvald, Cambridge 2002, pp. 34–35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> A. C. Woodbury, *The word in Cup'ik*, [in:] *Word: A Cross-Linguistic Typology*, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> *Popol Vuh...*, op. cit., pp. 23–25, 56.

and the worldview of the Maya that are otherwise, in many instances, shrouded behind a veil of mystery.

The content of the original manuscript is known today thanks to the copies made in the beginning of the 18th century by Fr. Francisco Ximénez, a Dominican friar who resided in the towns of Chichicastenango and Rabinal, and possessed a wide knowledge of local languages. Having apparently awarded him their trust, the keepers allowed him to examine the manuscript, which he eventually copied and translated into Spanish. His Castilian version was in turn copied and subsequently published by Carl Scherzer in the mid-19th century, followed a few years later by the French translation of Fr. Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, this time, however, alongside the original text in the Quiché language, which appeared in print for the first time in history. Scherzer's publication drew on a copy no longer in existence, while the French translation was based on the version that remains today in the archives of the Newberry Library in Chicago<sup>8</sup> and is accessible in digitalised form on the Internet services of the Ohio State University<sup>9</sup>.

The story covers events occurring even before the creation of the world, concluding in the times of the Spanish presence on the American continent, showing the supernatural and human beings in constant interaction. The account maintains a rather subjective point of view in relating historical events, although certain episodes, especially those of a mythical character, seem to belong to a wider tradition, because they had been depicted on ceramic vessels many centuries earlier<sup>10</sup>. This has tempted some researchers to label the whole account as pan-Maya, although such an assumption appears to be rather exaggerated.

Throughout the *Popol Vuh*, the words and acts of speaking play a significant role in the story. The following pages will examine the creative power of words in the light of select events and characters. The commemorating and actualising potential of words will also be taken into account, as well as their use as a means for deceiving adversaries. Furthermore, particular conversations will be explored in their specific context, providing remarkable examples for discussion about the word and its meaning.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, pp. 31–33.

<sup>9</sup> The Ohio State University, [online] <http://library.osu.edu/projects/popolvuh/> [accessed: 14.08.2015].

<sup>10</sup> For instance: M. D. Coe, *The Maya*, London 2011, pp. 67–68.

## THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

The account begins with a narration describing the creation of the natural world and the creatures inhabiting it. All the elements that could characterise its existence and functioning are void: there is no movement, no light, no sound, no sky, no earth, no living beings. There is only water in this timeless reality. The stagnation is omnipresent. Such a lifeless and immobile state is additionally emphasised by the particular use of the present tense, as pointed out by the translator<sup>11</sup>.

What follows is the appearance of the first dynamic power in this primordial world: the word. The change of the tense is also very suggestive: ‘Then came his word’<sup>12</sup>. The gods confer with each other and decide upon the shape of the world they are about to generate, ‘bringing together their *words* and their thoughts’<sup>13</sup>. Immediately afterwards, they design the particular elements of the natural environment: life, light, plants, animals. They employ their mighty powers expressed through their words:

Merely their *word* brought about the creation of it. In order to create earth, they *said*, ‘Earth’, and immediately it was created. [...] Then they *called* forth the mountains from the water. Straightaway the great mountains came to be. [...] Thus they considered and *spoke* together, and immediately were created the deer and the birds<sup>14</sup>.

From such an opening, the power of the gods and their words seems to be limitless, yet the following pages decidedly oppose such an assumption. We are confronted with failed attempts at making creatures that would give thanks to and sustain the gods. At this point it becomes clear that the word is indeed at the centre of the creative act, not only as the productive power, but as a purpose as well, as the intention of the gods was to bring to life rationally speaking beings, who would revere their creators.

The first undertaking focused on animals. The gods ordered them to express themselves: ‘Speak! Call! Don’t moan or cry out. Speak to one another. [...] Speak therefore our names. Worship us, for we are your Mother and your Father. Say this, therefore. [...] Speak! Call upon us! Worship us!’<sup>15</sup>. However,

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<sup>11</sup> *Popol Vuh...*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60 [emphasis added].

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 61, 63 [emphasis added].

