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**How Our Mother Beloved Maiden was Saved from an Untimely Death:  
A christianized version of the Xkik' tale of the Popol Wuj**



**Research Year:** 2001

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Pre-Classic to Contemporary

**Location:** Rab'inal, Highland Guatemala

**Site:** Xkik' story from the Popol Wuj

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## Introduction

This project comprised the transcription, translation and interpretation of a traditional Achi-K'iche' hand-petitioning text recited during a marriage ceremony called *Tz'onoj*, "Petitioning". The text of some 1100 lines was recorded in Rab'inal from a Maya priest, don José León Coloch Carniga, who is also the dance-master of the well-known K'iche' dance called *Rab'inal Achi*. This document is a christianized version of the Xkik' story from the *Popol Wuj*. A first translation was made together with the priest. I made a second at home, and then returned to do a final check to ask about the phrases that had remained obscure. In all I lived in Rab'inal for almost two and a half years, and during one of my stays I was able to witness a *Tz'onoj*-ceremony.

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## Xkik' or Blood Woman

The Xkik' story in the Popol Wuj describes the life of the daughter of lord Kuchuma Kik' (Blood Gatherer) of Xib'alb'a. Attracted by the gourd tree in the ballcourt, she finds out that one of the fruits is the severed skull of Jun Junajpu. She becomes pregnant when receiving spittle in her hand that was ejected from the skull. When her father discovers her pregnancy, he demands her to reveal the father of the child. Xkik' denies having been with a man, after which her father, together with the other lords of Xib'alb'a, decide to have her killed. Owl messengers are ordered to take her away and bring back proof of her sacrifice. Xkik', however, manages to persuade her executioners to let her go, which they do. They deceive the lords of Xib'alb'a with fake evidence of her death. Instead of bringing Xkik's heart a fake one is produced from the fruit and red sap of the Croton Red Tree. With the help of the Owl messengers Xkik' escapes from Xib'alb'a and arrives at the house of Jun Junajpu. His mother, Xmukane, is not easily convinced that Xkik' carries his children, and sends her out to do an impossible task – filling up a net with corncobs from just one corn plant – which she nevertheless completes. Only then is she accepted into the house and gives birth to the hero twins Junajpu and Xb'alan Q'e.

## Qachu Kilaj Qapoj or Our Mother Beloved Maiden

In the modern variant that I recorded Xkik' became the holy Virgin *Qachu Kilaj Qapoj* or "Our Mother Beloved Maiden" (hereafter Beloved Maiden text). She is the daughter of "Our Celestial Father", who keeps her locked in his house. Nevertheless, she gets

pregnant by eating an apple given to her by San Pedro (Saint Peter) through a small window. Here the gourd from the *Popol Wuj* is replaced by the biblical forbidden fruit.

In Rab'inal, San Pedro is the prototype of what I have called the Old Earth God, a mix of Maya gods D and N. In their cosmivision he is the older brother of Rab'inal's patron saint San Pablo (Saint Paul) who represents their former god Tojil. They are always worshipped together. I have shown elsewhere that the twin-temple pyramid in Rab'inal's pre-Columbian town of Kaqyuq was dedicated to these Maya forebears of San Pedro and San Pablo (Van Akkeren, 2000a:249-254). There are various examples in Maya iconography that display the amorous advances of an old man towards a young girl (Taube, 1989:fig. 24.13, 24.14, K1339). The personage of the old man is also already anticipating Our Mother Beloved Maiden's future husband, Saint Joseph.

When the father finds out about her pregnancy, Our Mother Beloved Maiden is ordered to be put to death, like her counterpart in the *Popol Wuj*. Her executioners San Miguel and San Vicente (Ferrer), angels who replaced the Owl messengers, fall for her pleas to let her go. She explains to them that she carries the body of the god of the new era in her belly. Still, the executioners have to come up with proof of her demise, and here the modern version exhibits more detail than its parallel in the *Popol Wuj*. Where in the *Popol Wuj* the lords of Xib'alb'a want her heart in a bowl, the father of Our Mother Beloved Maiden wants to hear her deathshriek, and see her heart and blood.

