

**The Form and Function of Animal Codes in the *Popol Vuh*:
Keys to Unlocking the Precolombian Indigenous World View**

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Animals are universal symbols that are key to human efforts to represent reality with language. All cultures have different perspectives concerning the importance of animals. Animals behave very much as we do, probably for very similar reasons. They, like us, are interested in acquiring territory and status. One can assume that primitive humans also thought animals resembled them, but they did not know what motivated them. In time, human ideas about animals were reflected in religious rituals, literature, and art.¹

John Berger's *Why look at Animals?* was first published under the title "Animals as Metaphor" in 1977. In it, he wrote that "it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal." He refers to Rousseau's *Essay on the Origins of Languages* and to Lévi-Strauss's *Totemism* in support of his views.² The idea that animals are metaphorically indispensable to humans has certain attractions, because it proposes a relation between humans and animals which is not necessarily an exploitative one, nor one which works by denigrating animals. It is "anthropomorphic" attributing through carelessness or convenience all manner of human motives to the animals. Metamorphosis or metempsychosis, an integral feature in the development of religions, was relegated principally to "mummings" which was a ritual that included the practice of humans putting on animal skins or head of beasts.³ This practice extended into religious narration to include, combine, compare and contrast humans and animals.

¹ See Beryl Rowland's *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973.

² John Berger, "Animals as Metaphor", *New Society*, (March, 1977): 505-518.

³ Roys, Ralph L. *Ritual of the Bacabs: A Book of Maya Encantations*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1965.

The study of the form and function of animals in a sacred book can serve as an interpretative strategy to unlock the world view of a specific culture.

The most important and complete, existing precolombian historical-religious text of the American continent is the *Popol Vuh*, the Maya-Quiché sacred book of life. The *Popol Vuh* contains religion, mythology, traditions and history of the Maya-Quiché.⁴ The language and literary style, the philosophy, and the life it reveals show the Quiché had reached a high degree of learning and religious and cultural progress.⁵ The narrative trajectory of the *Popol Vuh* contains four sections or books. It begins with the Maya civilization's creation myth, followed by the stories of the Maya Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who are prominent figures of Maya mythology. The book continues and ends with details of the foundation and history of the Quiché Kingdom.

The best known and most complete manuscript of the *Popul Vuh* is in the Maya-Quiché language. After the Spanish conquest, the sacred books of the native inhabitants were destroyed and the use of native script was forbidden. Near the end of the seventeenth century, a priest named Francisco Ximénez, in the Guatemalan town of Chichicastenango, was shown a version of a sacred native text. Instead of burning it, Father Ximénez made a copy of it, and added a translation into Spanish.⁶

Many studies have been published on the *Popol Vuh*, but none has addressed the important role that animals play in the composition of the text and the elaboration of the narrative. There are approximately 30 different types of animals incorporated into the entire

⁴ Thompson, John Eric Sydney. *Maya History and Religion*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1970.

⁵ This copy was found in a corner of the University of San Carlos library in Guatemala City, by Abbé Bresseur de Bourbourg and Carl Scherzer in 1854. They published French and Spanish translations a few years later, the first of many translations that have kept the *Popol Vuh* in print ever since. The original Ximénez manuscript is now in the Newberry Library in Chicago.

⁶ Tedlock, Dennis. *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*. Touchstone Books (1996).

Popol Vuh text, including most existing insects, reptiles and mammals. The format of this study will combine a narrative sequencing of the animals, as they appear in Book II, with an analysis of their form and function.

Book II narrates the adventures of the Maya Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque. This narration includes essentially nine stages of sequencing, including their: 1) conception: owls; 2) birth: ants; 3) development: birds, monkeys; 4) journey to the underworld: mosquito; 5) series of tests in the underworld; 6) death and resurrection; 7) performed miracles of destruction and regeneration; 8) defeat of the underworld Lords; 9) success and transformation into the Sun and Moon. In each major phase of the narrative sequence, animals play an active role in enabling the Hero Twins to achieve victory.

In Maya mythology and the *Popol Vuh*, Hunahpu was a son of Hun Hunahpu and Blood Moon, and the older twin to Xbalanque; the two were the Maya Hero Twins. In the underworld, Xibalba, when their mother spoke with the decapitated head of their father in a tree, the skull spit on the virgin girl's hand and the twins were conceived in her womb. She was to be sacrificed, but was able to deceive the Lords of the Xibalba with the help of owls.⁷

This first act of deception would engender the twins and influence their actions and strategies in the future. As a result of the miraculous conception, the twins would become half gods or semi/demi-gods. They would have extraordinary powers and would be able to communicate with and manipulate the animals to achieve their goals. Deception is a consistent devise the twins employ to outwit their adversaries and animals assist them consistently.