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 64–65.

the animals were able to utter nothing more than their own, unarticulated sounds, inconsistent with the gods' intentions. Such a result seems to be rather unexpected, surprising even the deities, as they say:

Their speech did not turn out well. [...] They were not able to speak our names. [...] This is not good. [...] You shall be replaced because you were not successful. You could not speak. We have therefore changed our word. [...] [B]ecause you have not been able to worship us or call upon us, there will be yet someone else who may be a worshiper<sup>16</sup>.

Then they tried to create other beings, taking mud as building material. This time too their efforts came to nothing, being even less successful at a physical level. It is important to realise, however, that this mud creature was able to talk, though not consciously: 'At first it spoke, but without knowledge'<sup>17</sup>. From this point of view, this attempt surpasses the previous one, bringing the gods closer to their intended aim.

Before the third try, the Master of Days and the Mistress of Shaping are asked for advice. Again, the importance of the ability to speak is distinctly stressed: 'For it is with words that we are sustained'<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, the wooden people also fail to fulfil their duty, although progress is visible:

May these effigies of wood come out well. May they speak. May they communicate there upon the face of the earth. May it be so. [...] And when they had spoken, straightaway the effigies of carved wood were made. [...] At first they spoke [...] [but] they were not capable of understanding before their Framer and their Shaper. [...] They were not capable of understanding and did not speak before their Framer and Shaper, their makers and their creators<sup>19</sup>.

From the complaints of the effigies' household dogs (which are somehow able to communicate intelligibly at this point of the story), it becomes clear that the effigies were able to speak comprehensibly, but instead of using this ability for the glory of their gods, they used it to harm other creatures<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, they were doomed.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, pp. 71–74.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 76 (footnote 143).

Finally, after the discovery of maize, the first humans could be created<sup>21</sup>. This time, however, in contrast to the previous attempts, the creatures turn out to be too perfect to the gods' liking. This causes the gods to react by limiting the humans' profound understanding of the world. Nevertheless, before this happens, the first words of humanity in history are pronounced, and they constitute a solemn expression of gratitude: 'Truly we thank you doubly, triply that we were created, that we were given our *mouths* and our faces. We are able to *speak* and to listen. [...] We became because of you, our Grandmother, and you, our Grandfather'<sup>22</sup>. It is striking that already the first and the second sentences contain a reference to the ability to speak, showing that it is truly essential for human nature. Significantly, only wisdom is inherited by the first men from their creators, not the ability to influence the world around them with powerful words. It is an important point to remember, as this motif will appear to be pivotal for other parts of the story as well.

The numerous efforts of the gods in view of bringing into life beings that would consciously worship and sustain them are eventually fruitful, resulting in the creation of human beings. However, their obligation to glorify and to praise their creators is not completely fulfilled in the beginning of the times. Instead, such a duty is rather expected to be satisfied throughout the generations. It is truly thought-provoking to ponder whether this question finally led to the writing of the very book that is under consideration in this article. Did the authors of the *Popol Vuh* manuscript fear punishment from heaven for the possible lack of appropriate veneration at a time when the native religions were being suppressed? If so, their endeavour was not futile, as the memory of their gods has been preserved for more than 450 years. Another compelling question concerns the imperfection of the particular creations and the difficulties encountered by the gods performing this challenging task. How was this account perceived by the indigenous people at the time of the Christianisation that preached an Omnipotent God, whose creation was perfect?

It is distinctive that the whole creation account circles around the topic of the word, pointing to the significance of this concept. As may be observed, the nature of the word, its functions and its properties vary, primarily depending on who is speaking. Nevertheless, despite differences on the level of the pur-

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<sup>21</sup> There is a long break in the story between the third and the fourth creation, when the attention of the storyteller is switched to the deeds of the twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, and their father and uncle.

<sup>22</sup> *Popol Vuh...*, op. cit., pp. 185–188 [emphasis added].

pose and possessed potential, the picture which emerges is coherent. One word brings the world to existence, another maintains it, both acting in continuity and leading to harmony in the Universe.

## ACTS OF SPEAKING AND THEIR MEANING

As mentioned above, humanity did not receive the ability to affect the world with their word. The descendants of one divine couple, who participated in the creation of the world and living beings on its surface, however, seem at least in some cases to possess such potential. A closer examination of particular characters and their conversations provides an interesting perspective, enriching our understanding of Maya beliefs.

