

Sequoyah High School

Relative Perceptive Existence Through Dualistic Language in Mayan Culture
An Exploration of Memento Mori in the Popol Vuh

Griffin McLemore

Humanities C Second Semester

Mr. Schuetze

February 11, 2023

I know how Gods begin, Roger. We start as Dreams. Then we walk out of dreams into the Land. We are worshiped and loved, and take power to ourselves. And then, one day, there's no one left to worship us. And in the end, each little God and Goddess takes its last journey back into Dreams... and what comes after, not even WE know. I'm going to dance now, I'm afraid.

– Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman* #45: Brief Lives Part 5

Griffin McLemore

Mr. Schuetze

Humanities

05 February 2023

Relative Perceptive Existence Through Dualistic Language in Mayan Culture

“If a tree falls in the middle of the forest, does it make a sound?” was first asked by Dr. George Berkeley an Anglican Bishop and philosopher in the 1600s¹. This famous inquiry questions the nature of reality and perception. Dr. Berkeley answered his own question with a yes, because God heard it. John Locke, an English philosopher, says no, as if a tree can exist outside the framework of perception, then a person is not able to know if it is a tree therefore by giving trees a name, and sequentially objectivity, it can only exist through our perception. Berkeley refuses Locke’s idea that knowledge is only a perception of the connection and

¹ Atkins, Michael. “Opinion: If a Tree Falls in a Forest and No One...” Northern Ontario Business, 5 Feb. 2018, <https://www.northernontariobusiness.com/columns/if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest-and-no-one-814819#:~:text=The%20ful%20quote%20from%20Dr,sound%2C%20because%20God%20heard%20it>.

conformity or inconsistency and incompatibility of any human ideas². The Popol Vuh is solely about this existential question as it employs language, through text structure and sound, to reinforce the importance of duality in Mayan culture, explaining one's origin while proving existence through correlation to others via an immaterialistic existential lens.

“Here we will write. Here we will plant /the ancient word of the beginning, / the origin of all that was done in the citadel / Of K’iche’ Nation”³(3). This phrase in the preamble heads the book and sets the stage for the remainder of the literature. The preamble does this by briefing us that the Popal Vuh is a recording of how people came to be. This section commences with an Anaphora, “here we will write. Here we will plant”. The Popol Vuh is showing us that these are equivalent to each other. This is done to tie together figurative and literal language; plants are tangible while words aren't. Starting the book this way is meant to implant this idea of figurative and literal correlation. This use of binary is reinforced by the word, “will and was' ' breaking tenses indicating through a comparison between the past and future, in another instance of binary, that dualism is a critical aspect of the Popol Vuh. This seemingly vital duality is likewise exhibited in more subtle ways: synonyms and repetition. Origin and beginning are synonyms the same way citadel and nation are.

Reading a bit further into the pages of the Popol Vuh will lead you to the keystone of the book: the creation of the earth. On page nine the words read “When it was time to make the earth / it only took a word / to make earth they said, ‘Earth’”⁴. This entire section binds words and creation (another example of literal and figurative correlation). “When it was time to make the

² "Berkeley and Locke: If a Tree Falls in a Forest." StudyCorgi, 1 July 2021, studycorgi.com/berkeley-and-locke-if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest/.

³ Bazzett, Michael, translator. *The Popol Vuh: A New English Version*. first ed., Milkweed Editions, 2018.

⁴ Bazzett, Michael, translator. *The Popol Vuh: A New English Version*. first ed., Milkweed Editions, 2018.

earth” displays how creation, something quite tangible, is obtainable through reversely intangible words. The directness of the word earth communicates an order. The phrase is absolute with no hesitation and is forceful in its intent. This passage illustrates the commanding and vigorous potential language contains when voiced correctly. Only needing one word to create earth implies that the Popol Vuh is arguing that language is dualistic because it is both symbolic and creative.

Duality although critical isn't always the standard, page 14 reads. “The animals did not make speech / and so the work was not complete / And so their flesh was / then brought low. / The animals were made to serve, / Killed and eaten on the face of the earth.”⁵ The Popol Vuh is raising the stakes on the importance of words. In an instance of failure, the animals who couldn't speak the names of the gods were punished. Words show creation while their absence layouts collapse. Whilst past sections utilized duality, this section breaks the pattern. Work, Serve, and earth, are all assonances, and so are complex, speech, and eating. But these are in a group of three, uneven; this entire section is integrated with odd numbers, and there are five lines. Reading this section is physically uncomfortable and feels like it's missing something. This is due to each line's failure to rhyme with its neighbors. Instead, each line concentrates more on rhyming with itself. Besides showing that the gods are simultaneously looking for the start of language and the start of people, these lines also reflect the failure of the gods in the failure of the sentences to function with each other.