The twins used their powers one day to hurry their farming chores for their grandmother. However, the next day they returned to find their work undone by the animals of the forest. Upon completion of their work the second day, they hid and waited, and when the animals returned they attempted to catch or scare them off. Most of the animals escaped, but the mouse they

⁷ Thompson, John Eric Sydney. *Maya History and Religion*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1970.

captured, and burned his tail in revenge. That is why mice today have no hair on their tails. In exchange for mercy, the mouse revealed a critical secret: the ballgame equipment of their father and uncle was hidden in the attic by their grandmother.

When the twins started to play ball in the court, the Lords of Xibalba were intrigued again by the sound, and sent a message to the boys to come to Xibalba and play in their court. Their grandmother relayed the message by telling it to a louse, which was swallowed by a toad, which was swallowed by a snake, which was swallowed by a falcon. In this narrative sequence, a series of animals coordinate their efforts to convey the grandmother's message, and serve literally and figuratively as a means of transportation. The fact that the toad was hit and stepped on in order to vomit the louse/insect with the original message, explains the current physical form of the toad.

In the first part, the birth and formation of the twins, the owls begin the interaction by saving their mother. The ants do not eat them as babies. They are able to free themselves from the tyranny of their older brothers by changing them into monkeys. The capture of the mouse enables them to realize their destiny. The insect, frog, snake and hawk form a formidable chain of message transport. The mosquito delays their grandmother and reveals the names of the underworld lords.

The mouse was the only animal that Hunahpu and Xbalanque caught. They burned its tail. At this point in the narrative, the mouse becomes the most important animal in the sense that it revealed to them their destiny by explaining the destruction of their fathers and the existence of the ball-court equipment. The youths compensated the mouse with food. A recurrent tendency within the *Popol Vuh* is to explain the cause of existing animal forms and physical characteristics: the short tail of the rabbit and deer and the hairless tail of the mouse

By using animals the twins defeated most of the underworld tests. The Lords of Xibalba were disappointed at the twins' success, until the twins were put inside of Bat House. They hid inside their blowguns from the deadly bats, but Hunahpu looked out to see if dawn had come, and was decapitated by a bat. The Xibalbans were elated that Hunahpu had been killed.

However, Xbalanque called upon the beasts of the field, and from a tortoise configured a replacement head for Hunahpu. Though his original head was used as the ball for the next day's game, with the help of a rabbit the twins were able to exchange the tortoise head for the ball, retrieving Hunahpu's real head and resulting in an embarrassing defeat for the evil Lords.

In the second part, the series of deadly tests, animals prove crucial as instruments and vehicles to their survival. The fireflies and bird feathers appear like lighted tobacco. The ants cut and retrieve the protected flowers. The jaguars are subdued and convinced to not harm them. The bat kills one of the twins, but with the help of the vulture, the tortoise and the rabbit, they are able to deceive the evil lords and bring him back to life.

The vulture blackened the sky four times by opening its wings when Xbalanque was carving Hunahpu's head. Here, the buzzard functions as a creative and clandestine force that enables the revival of Hun Ahpu. The Tortoise was the animal that Xbalanque chose to replace Hunahpu's head. The tortoise functions literally and figuratively as the temporary instrument that enables the Hero Twins to succeed. The Rabbit switched Hunahpu's real head with fake one and enabled his revival.

The Lords of Xibalba still wanted to destroy the twins. They built a fire oven and again called the boys, thinking to trick them into the oven and to their deaths. The twins realized that the Lords had intended this to be their defeat, but they let themselves be burned in the oven, killed, and their bones were ground into dust and thrown into a river. This was a part of the plan by the boys, and when thrown into the river, their bodies regenerated and resurrected, first as a pair of fish, and then as a pair of young boys again.

Unrecognized, the resurrected twins remained in Xibalba. Rumors of their transformation from fish spread, as well as descriptions of their dances and the way they entertained the people of Xibalba. They performed many miracles, setting fire to homes and then bringing them back from the ashes, sacrificing one another and rising from the dead. Fascinated by the acts of destruction and regeneration, the Lords of Xibalba, demanded that the miracles be performed upon them. The twins responded by killing and offering the lords as a sacrifice, but did not bring

them back from the dead. As a punishment for their crimes, the realm of Xibalba was no longer to be a place of greatness, and the Xibalbans would no longer receive sacrifices from the people who walked above on the Earth. Having accomplished their mission, the twins left Xibalba, climbed back to the surface of the Earth and were transformed into the Sun and the Moon.