## ONE HUNAHPU AND LADY BLOOD

One Hunahpu belongs to the most important figures in the whole account. He is believed to function as the Maize God<sup>23</sup>, providing the surface of the Earth with maize, the essential ingredient for the creation of human beings. For this reason, he might be expected to be portrayed in a dignified way throughout the story. However, almost every time One Hunahpu expresses himself, he errs. He is wrong when he assures<sup>24</sup> his relatives about his return from the Underworld, where he actually loses his life: ‘We will surely return to use it again [the rubber ball]. [...] We must go, but we will not die. Do not grieve’<sup>25</sup>. Soon after that, reaching the Xibalba, he and his brother, Seven Hunahpu, are tricked by the Lords of the Underworld. The brothers greet wooden effigies: ‘Morning, One Death. (...) Morning, Seven Death’<sup>26</sup>, causing the cunning Lords to explode with laughter. The brothers are finally defeated and they end up humiliating themselves, confessing: ‘We finished them off [the cigars and the torch], O Lord’<sup>27</sup>, only to be sacrificed shortly after.

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<sup>23</sup> For instance: M. Miller and K. Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*, London 2014 [1997], p. 98.

<sup>24</sup> There is a possibility to interpret his words as referring to future events, i.e. his resurrection or his continuing to live in his offspring, although most probably the meaning of this statement was supposed to be literal.

<sup>25</sup> *Popol Vuh...*, op. cit., s. 108.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 110.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

Miraculously, however, the head<sup>28</sup> of One Hunahpu retains the ability to speak<sup>29</sup>. The tree on which it was hung, dry and leafless until this moment, blossoms and bears fruit, causing puzzlement among the inhabitants of the underground world, resulting in restrictions forbidding any approach to the said plant. Then comes the maiden, Lady Blood, intrigued by the fruits of the tree she had heard of: ‘I hear that its fruit is truly delicious’. In reality, she should rather not have been able to witness such words for the existing restriction. Most probably, however, by being disloyal to the Lords of the Underworld and contradicting their will, she is portrayed as having a different nature from her compatriots, thus being a suitable person for becoming the mother of the future heroes, who were supposed to humiliate the ones ruling in this part of the Universe. Moreover, even though genealogy constituted an important aspect for the Maya throughout centuries<sup>30</sup>, nowhere in the book is the ancestry of her sons related to the Underworld.

The first and probably the only meeting of One Hunahpu and Lady Blood does not cast the former in any more favourable light. As a matter of fact, excluding the short introduction, their dialog expresses again their most compelling characteristics – he is wrong and she is a rebel: “‘You do not desire it”, she was told. “‘But I do desire it”, said the maiden’<sup>31</sup>. For declaring firmly her longing, she indeed receives the fruit, but one that she will bear in her womb for the next nine months. Then, only after the astonishing conception by means of the saliva of One Hunahpu does he begin to talk wisely:

My saliva, my spittle, is merely a sign that I have given to you. This head of mine no longer functions, for it is merely a skull that cannot work. The head of a truly great lord has good flesh upon his face. But when he dies, the people become frightened because of his bones. In like manner, his son is like his saliva, his spittle. He is his essence. If his son becomes a lord, or a sage, or a master of speech, then nothing will have been lost. He will go on, and once more become complete. The face of the lord will not be extinguished nor will it be ruined. The warrior, the sage, the master of speech will

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<sup>28</sup> A similar event will take place once more, when one of his sons, following his path into the Underworld, will lose his head while on trial in the Bat House. In his case, however, he will retain control over his body and will be able to speak while having a substitute for his head in the form of a chilacayote squash (Cf. *ibidem*, p. 162).

<sup>29</sup> Ordinarily, having lost the ability to speak was considered a proof of death. Compare with the alleged death of Zipacna: ‘He is no more. He does not speak’ (*ibidem*, p. 91).

<sup>30</sup> For instance: P. A. McAnany, *Living with the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society*, Austin 2000, pp. 15, 47–55, 128, 161.

<sup>31</sup> *Popol Vuh...*, op. cit., p. 116.



remain in the form of his daughters and his sons. Thus may it be so, as I have done to you. Climb, therefore, up there to the face of the earth. You will not die, for you have entered into a promise. Thus be it so<sup>32</sup>.