The messengers find the deathshriek with a local plant called *tup*. It is a plant with large fleshy leaves on long stems. When pulled from its sheathe the leaf produces a high-pitched sound. Interestingly, the *tup* is eaten by Maya women who have just given birth, as it guarantees good breastmilk. The fake heart comes from the nucleus of a tree called *ratit kako*, literally "grandmother of the cacao", though in Spanish called "madre de cacao". Its trunk has a distinctly red-colored heart when cut; it often serves as a shade-provider for cacao trees, hence its name. The blood is procured by the pitaya, a plant that seeks support with its roots on rocks. It produces a dark, purple fruit and equally colored sap.

Once the messengers have the fake proofs of her death, they return to their master and Our Mother Beloved maiden sets out for a long journey to the East. The East is epitomized by the city of Jerusalem. We observe already in the XVI<sup>th</sup> document *Título de Totonicapán* that Jerusalem replaces the pre-Columbian legendary city of Tullan in colonial times. To get there Our Mother Beloved Maiden has to cross a body of water, just as the migrators from and to Tullan had to (Edmonson, 1971:line 7258).

But before she arrives at the coast, Our Mother Beloved Maiden has an arduous road ahead of her. At night she asks for shelter in various residences of wealthy people. They all give her impossible jobs to do, recalling the task that the grandmother Xmukane gives to Xkik'. As in the *Popol Wuj*, she is helped out by animals. In one scene, she must spin an entire load of cotton and weave fabrics from it; and just as she begins to cry, spiders (*'am*) slide down from the ceiling offering her help. In another, she is given bags of corn of mixed varieties and she has to select the corn. Pigeons (*palomax*) help her out in that case. Contrary to the *Popol Wuj* the people who give her

these jobs get even more suspicious about her when she completes them with such apparent ease, and chase her from the house.

She finally arrives at the ocean. Her heart sinks anew, as she is unable to cross it. First a basilisk (*patix*) offers to carry her on his back, but they do not progress far before the animal realizes that she is too heavy – she is pregnant, – and they return. Then, a creature called Lord Dragon (*ajaaw taragon*) offers to help her. Its nature is not specified but it may be a version of Sipakna, because he preys on fish. Lord Dragon succeeds in bringing her to the other side.

It does not take long for her to arrive in Jerusalem. The nobles of the city show great interest in her. They summon the priest to announce a holy mass for Our Mother Beloved Maiden. Every nobleman is invited and is to bring a staff with flowers on top. The man whose staff begins to blossom during the mass, will marry her. So it happens; all the lords show up and the church is packed. They are dancing and playing flute while the maiden stands beside the altar. Then halfway through the celebration a strong perfume begins to pervade the temple. The priest sends his two messengers to find the chosen man, but he is not among the many young and virile men in the front. Instead, the flowering staff belongs to an old, white-haired man named San José (Saint Joseph) who is standing in the back, near the entrance of the church. Reluctantly, he follows the messengers to the altar. How can he be the chosen one? The priest points to his staff and says that that is the sign. Our Mother Beloved Maiden accepts her partner, telling him that she will love him as a father and a husband, and they get married. After the mass they have to flee the city under the protection of a group of good men, because the rich suitors plan to steal the maiden from San José.

The married couple escapes the city and starts another journey through a dry and deserted area with barren trees. Our Mother Beloved Maiden gets hungry and thirsty, but there seems no food available. Yet every time she sits down under a tree, it begins to shoot leaves and bear fruit (*tapal* or 'nance' and *q'enum* or 'jocote'). The miraculous fruit-bearing recalls the gourd tree in the *Popol Wuj* that also immediately produces gourd when Jun Junajpu's head was hung in it, and was subsequently visited by the predecessor of Our Mother Beloved Maiden, Xkik'. This is understandable, as the maiden is in her essence an Earth goddess. Modern Achi indeed call the earth among others, Our Mother Beloved Maiden.

The story ends as a traditional Christmas tale, with Our Mother Beloved Maiden giving birth to "the son of the god who is in heaven", which in terms of the *Popol Wuj* would be the son of Juraqan. Her child is born in a barn in Bethlehem and angels announce it to the shepherds in the field and a bright star guides the Three Wise Men to the baby in the manger.