The Popol Vuh is surprisingly self-conscious in its preamble. The Popal Vuh explains itself as a gathering of knowledge concerning the creation of the peoples. The Popol Vuh is the

⁵ Bazzett, Michael, translator. *The Popol Vuh: A New English Version*. first ed., Milkweed Editions, 2018.

conversation of two greater beings evident by the use of the word we on page 3 in “Here we will write / here we will plant”. The rest of the page is used to list the contents of the book and ends with the phrase “all together these are named and known”. Without a name/story, one is nothing. Something can not exist without a perception of it. Although Dr. Berkeley said that God hears the tree, we can not apply a Christian lens to a non-Christian culture. On page five it says “We will write about this now amidst talk of God under the rule of Christendom”⁶, this is a self-conscious disclaimer that we live in a Christian society and view Mayan culture through a Western lens, and in Mayan belief, creations are only sustainable through the perception of people symbolic of how power is not literal but cultural as a king has no power outside of people’s treatment of that figure (or like Seven Macaw’s deity status or when the gods fear the first four people for being too powerful). Coincidentally the following chapter shows us the gods creating everything with words with the end goal to create a species that can speak the names of the gods.

The book starts with two entities in a conversation, not because of coincidence, but out of necessity. One cannot exist alone as there is nothing to hear it. This is captured yet again with the deity's desire to create a species that can utter their names to the universe, because without being spoken of they fade highlighting again the level of magnitude language carries. The Popol Vuh portrays the K'iche people to hold language as culturally imperative because without it meaning is undefinable.

Alternatively, the god's desire to be named could also be symbolic of immortality through a legacy. The Popol Vuh constantly shows death as something impermanent. When people do

⁶ Bazzett, Michael, translator. *The Popol Vuh: A New English Version*. first ed., Milkweed Editions, 2018.

seem to fully perish in the Popol Vuh their names often are a key aspect to their demise, eg. on page 59 it reads “Cabracan was his name ‘I am the wrecker of mountains,’ he said.”⁷ (perhaps Cabracan directly translates to wrecker of mountains) and he was destroyed by devouring dirt, a stand-in for the land he wrecked. The god's motivation to be spoken of may not be to keep them immortal but rather so they may live on through the words of the storytellers.

An intriguing thought is how this is similar to Mexican beliefs. A plethora of pop culture (Pixar’s *Coco* and 20th Century Fox’s *Book of Life* likely being the most impactful) depicts the infamous day of the dead as a way to remember everyone who has come before us. You only truly die when no one remembers you. Most of the K'iche people were in the Americas in Guatemalan-centric areas, uncoincidentally close to Mexico. Words are vital in the Popol Vuh because they represent the power of life and life after death, literally and physically. We are living our own stories, and though we may die. We could live on through stories and literature similar to how the Mayan gods survive to this day through the Popol Vuh. The Popol Vuh, through self-actualization, is transparent about its awareness that reality is nothing but what we decide to call it.

On the bottom of page xii and the top of page xiii in the introduction, Michael Bazzett explains that the Popol Vuh is not a Mayan Bible, because, without the Popol Vuh, humans would not exist⁸ (ironically similar to Dr. Berkley's argument that god hears the tree⁹). The creation of humans creates the story of how they came to be: the Popol Vuh. If an event is destined to create a story, stories, and events are directly tied together. Following this logic, a

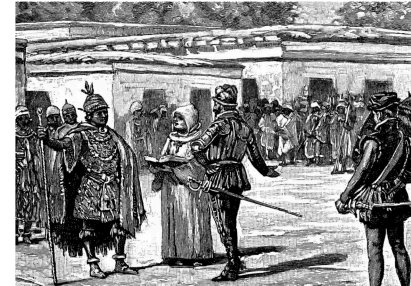
⁷ Bazzett, Michael, translator. *The Popol Vuh: A New English Version*. first ed., Milkweed Editions, 2018.