In the last section, the return of the twins and their defeat of the underworld lords, the fish are their first step in regeneration and the dog is the first victim sacrificed and brought back to life. Wanting to imitate this experience, the lords of Xibalba are ultimately deceived and defeated. The evolutionary life cycle is reflected in the sequence of rebirth and regeneration of the Hero Twins, this process begins with fish.

In the literature on human-animal relationships, there have been many important contributions by scholars working in different areas and within different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives in Latin America. However, the body of work that has generated the most interest and controversy within the discipline of anthropology is Claude Lévi-Strauss's four-volume study, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (1969, 1974, 1979, 1981).⁸ These volumes have made at least two lasting monumental contributions to American Indian studies: first, the collection, into a single set of volumes, of over 800 myths, the majority of which are from South America; and second, Lévi-Strauss has firmly placed animals in the foreground of American Indian studies.⁹

The book *Animal Myths and Metaphors in South America* (1985), edited by Gary Urton, is a collection of important essays that deal with the following questions: What similarities and differences do humans see between themselves and animals? Why do people commonly make metaphorical comparisons between themselves and animals? And to what degree are people's

⁸ Lévi-Strauss's study of the mythological systems of the Tropical Forest Indians is perhaps the single most important modern document in the comparative study of South American Indians.

Hausman, Gerald. *Meditations with Animals: A Native American Bestiary*. New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1986.

attitudes and beliefs about animals parallel to or contingent upon their attitudes and beliefs about human beings and human society?

Steve Baker explores the positive and negative connotation of animals in images in his insightful book *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (1993). Baker puts forth the hypothesis that the dualistic thinking expressed in binary oppositions is the main problem concerning negative animal associations, they invariably represent the negative term in the opposition: “the Other, the Beast, the Brute.” The occasions on which they serve a more positive metaphoric role are generally ones which cannot be cast so readily into binary terms. (18-20).

The social nature of the cosmological metaphor has been the subject of academic debate for many years. Levy-Bruhl offered the first classical analysis when he originally brought the issue to general attention in his first work, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910). In this study, Lev-Bruhl uses as subjects the Bororo of Central Brazil and their saying “We are red macaws.” He took this and other Bororo material from Steinen, whose work on the Indians of Central Brazil had appeared in 1894.¹⁰ The critical passages in Levy-Bruhl are the following:

The Bororo...boast that they are red araras (parakeets). This does not merely signify that after their death they become araras, nor that araras are metamorphosed Bororos, and must be treated as such. It is something entirely different. The Bororos give one rigidly to understand that they are araras at the present time, just as if a caterpillar declared itself to be a butterfly. It is not a name they give to themselves, nor a relationship (parenté) that they claim; what they desire to express by it is actual identity...

¹⁰ Van Baaren observes in his article on the same subject (1969), that Levy-Bruhl probably used the second edition (1897).

All communities which are totemic in form admit of collective representations of this kind, implying similar identity of the individual members of a totem group and their totem. (1966, 62)

Levy-Bruhl raises some of the most complicated issues in the analysis of figurative language and belief systems. His comment that the Bororo statement reflects the “actual identity” between clansmen and their totems is the logical essence of any totemic system. However, Lévi-Strauss offers the view and analysis of such systems in terms of symbolic, figurative meanings.

Throughout the *Popol Vuh*, animals are consistently compared with humans, and in most instances, the qualities, characteristics and actions of the animals, reflect a similar belief or world view of the American indigenous society. This type of anthropomorphism is common and key to the indigenous world view. Unlike the European-Judeo-Christian perspective that maintains a binary view that “we” are humans and animals are the “other.” The Native American and Maya-Quiché perspective perceived humans and animals as equal components and participants in the life cycle. In the *Popol Vuh*, it can be observed that in narrative sequencing of the Hero Twins’ adventures, that animals play an intrinsic and extrinsic, metaphoric and symbolic, actively engaged role in their success. They function as co-conspirators and mythological-symbolical vehicles by which the Hero Twins achieve ultimate success.

