

THE CREATION OF PEOPLE ACCORDING TO THE POPOL VUH



Before human beings, animals, grass, trees, and rocks were created, there was nothing but sky above and ocean below. There was not even any light or sound. There were, however, gods, called Creators, who lived hidden under layers of green and blue feathers deep in the ocean.

The Creators were tired of living in the bleak darkness under so many layers, so one day they got together and planned to fill the vast voids of the cosmos. They called out, “Let creation begin! Let the void be filled! Let the sea recede, revealing the surface of the Earth! Earth, arise! Let it be done!”³

And so the Earth, with its hills and streams and lakes and trees, rose up from the sea. At first, the Creators were thrilled with their rolling hills, rushing streams, and handsome cypress trees. However, although the new world was beautiful, it was also painfully quiet. So the Creators used their skills to make animals, such as deer and birds.

Then the gods commanded, “You, the deer: Sleep along the rivers, in the canyons. Be here in the meadows, in the thickets, in the forests. Multiply yourselves. You will stand and walk on all fours.

“You, precious birds: Your nests, your houses are in the

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trees, in the bushes. Multiply there, scatter there, in the branches of trees, the branches of bushes.”⁴

The Creators were very pleased with the animals, but there was still a problem. The gods wanted to be praised for their excellent efforts and adored by their creations. Animals could squawk and squeal and make other illiterate sounds, but they could not do verbal justice in praising their makers. The Creators became disheartened with the limitations of their work. So they ordered, “We will not take from you that which we have given you. However, because you cannot praise us and love us, we will make other beings who will. These new creatures will be superior to you and will rule you. It is your destiny that they will tear apart and eat your flesh. Let it be done!”⁵

The Creators then tried to create a class of creatures superior to animals. These creatures, the Maya people, would be able to speak words. But it was not an easy job to carry out.

First, the Creators used mud to make the people. Yet the mud people were not the kind of beings the Creators had in mind. They were soft and limp, and had trouble standing upright. Even worse, after it rained, they became wet and soggy and could not stand up at all. In addition, they were unable to see and had no brains. They could speak, but without a brain to guide their thinking, the people’s sounds were gibberish. Without wasting any more time, the Creators destroyed these mud people soon after they had been made.

The Creators tried again. This time they used wood to make human beings. The stick people were an improvement over the mud people. The sturdy wood allowed them to stand up and walk. Like the mud people, the wood people were able to speak. And so they lived and multiplied.

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Yet soon the Creators realized that, like the mud people, the wood people had no minds, so their words made no sense. They did not have blood flowing through their bodies, so their skin was dry and crusty rather than fresh and firm. They had no hearts, so their faces had no expressions. Even more important, they had no souls, so they did not know the difference between right and wrong. These ignorant beings burned the bottoms of their cooking pots and tortilla griddles, and beat and starved their dogs. Finally, the Creators realized they would have to destroy the stick people and try a third time to create creatures who were more complete.



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In destroying the stick people, the gods humiliated them. First the Creators unleashed a flood of a sticky sap-like substance. The wooden humans tried to escape, but their dogs, their former victims, would not let them do so. The dogs the wooden people had once beaten and starved so savagely now gained revenge by using their sharp teeth to bite the people and slash their faces. The griddles and pots the people had once burned so thoughtlessly also retaliated by burning the people back.

A few stick people managed to break free from the attackers they had once mistreated and tried to escape the flood of sticky sap. They climbed trees and hid on the roofs



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of houses. Yet even the trees and houses demanded vengeance. The trees shook their branches until the people fell to the ground. The houses collapsed rather than protect these wooden humans. And when the wooden race of people tried to hide inside caves, the caves closed up. Most of the people drowned in the sap. The few who did survive had their faces twisted until they no longer resembled humans. They became a new kind of animal, called monkeys.

For a third time, the Creators met to put their heads together. They needed a new way to bring to life the race of humans they had envisioned. Just as the Creators' meeting began, four animals came to visit: a mountain cat, a coyote, a crow, and a parrot. The animals told the Creators about an amazing food called maize, or corn, that grew nearby in an area called Broken Place. The Creators were very curious about this new food and wished to see it for themselves. So the animal quartet led the Creators to Broken Place where they found corn growing in abundance. The Creators realized at once that this was the key ingredient that had been missing. It was exactly what they needed to make the kind of creatures they had hoped to place on Earth.

The Creators got busy right away. They mashed corn into meal and used it to make four strong, handsome men who became known as the Four Fathers. Then they ground more corn into a liquid. The Creators offered the new potion to the men they had just made. The men drank it, and suddenly they had muscles and energy. While the men slept, the Creators made each one a wife as beautiful as the men were handsome.

The Four Fathers gratefully thanked the Creators for bringing them into the world, and for having been given an intelligence so superior that they were aware of all

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knowledge in the world. Much of their intelligence was aided by the men's powerful eyesight. The Four Fathers told their Creators, "We can see, we can hear, we can move and think and speak. We feel and know everything; we can see everything in the Earth and in the sky. Thank you for having made us . . ." ⁶

That suddenly led to a new problem. As they watched this new race of people, the Creators realized that by the making humans too perfect, they had made a mistake. If these people continued to see and know everything, then they would not be human beings but gods, just like themselves. It was clear that the Creators would have to do something to limit the intelligence and power of their handiwork.

So the Creators blew a mist into the Four Fathers' eyes. The mist had the same effect on the eyes of the men as a person's breath does on a mirror. The men could still see, but not as far. They could still think, but now their all-knowing intelligence was reduced to a more modest range of knowledge.

Soon the Four Fathers and their wives had children. Then their children had children, and before long there were many human beings on the Earth.