## Tz'onoj or Petitioning

The FAMSI grant was for the transcription, translation and commentary on the Beloved Maiden text. Still, it is instructive to know a little about the occasion in which the text is recited. As said, the Beloved Maiden text is narrated by a Maya priest during a wedding ceremony called *Tz'onoj*, meaning "Petitioning". What is petitioned, is the hand of the girl by the family of the boy. Traditional hand petitioning is rapidly losing ground in the town of Rab'in al itself. It is generally only practiced in the more remote hamlets. I was able to participate in a *Tz'onoj* ceremony.

The *Tz'onoj* is the residue of what in pre-Columbian times must have been the official Maya wedding ceremony. Roughly until the fifties of the last century weddings were still arranged. Parents determined when a boy was ready to marry and selected a suitable partner for him. When they found one, they contacted a Maya priest (in Rab'in al called *tiniente* or *abogado*) and with him, they began a series of seven visits with the girl's parents. The visits were meant to get to know each other, and for the parents of the boy to honor their future relatives with presents. On the last visit they set the date for the *Tz'onoj*.

The *Tz'onoj*, or Petitioning, takes place at the house of the girl. Both parties are represented by a Maya priest and his assistant, who are present with their wives. On the very day of the *Tz'onoj* the priest who represents the boy, pays three visits to the house of the girl. The first blessing is at six in the morning, when he performs a blessing at the entrance of the courtyard (*tzam ja* or *tzam aq'es*, "at the exit of the house", "at the edge of the weeds/bushes"). The second takes place at noon, in the middle of the courtyard (*unik'ajal uwaja*). The third is planned at six in the evening; this is when the entire family accompanies the priest. The priest first carries out the third blessing just before the door, under the drainage (*ub'e tz'uj*). Then the party moves to the door where they are awaited by the other party who sits inside ([Figure 1](#)). There are benches both inside and outside because the ritual prayers of both parties last three to four hours. It is only after these prayers are finished, that the party of the boy is allowed to enter the house ([Figure 2](#)). This prayer is called *Lajuj Tz'ij*, "Ten Words", (after the Ten Commandments) and mentions the entire pantheon, geography and administrative distribution of Rab'in al, and all its deceased ancestors. The priest of the girl's party recites the same prayer, but in his own words and interpretation.

Inside is an altar where the entering party pays its homage. Once entered, each party sits down on either side of the altar. They seem to follow the pattern practiced in church during holidays where the images of the male saints stand on the left and the female saints on the right (as seen when looking towards the altar) ([Figure 3](#), [Figure 4](#) & [Figure 5](#)). Here too, the party of the boy sits on the left, and that of the girl on the right. When they have taken their seats, the priest of the boy's party begins his version of the Beloved Maiden text ([Figure 6](#)). On average, it lasts an hour and a half. He recites the text in a chanting way as catholic priests used to do. The other priest who sits opposite of him answers him occasionally, on the narrator's utterance *keje k'u compadre?*, "is it not like that, compadre?". Later, the priest of the girl's party recounts his version of the Beloved Maiden text ([Figure 7](#)). It all depends on the performance skills of the narrator,

as to how interested people are in listening to him. But even the greatest performer will not be able to keep the attention of an audience after hours of prayers, alcohol and sleepy cosiness. Like in many rituals, the importance is that the prayers are completed. All kinds of activities go on while the priest is chanting. People walk in and out, they chat with each other, liquor and cigarettes are imparted, if the priest has to go to bathroom his place is taken by his assistant etc.



**Figure 1. Prayers at the door.**



Figure 2. Entry of boy's party.



Figure 3. Left: boy's party, Right: girl's party.

After each account of the Beloved Maiden text, there is a very specific action which, in my opinion, epitomizes the very meaning of the *Tz'onoj* ceremony. The action is called *empás*, difficult to deduce, but is probably derived from Spanish dance terminology. Both parties rise from their benches and pray in front of the altar. They then sink on their knees forming two half circles that move alongside each other ([Figure 8](#)). After the first Beloved Maiden text, the party of the boy, headed by the priest, moves along the inside, and the party of the girl along the outside. After the reciting by the priest of the girl's party, positions are reversed. While on their knees both priests hold each other and bow, saying a little salute. In these words they formally acknowledge that, now their son and daughter are to be married, they will become family and are bound to greet each other accordingly in public places. Then the priests move to the second in line and do the same. Each one gets to meet one another, accepting them as family. If there is one thing that is clear about the *Tz'onoj* as a whole, and here we must include all earlier visits, it is that the ceremony is much more about the joining of two formerly entirely different social groups, than about the uniting of a boy and a girl. The bride and groom are hardly present during the rituals, only at the end do they play a central role. The *empás* is like a choreographic expression of the integration of two social groups.