In a recent essay “Animality, Humanity, Morality, Society” the anthropologist Richard Tapper presents a cross-cultural perspective on evidence of totemic thought. Tapper suggests that this process of distinction and opposition need not invariably present a negative image of the animal.¹¹ Tapper suggests that this process of distinction and opposition need not invariably present a negative image of the animal. Tapper’s essay, which opens with an interdisciplinary

¹¹ Richard Tapper, “Animality, Humanity, Morality, Society,” in *What is an Animal?.* edited by Tim Ingold (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988): 49-61.

selection of quotations dealing directly or indirectly with the animal as metaphor, also recognizes a distinction between positive and negative convention:

Animals, or rather cultural constructions of them, are used as metaphors...in two rather different, even contradictory, ways. Sometimes certain animals are idealized and used as models of order and morality, in animal stories and myths... The animals are treated as agents and social beings, with motives, values and morals; and differences between them and people are implicitly denied. By contrast animals are sometimes represented as the Other, the Beast, the Brute, the model of disorder or the way things should not be done. Animals are ideal for both of these purposes...¹²

There have been many important studies on the intrinsic role that animals play in human culture. As Paul Shepard notes in his book *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (1996), animals are in fact essential to all cultures and societies in their individual and collective process of self-definition.¹³ Shepard's book treats in a detailed manner many of the issues concerning the animal-human physical and cognitive symbiotic relationship that I am exploring in this study. For Shepard, one's identity is not simply human as opposed to animal. It is a series of nested categories. Paradoxically, the difference between the human and the animal begins with a claim of unity. Like other primates humans are obsessed with the question of status, the pronoun inquiry; who are you, we, they, and I myself. Personal identity is not so much a matter of disentangling the self or "the human" from nature as it is a combination of selected correspondence in which aspects of the self are projected into the dense, external world where they are discovered among a variety of animals who are both similar and different from us.

¹³ See Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington, D.C., Island Press, 1996).

Aspects of the animal are then reintroduced into our psyches by a chemistry of imitation.

(Shepard: 86)

Human learning is commonly said to have three stages or “modes of representation”; enactive, iconic, and symbolic. Children are committed to the first stage, acting out what they feel; they learn to walk like mice learning to run a maze. Manual skills are not taught but learned by watching and imitating. Other large mammals do this also. The human being seems peculiar, though, in that children imitate not only other people but other species, a characteristic of our own kind of consciousness. But being an animal and acting like an animal are not the same. Enactments are transformative traits of our humanity. The emulation of animals in childhood games is translated into dance and ceremonial performance in adult life.¹⁴ The second “mode of representation” the iconic stage, appears in middle childhood, when many children are charmed with drawing and pictures. Iconic refers to the image in the mind’s eye and in art as simulations of tangible things. It includes the personification of animals in ways much wider than games and is related to mythic narration and performance. The iconic alludes to images and the older child’s capacity to imagine. Beginning in adolescence and continuing throughout life, the third form of representation; metaphor and symbol. These representations occur in poetry and song as well as all other arts and myths. This stage is the result of the intellectual realization that things have more than a face value. (Shepard: 89)

According to Shepard, Florence Krall suggests that there is a fourth type of representation beyond psychology’s conventional three of enactive, iconic, and symbolic. After the symbolic division, she says, where things at first thought to be the same are discovered to be similar but different, there is a culmination in the recovery of the literal connection where we and the animals meet as kin. In this sense the early play at being an animal, with its interiorizing of a morphology of feelings -giving species names to acts and emotions- leads to a clearer self-definition. The biological kingdom, Animalia, is composed of many species, but psychologically it is we who are composed of animals. Despite modern usage, as in “humans or animals” we are

not part of a binary duo nor elements of a simple juxtaposition with them. However we may define ourselves as a species, the final act is to recover our animalhood, to see all taxonomy for what it is: a means, not an end, to thought. (Shepard: 89)

The *Popol Vuh* tells of the adventures of the legendary Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, in defeating the lords of Xibalba, the underworld and explains the origin of the sun and moon. These two are focal points of Maya mythology and often found depicted in Maya art.¹⁵ The stories of how the Hero Twins defeated the lords of Xibalba was taught as an example of how Maya people should conduct themselves and how also to defeat enemies in the afterlife.¹⁶ The study of the form and function of animals in the *Popol Vuh* underscores and explains the importance of animals as active participants in the continuing battle between good versus evil and life versus death in the world view of the Maya-Quiché.

Important work is being done and still needs to be done in the field of ethnography and the relationship between animals and humans in language and literature. The ongoing influence between author, reader and culture is based on shared codes. Animals are these universal codes for all cultures and are key to defining and describing ourselves, our language, our literature and our world.

¹⁵ Soustelle, Jacques. *L'Art du Mexique Ancien* (B. Arthaud, Paris, 1966)

¹⁶ Florescano, Enrique. *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico: From the Aztecs to Independence*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.

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