In the context of his previous statements, this monolog sounds truly exceptional, but the occasion itself is most extraordinary, as his sons, who will play a crucial role in the history of the Universe and who will help One Hunahpu to fulfill his destiny, have just been conceived.

The detailed exploration of One Hunahpu's acts of speaking and his conversations, especially the one with Lady Blood, help to grasp certain aspects of the word, existing in the Maya culture of that time.

First, the significance of speech in the social dimension is emphasised. To be a speaker or an orator meant enjoying a privileged and respected status. In One Hunahpu's statement, the master of speech ranks among the most important positions of responsibility in the community: lords, warriors, sages.

Second, the relationship between descendants and their ancestors is highlighted, as the merits and achievements of posterity bring glory to the forefathers as well. Indeed, One Hunahpu will also be honoured thanks to his sons in the latter part of the story.

Third, his speech bears traits of prophecy, as he assures Lady Blood of her safety. Previously, he did not have such an ability, which may be observed especially in the scene in which he was assuring his household about his return from the Underworld alive, which actually never happened.

Finally, his word is ensured to be true and productive, perhaps because of the concluding sentence: 'Thus be it so'. Such a phrase appeared previously when the gods were performing the acts of creation. They also utter the same expression while punishing animals for not being able to worship them<sup>33</sup>. The messengers of the Underworld Lords use it even twice when they decide to spare the life of Lady Blood<sup>34</sup>. After that, the sons of One Hunahpu say it at the moment of defeating their elder brothers<sup>35</sup> and then when they guarantee that their names will be remembered<sup>36</sup>. Lastly, One Hunahpu will hear these words from his sons, while establishing the custom of worshipping him<sup>37</sup>. Such a phrase may be likened to the Semitic phrase 'Amen', present in Juda-

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 116–117.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 120.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 130.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 179.

ism, Christianity and Islam, expressing confirmation and acknowledgement of what has just been said. Thus, for the first time in the account, One Hunahpu speaks with power, becoming almost equal with the gods, from whom he is descended.

## HUNAHPU AND XBALANQUE

Contrary to their father, the twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque possess internal powers, which on many occasions manifest themselves and successfully affect the world. Numerous situations illustrating their abilities may be identified throughout the account, although in many of these cases the boys do not utter a word. Such circumstances indicate that the word is not always necessary, but that it is rather one of the ways through which the internal spiritual essence<sup>38</sup> may act, causing alterations in the external world. The list of their deeds is long. First they free the world from Seven Macaw, who boasts in false, empty words<sup>39</sup>. Then they get rid of their elder brothers, causing their transformation into spider monkeys<sup>40</sup>. They also make the tools on the maizefield do their work for them<sup>41</sup>. But all these acts merely constitute a preface to the core of their mission: the defeat of the Lords of the Underworld, establishing the worship of their father and becoming the sun and the moon in the sky.

There is one particular episode deserving closer attention for the purposes of the study of the word. Having been killed by the Lords of the Underworld, One Hunahpu meets his sons after their victory over the same enemies. They finally encounter their father face-to-face, for the first time in their life, after having avenged him. The scenery seems to be perfect for an epic final, with the twins' powers coming to a climax. And yet, a series of unexpected and rather puzzling events takes place. The brothers ask their father to name some parts of his head – his mouth, nose and eyes, but he is able to mention only the first one. The boys, however, despite having accomplished extraordinary undertakings, do not say or do anything to bring him back to life. One Hunahpu appears to be the only one encumbered with the responsibility for the success or failure of the whole situation. At last, not being able to face the challenge, he surrenders, being unsuccessful in the task. However, as the narrator of the

<sup>38</sup> 'It was merely by their enchantments that it was done' (ibidem, p. 132).

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, pp. 78–80.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, pp. 131–132.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 136.

story declares: ‘Still, this had been said [naming his mouth], and thus they honored him’<sup>42</sup>. Soon after that the Twins reassure their father: ‘Here you will be called upon. [...] Your name shall not be forgotten’<sup>43</sup>.