Figure 4. Both priests in front of altar.



Figure 5. Women in girl's party.



Figure 6. Beloved Maiden tale by priest boy's party.



**Figure 7. Beloved Maiden tale by priest girl's party.**



**Figure 8. Empás after the first tale.**

After sweet bread and coffee we see the wedding couple for the first time, some six to seven hours after the boy's party has arrived. They do walk in occasionally, but do not take part in the ceremony, rather they socialize with their peers outside. This time, they kneel in front of the altar and are blessed with incense by both priests ([Figure 9](#) & [Figure 10](#)). First the boy is presented by his priest to the party of the girl, starting with their priest, assistant, father, other *compadres*, and then to all the females: the wives of the priest, assistant, father (that is, the mother of the girl) etc. ([Figure 11](#)). Everyone blesses him by laying a hand on his head while the priest utters his ritual words. Next, the girl is presented by the priest of the boy to her own family. Then the action is reversed; this time the priest of the girl has the lead and presents the boy to his own family ([Figure 12](#)). After him, the girl is introduced to her new family.

When this is finished, bride and groom are put in front of the altar anew and tested about their knowledge of catholic prayers. After all, they are asked to reproduce these texts by the catholic priest when they are officially prepared for the wedding in the church (*información*). Advice may be given as to study a little more on one or two of the prayers. Next, the wives of the party of the girl (*comadres*) formally accept her wedding clothes brought by the party of the boy ([Figure 13](#)). Finally there is a last communal prayer in front of the altar. As the party of the boy leaves, they do a last prayer outside the door ([Figure 14](#)).