⁸ Bazzett, Michael, translator. *The Popol Vuh: A New English Version*. first ed., Milkweed Editions, 2018.

⁹ "Berkeley and Locke: If a Tree Falls in a Forest." StudyCorgi, 1 July 2021, studycorgi.com/berkeley-and-locke-if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest/.

story can not exist without there being a truth behind it, furthermore explaining why words are so powerful because they force reality to be subjective. The product of a narrative creates meaning akin to the Popol Vuh and human existence being synonymous.

Truthfully the Popol Vuh is a call for help. A plea for us as a society to be better. The Michael Bazzett Popol Vuh is a literal translation of a translation of a translation. Only Hunapu knows how much information was lost. On March 13, 1697, the Spanish Conquest of the Maya and the conquest



of Petén (a region of Guatemala) officially came to a conclusion when Spanish conquistadores successfully laid a waterborne attack on the city of Nojpetén, an Itza (Itza: a group of Mayans) city-state and until then, the only remanence of an Independent Maya civilization. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a conquistador, depicted Nojpetén as a city littered with temples, palaces, and houses, all surrounded by water¹⁰. ¹¹

The conquistadors went out of their way to eradicate the past culture and replace it with their beliefs. The end of the Popol Vuh is the end of the Mayan people. Book burnings, genocide, and disease are wraiths that loom over our society. The colonialists that nearly erased the Mayan culture also scrubbed away the original Mayan creation story. In an unpredictable blaze of hope, the Mayan story wasn't completely lost. The Dominican Friar, Fransisco Ximénez, managed to record the Popol Vuh¹²(vii). Aspects of the Mayans still survive as there are still Mayan descendants. But it's like a rough game of telephone.

¹⁰ Milligan, Markus. "Petén Itzá - the Last Maya Kingdom." *HeritageDaily*, HeritageCom, 2 Sept. 2022, <https://www.heritagedaily.com/2022/09/peten-itza-the-last-maya-kingdom/144580>.

¹¹ Milligan, Markus. "Petén Itzá - the Last Maya Kingdom." *HeritageDaily*, HeritageCom, 2 Sept. 2022, <https://www.heritagedaily.com/2022/09/peten-itza-the-last-maya-kingdom/144580>.

¹² Bazzett, Michael, translator. *The Popol Vuh: A New English Version*. first ed., Milkweed Editions, 2018.

Sometimes, something is lost or destroyed, and no matter how many king's horsemen you have, you can't put the pieces back together again. Although the Mayan civilization shattered, we must move forward. The Popol Vuh holds a shred of hope for us. As the gods could still live on through the telling of the Popol Vuh, stories and culture could survive too. Although endless fonts of knowledge may never exist for us to study, we need to stop asking whether Dr. Berkeley or John Locke is correct about a tree and instead preserve the forest. There was this wonderful feeling of play— hey, we can do it, we're free! And then we became slightly more self-conscious about that freedom as time went on, and we began to think, Where do we go from here? You can't always have sketches about flying sheep— you have to move on. Where are they flying to?

Works Cited

- Atkins, Michael. *"Opinion: If a Tree Falls in a Forest and No One..." Northern Ontario Business*, 5 Feb. 2018,
<https://www.northernontariobusiness.com/columns/if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest-and-no-one-814819#:~:text=The%20full%20quote%20from%20Dr,sound%2C%20because%20God%20heard%20it>.
- Bazzett, Michael, translator. *The Popol Vuh: A New English Version. first ed., Milkweed Editions*, 2018.
- History.com Editors. *"Mayan Civilization: Calendar, Pyramids & Ruins- History - History."* Maya, A&E Television Networks, 29 Oct. 2009.
<https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-americas/maya>.

Jones, Grant D. *"The Conquest of the Last Maya Kingdom - Grant D. Jones."* Stanford University, Stanford University Press, <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=2182>.

Milligan, Markus. *"Petén Itzá - the Last Maya Kingdom."* HeritageDaily, HeritageCom, 2 Sept. 2022, <https://www.heritagedaily.com/2022/09/peten-itza-the-last-maya-kingdom/144580>.

"Spanish Conquest of Guatemala." Military History, Fandom.com, https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Spanish_conquest_of_Guatemala.

"Berkeley and Locke: If a Tree Falls in a Forest." StudyCorgi, 1 July 2021, studycorgi.com/berkeley-and-locke-if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest/.