Nevertheless, this enigmatic episode has a point. First of all, the parts of One Hunahpu’s face, understood in a figurative sense, can symbolise the whole person. The eyes or sight on the pages of the *Popol Vuh* serve as a symbol for knowledge and consciousness. Even the *Popol Vuh* itself is called ‘the instrument of sight’. Secondly, the nose is a means of breathing. For the Maya, breath was one of the components of the soul<sup>44</sup>. Therefore, the whole incident is not only about recalling the terms of physical parts of the body, but about reconstructing the whole being, with his understanding, awareness and soul. However, this attempt happens to be unsuccessful. The explanation for such a course of events seems to be simple: it had to be that way. The maize kernels, as can be observed in their natural cycle, have to be put in the soil to die, and only then can they bring the next crop. Therefore, it seems that a similar path had to be taken by One Hunahpu. Apparently it was just a question of destiny, his role in the world. Such an assumption may be reached since immediately after this scene, maize appears on the Earth and the creation of human beings becomes possible.

However, there is another intriguing part of this episode. One Hunahpu manages to mention his mouth and for this reason he may be ‘called upon’ and remembered. Although rather mysterious at first glance, the perspective of the acts of speaking provides certain clues that help to clarify the meaning of this scene. In the first place, because of restoring his mouth, that is his instrument of speech, One Hunahpu made himself able to communicate with his descendants. This was indispensable, since ancestor veneration, according to Maya beliefs, meant being in contact<sup>45</sup>. He proved to be sage through his words in his conversation with Lady Blood, in which she was also ‘given many instructions’<sup>46</sup>. The wisdom of the elders was one of the important reasons for their higher status in society and the motive for which younger generations kept asking for advice while dealing with important questions. Another point to realise is that Hunahpu and Xbalanque came to be thanks to their father’s

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<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>44</sup> For instance: K. Taube, *The Classic Maya Gods*, [in:] *Maya: Divine Kings of the Rain Forest*, ed. N. Grube, Germany 2006/2007, p. 272.

<sup>45</sup> For instance: *Popol Vuh*..., op. cit., pp. 53 (footnote 24), 188 (footnote 494).

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 118.

mouth, as his saliva served as the means to impregnate Lady Blood. Indeed, he needed nothing more in order to be honoured. His greatest merit was the result of his mouth and his words alone.

## DIALOGUE AND GATHERING TOGETHER

The *Popol Vuh* shows a world where unity seems to be a fundamental value. Such a rule is prevalent both in time and space, as it appears even before the creation of the world and lasts until historical times, being present at all levels of the Universe. It is manifested by making collective efforts and actions, proceeded by reaching a unanimous decision, which is consequently expressed in one, common voice. There is an overall pattern, which may be traced throughout the story. It all starts in the times when, suggestively, ‘There is not yet anything gathered together’<sup>47</sup>, as the authors characterise the primordial reality. The gods meet, decide about the shape of the world and undertake the creation:

Then came his word. Heart of Sky arrived here with Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent in the darkness, in the night. He spoke with Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent. They talked together then. They thought and they pondered. They reached an accord, bringing together their words and their thoughts. Then they gave birth, heartening one another. [...] Together they conceived light and life<sup>48</sup>.

Also the Lords from Xibalba gather together their thoughts and communicate before acting, for instance while planning the defeat of One and Seven Hunahpu<sup>49</sup> or considering the guilt and future of Lady Blood<sup>50</sup>. Similar steps were also taken by Hunahpu and Xbalanque, outwitted by animals on their maize-field, when, as could be expected, they ‘gathered together, coming together as one’<sup>51</sup>. The brothers also instruct the seers about their death, saying:

The lords of Xibalba may inquire of you concerning our death. They are even now putting together their thoughts on the matter, because we have not yet died. [...] Thus when all Xibalba has gathered together to determine how to ensure about our death, this shall be the idea that you will propose<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 58.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, pp. 59–60.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 111.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 118.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 138.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 166.

On another occasion, after the appearance of maize on the surface of the Earth, the major gods again ‘gathered together and joined their thoughts in the darkness, in the night. They searched and they sifted. Here they thought and they pondered. Their thoughts came forth bright and clear. They discovered and established that which would become the flesh of humanity’<sup>53</sup>.