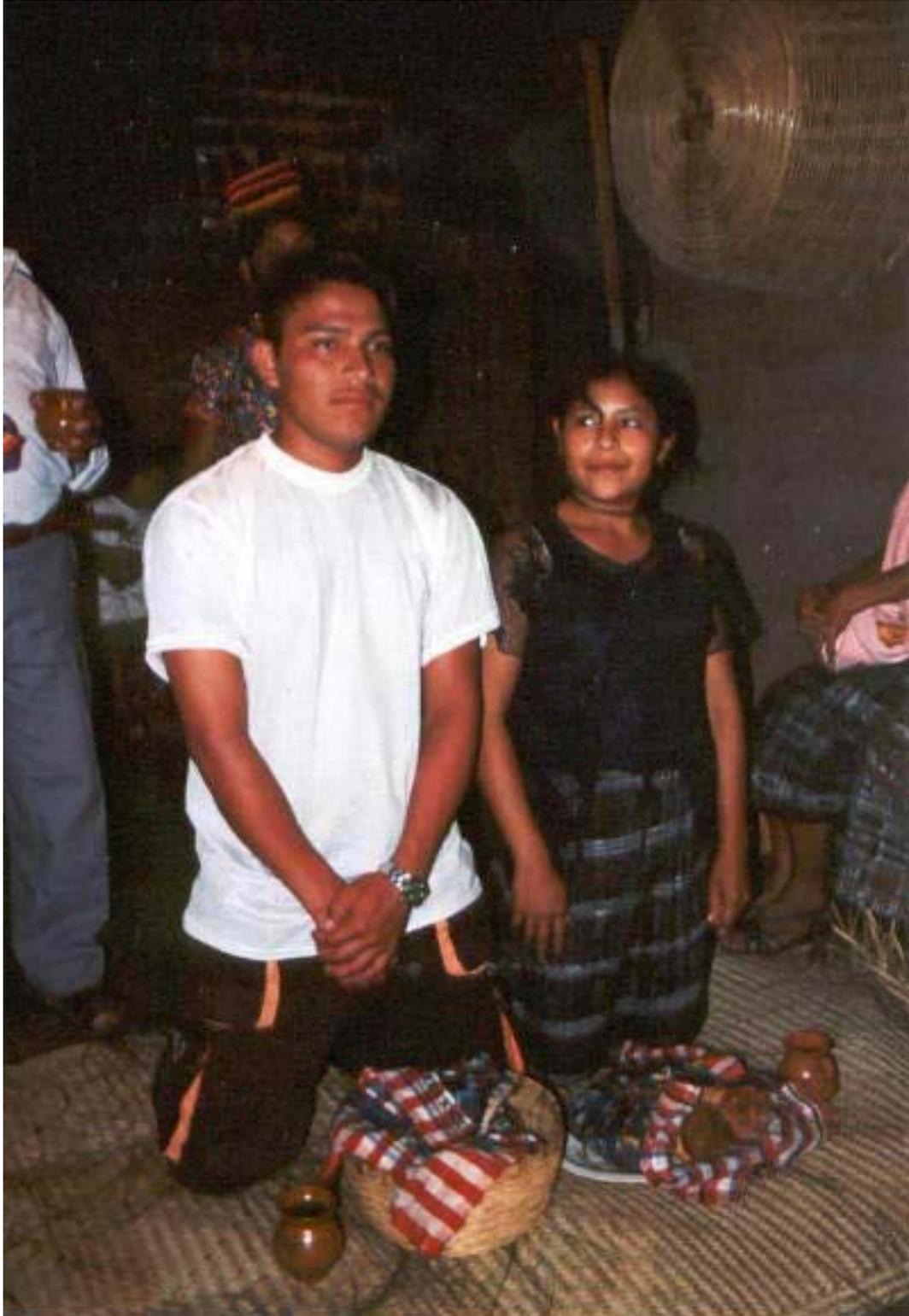
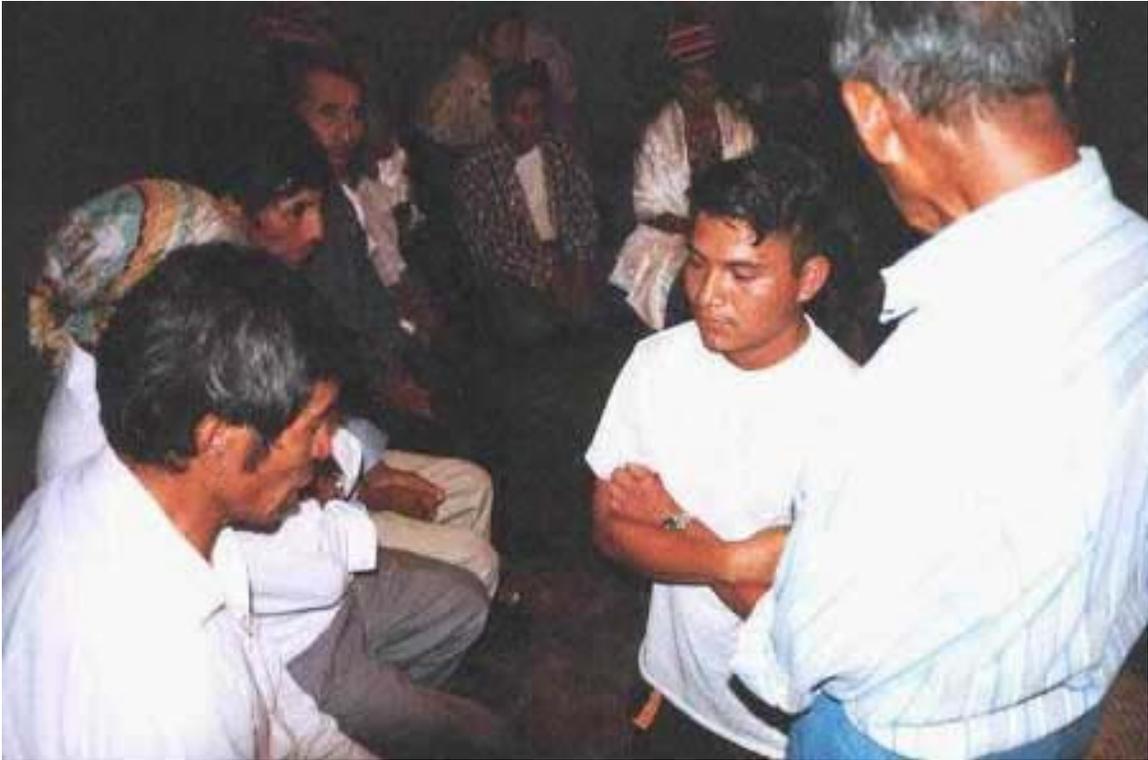


Figure 9. Couple in front of the altar.



**Figure 10. Bride and her mother.**



**Figure 11. Presentation of boy to girl's party.**



**Figure 12. Presentation of girl to boy's party.**



Figure 13. Receiving of the girl's clothes.



Figure 14. Departure of boy's party.

## Exegesis and Comparison

The study of the Beloved Maiden text provides us with a unique opportunity to compare its content with an older, similar tale from the *Popol Wuj*. The latter document is probably the most famous Maya text. It has been argued that the document is a compilation of tales, dance-dramas, religious prayers and historical chronicles, aptly edited into one ongoing story line. The editing was done somewhere in the mid-fifties of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, predominantly by members of the Nim Ch'okoj of the Kaweq lineage. There is good reason to think they created the document in order to support their choice to the highest rulership of the K'iche' confederation, that of the Keeper of the Mat (*Ajpop*). Various ruling lords had been killed by the Spaniards and the K'iche' political structure was in a state of chaos (Tedlock, 1996; Van Akkeren, n.d.).

Still, most of the stories and characters of the *Popol Wuj* circulated among the Maya for centuries and perhaps even millennia, and, as illustrated by the Beloved Maiden text, are still alive today. I have shown elsewhere that the story of the trapping of Sipakna is also still told in Baja Verapaz, and that the version, which ended up in the *Popol Wuj* probably originated there (Van Akkeren, 2000a; 2000c). Finding the Beloved Maiden text in Rab'in al gives additional support to the hypothesis that many sections of the *Popol Wuj* are staged in Verapaz (Van Akkeren, 2000a; Acuña, 1998; and Van Akkeren, n.d.). It further demonstrates that its tales belong to the realm of oral tradition, which evolved in time, picking up new imagery and dropping old when cultural orders shifted. Below follow some of the themes, which emerged from the comparison of both texts.

## Creation of New Era

The personage of Xkik' links the vanishing epoch of Xib'alb'a with the new era of the sun and moon, and people made of corn. I believe that the Xib'alb'a tale is in its essence a literary comment on the historical decline of the Classic Maya civilization of the lowlands, cast in a myth that was in fashion at that time. As repulsive as the lords of Xib'alb'a may be, the hero twins Junajpu and Xb'alanq'e are still related to them through the maternal line. If the twins are the alter egos of the scribes of the *Popol Wuj*, these authors (of the Kaweq lineage) may want to convey the message that they are descendants of Classic lowland Maya lineages. And indeed, that is a notion that is gradually confirmed by the reconstruction of the Late Classic and Early Postclassic history of the highlands (Van Akkeren, 2000; 2002a; & n.d.).

History aside, the Xkik' saga is also unquestionably a creational story, about the emerging of a new era and centered on the genetrix of the new generation. As said, it announces the era of the sun and moon, and its denizens shaped of corn. These features of the new times, are embodied in the hero twins who after their adventures change into the sun and full moon (the male moon which acts like a sun at night, rising in the east and setting in the west, hence the Q'eqchi name Xb'alan Q'e or Hidden Sun). However, they are also related to corn by planting an ear of green corn in the courtyard

of Xmukane's house before they part for their challenge with Xib'alb'a. The regeneration of the plant symbolizes their victory over the Xib'alb'a lords.

In colonial times, highland Maya were forced to forget about their former gods and divine heroes. In a remote place like Rab'inah though, Spanish influence was reduced to a few Dominican friars within the first two centuries. Maya scribes and narrators, assuming ecclesiastical positions as those of "maestro de iglesia" or "sacristan mayor", adapted to the cultural and religious principles of the new power, and merged their own stories with the ones taught by the friars (Van Akkeren, 2000b:note 21). Our Mother Beloved Maiden became the new genetrix, and her son the substitute for the hero twins. Her story also exemplifies the beginning of a new epoch. Our modern era initiates with the supposed birth of her son.