People, as it may be observed, also practise such a habit: ‘Then they arrived atop a mountain. All the Quiché people gathered together, along with the nations. There they all came and counseled one with another. [...] Here they gathered together and here they gave to one another their names’<sup>54</sup>; or: ‘They assembled themselves together. All of them gathered together, summoning one another. Then they gathered together their thoughts. They spoke, asking one another’<sup>55</sup>.

For human beings, language is the key factor that allows different groups to persevere in unity: ‘There they looked for the coming forth of the sun, when they had one common language’<sup>56</sup>. Eventually, however, language changed and became a cause of division. Realisation of the changes comes as a surprise:

‘Truly we are not ashamed to come before you to ask for just a little bit of your fire,’ they said when they arrived. But they were not welcomed, and the nations cursed in their hearts. For now the language of Balam Quitze, Balam Acab, Mahucutah, and Iqui Balam was different. ‘Alas, is our language now abandoned? What have we done? We are lost. Where were we deceived? We had but one language when we came from Tulan. We had but one origin and creation. It is not good what we have done,’ said all the nations beneath the trees and beneath the bushes<sup>57</sup>.

Yet, certain steps towards unification are noticeable:

Tohil is the sole name for the god of the three groups of Quiché people. This is also the name for the god of the Rabinals. Only a little bit different is his name: One Toh being the name of the god of the Rabinals. They say it this way because of their desire to make it one with the language of the Quichés<sup>58</sup>.

Furthermore, many characters of the story come in fixed pairs or even trios, which also emphasises their unity. It is particularly clear in case of one of the supreme gods: ‘First is Thunderbolt Huracan, second is Youngest

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p.180.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 206–207.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 225.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p.194.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 201–202.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 217.

Thunderbolt, and third is Sudden Thunderbolt. These three together are Heart of Sky<sup>59</sup>, but other figures also have their almost inseparable companions, in some cases even possess very similar names (for example: One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, One Death and Seven Death etc.). The father and the uncle of Hunahpu and Xbalanque on some occasions are even collectively called the ‘fathers’ of the boys<sup>60</sup>. It is noticeable that acting on one’s own initiative takes place rather rarely in the related story.

It merits attention that all the beings of the Universe strive to be unified through communication and consent, revealed in their speaking in one voice. This is not surprising, however, as the way of living in the Maya communities in the pre-Columbian era was characterised by cooperation, interdependence and interaction of the members of society composed of lineages<sup>61</sup>.

This value seems to survive through centuries and to be still present among the Maya. Allen J. Christenson shares his observations: ‘In Quiché society, lack of unity is seen as one of the chief causes of misfortune and failure. Disagreements are therefore quickly resolved through direct discussion or mediation by a respected elder’<sup>62</sup>.

## THE WORD THAT DECEIVES

The word, however, has its reverse side as well. Apart from being a tool for creating the world and establishing its customs, it can also be used as a weapon during a confrontation. Lying and cheating occur surprisingly often on the pages of the *Popol Vuh*. This can be observed in the episodes with Seven Macaw and his sons; when both sets of twins meet the Lords of the Underworld; when Hunahpu and Xbalanque try and overcome their elder brothers or when they send their grandmother and mother for food and water. Such strategies are also common among people, as is particularly evident in the case of entangling others into human sacrifices. In such instances, word-play is often used, making the whole of the text more complex and beautiful.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 60.

<sup>60</sup> For instance: ibidem, pp.140, 144, 175, 178.

<sup>61</sup> For more information about lineages cf. P. McAnany, op. cit.

<sup>62</sup> *Popol Vuh...*, op. cit., p. 60 (footnote 60).

## CONCLUSION

The *Popol Vuh* is a book that was left by the 16th century Quiché Maya to their descendants, with the view of preserving what they believed was right. Today, almost five hundred years later, their hopes and efforts find fulfilment, as their account has not only survived, but is even more appreciated and comprehended with the course of time. The power of the word manifests itself on the pages of this narrative in its various aspects, creating, glorifying, punishing, uniting and deceiving. The acts of speaking and the diversified nature of the word indeed prove themselves to be essential for a deeper understanding of the story, not only affecting substantially the chain of events, but also providing valuable clues for the clarification of some of its most mysterious episodes.

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