### **Human Sacrifice**

Some five hundred years after the *Popol Wuj* was written, Maya of Rab'inah still hold on to the tale and have preserved much of its pre-Columbian story lines and concepts. It is surprising, for example, to find how a delicate theme, as that of her death-sentence, has survived. There are other versions of the story – probably as many as there are Maya priests, each having his own interpretation – and in one of them the priest actually mentions the plate and the sacrificial knife, which the father of Our Mother Beloved Maiden hands over to the executioners San Miguel and San Vicente. In the *Popol Wuj*, the objects are called *sel*, which is a gourd cut in half, and *saqi tok*, "white sacrificial knife" (Edmonson, 1971:lines 2319 and 2325). In the abovementioned version these instruments appear as *jun plato de china* and *jun cuchilobem*, mingled Spanish/Achi-K'iche' for "a china plate" and "a knife" (copy recorded by Alain Breton; I thank him for letting me quote from it). It is further extraordinary that the version I recorded is more detailed in the fake proofs of her execution than the Xkik' tale in the *Popol Wuj* itself. It shows that it was just as much an oral document, as it still is today, and thus, that the version, which ended up in the *Popol Wuj* was but an interpretation of the XVI<sup>th</sup> Kaweq narrator who recited it to the scribe (Van Akkeren, 2000a:51-57).

### **Etiology**

Similarly, the modern version also seems to yield a greater variety in the impossible tasks Beloved Maiden has to do. In the *Popol Wuj*, Xkik' arrives at the house of Xmukane, but finds a suspicious grandmother when she explains that the offspring in her belly is Jun Junajpu's. Xmukane wants proof from her that she is indeed the mother of the hero twins. When she sends her to their cornfield to fill up a net with corncobs, there appears to be only one stalk carrying one ear. Xkik's heart drops. But then she calls forth the guardians of the food and, miraculously, starts filling up the net with cobs. Once the task has been completed, she has animals carry the net to Xmukane's house (Edmonson, 1971:lines 2499-2546).

In the Beloved Maiden text, Our Mother Beloved Maiden is on her way to Jerusalem. When night falls, she begs for a place to sleep at the residences of wealthy people. They are also very suspicious, but let her in after Our Mother Beloved Maiden implores some more. They then give her a task to do which seems impossible for a human being to complete in just one night. When she does complete the task, they chase her away with the words *laj xa na at ta winaq*, "you are probably not human". And strictly speaking, she is not human indeed, but rather the mother of a divine child.

Like Xkik' in the *Popol Wuj*, Our Mother Beloved Maiden is able to accomplish the tasks with the help of animals. Every time she is left with her chores, she sits down crying, much as Xkik's heart sank when discovering the single stalk in the cornfield. But throughout the tale she is assisted by animals, plants and trees; everything that grows and walks on the face of the earth. In fact, the creational nature of the Beloved Maiden tale is emphasized by the many etiological elements in it. As every time she is helped out by these animals and plants they ask for a favor in return (*kooch*, *loq'oxik*, "reward", "recompense"). Our Mother Beloved Maiden distributes the goods, e.g. the tup-plant gets its location near wells and rivers, spiders get their webs, pigeons the corn that is dropped by the people, the basilisk the ability to walk on water and Lord Dragon fish as his main nourishment. In other words the tale explains why plants or trees grow where they grow and why animals behave as they do. The *Popol Wuj* is equally full of etiological elements, like in the Xkik' tale the sudden appearance of gourd fruits in the gourd tree after Jun Junajpu's head was hung in it.

## Flower Staffs

An interesting detail in the Beloved Maiden text, which is not directly visible in the *Popol Wuj*, are the flower staffs that the suitors of Our Mother Beloved Maiden bring to the church. The owner of the staff that blossoms, will receive the maiden's hand. The object seems, first of all, an almost inevitable phallic symbol. However, flower staffs appear to have been a piece of equipment used in wedding ceremonies. Among the K'iche' Maya, the family of the man brings wands wound with flowers to offer to the woman's family (Barbara Tedlock, 1996:117). The custom dates back to pre-Columbian times, as we can make out from the *Título de Totonicapán*. When K'iche' lord K'otuja proposes to a Tz'utujil princess from the Pacific coast he offers her father many different gifts including *retal nusij*, "my flower symbols" (Carmack & Mondloch, 1983:24r). The historical wedding probably took place in the XIV<sup>th</sup>. Interestingly, a Cotzumalhuapa stela (Bilbao monument 18) from the same coastal region displays the offering of flower staffs, which must have happened some four centuries earlier (Hatch, 1989:177-8). The corresponding date seems 9 B'atz' or 9 Ozomatli (we do not know what language was spoken in Cotzumalhuapa), and today B'atz' days are still the best days for wedding proposals (B. Tedlock, 1996:117).

As far as I know flower staffs are not part of the wedding gifts in Rab'inah. However, when I heard the text for the first time it immediately reminded me of the staffs which heads of *cofradías* carry. They are wooden staffs with a silver medallion of the saint on

top, sitting in a flowery branch of bright colored silver-foiled flowers. *Mayordomos* bring out their staffs at important calendrical moments including the day they change *cargo*, which may be conceived as the beginning of a new epoch. In a sense *mayordomos* fit the description of the wealthy and important suitors in the Beloved Maiden text, though usually they are old, and married a long time ago.

### **Torn Away from Home**

In the old days every *Tz'onoj* or Petitioning had its complementary ritual at the eve of the wedding in the church. It is called *Esanik*, "Taking Away". It is still done but even less than the *Tz'onoj*. It is the moment that the bride is officially separated from her family. She is dressed in her new clothes that her in-laws provided for her during the *Tz'onoj*. The girl is taken to house of the boy, where they duplicate the acts and prayers performed during the *Tz'onoj*, this time in the house of her new family. The ceremony is also called *B'oqonik*, a verb that is used for pulling a plant out off the ground, roots including. The girl is completely disjoined from her home and family. Interestingly, we encounter the same verb, *b'oqonik*, in the Xkik' tale. It is employed when the maiden pulls the tassel from the corncob: *ta xuk'am k'ut ri tzamiy/utzamiyal uwi jal xub'oq aqanoq*, "then she grabbed the tassel/and she pulled out the tassel at the top of the cob" (Edmonson, 1971:lines 2535-6, my translation). With the tassel she manages to fill up the entire net. The scribes may have deliberately laid the symbolism in this passage. She was not accepted in the house of her mother in law, Xmukane, until she was completely uprooted from her past. Only when she comes home with the net of corn-cobs, is she allowed to enter her new home.

### **Xkik' Tale in Pre-Columbian Wedding Context?**

The Beloved Maiden text appears to be an inextricable element of a nuptial rite. It evokes the view that, according to the Maya, every marriage, every merging of social groups, is considered a micro creation in itself, and as such reflects the macro creation of the modern era. After contemplating the similarities between the Xkik' tale and Beloved Maiden text, one wonders whether the former was the standard story narrated during a Maya wedding ceremony in the pre-Columbian highlands. Mesoamerican scholars, building on the history theory developed by the French *Anales*-school, have argued that institutions like marriage belong to a slowly changing stratum. That may account for the persistence of the Xkik' tale through the ages (Carmack, 1973:216-7; López Austin, 1993:304). It would also answer our question about the original nature of the Xkik' tale positively.

Still, it is wise to be careful with our judgements. The plot of Xkik's is embedded in a larger epic. It is preceded by the story of Jun Junajpu and Wuqub' Junajpu and followed by a long series of conspiracies and bold feats of the hero twins in their conflict with the lords of Xib'alb'a. Moreover, the descending of Junajpu and Xb'alan Q'e into the

netherworld seems to have been a dance-drama. Dominican friars witnessed its performance at the founding of San Juan Chamelco in 1543 (Estrada Monroy, 1979:172-173). Nonetheless, it is still possible that the entire epic was narrated or perhaps even staged during a royal wedding. Some modern Maya priests do not stop with the birth of the son of Our Mother Beloved Maiden either, but rather continue by recounting the entire life of Christ, which would be the modern parallel of the adventures of the hero twins. Thus, in conclusion, the location of the Beloved Maiden text within the context of a wedding ceremony suggests a similar function for its predecessor from the *Popol Wuj*. The creational and etiological elements within the Xkik' tale support such a point of view, but it must not keep us from staying open to other interpretations. More convincing, of course, would be a Maya vase depicting Xkik's scenes while hieroglyphically explaining the vessel was made to celebrate a royal wedding.

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