



Popol Vuh

Curriculum Unit 99.02.09
by Norine Polio

Only yellow corn Xa q'ana hal,

And white corn were their bodies. Zaqi hal u tiyohil.

Only food were the legs Xa 'echa r aqan,

And arms of man. U q'ab vinaq.

Those who were our first fathers Ri 'e qa nabe qahav

Were the four original men. E kahib chi vinaq tzak.

Only food at the outset Xa 'echa 'akinak

Were their bodies. Ki tiyohil. (1)

In the mid 1500's the Maya in Quiché, Guatemala (present day Santa Cruz) were forbidden by the Spanish conquerors to practice their religion and to tell their ancient stories. Across the entire Maya realm, hieroglyphic books were burned by Spanish missionaries. This prompted a group of Maya to learn the Latin alphabet and to write down their myths in their language, Quiché (the town, the language, and the people are the same word). These alphabetic substitutes for hieroglyphics were painted on deerskin or fig bark in bundles of codices, or accordion books, and carried over the mountains to the neighboring town of Chuui La, present day Chichicastenango, where they were hidden.

In 1701, a Spanish friar, Padre Francisco Ximénez, found one of these sacred narratives, the Popol Vuh, or Counsel Book. He knew the language of the Maya, Quiché, made a copy of the text, and translated it into Spanish. This treasure, the history of the creation of the Maya world and of humans from corn, was housed in Guatemala and Paris and now rests in the Newberry Library in Chicago. The Popol Vuh is still part of the belief system of over half a million contemporary Quiché, even though most are now Christians.

Time travel. Academic year, 1999-2000. New Haven, Connecticut. East Rock School New Arrival Center. Kindergarten to eighth grade ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), 70 students, 25 countries, 20 languages, 3 teachers, all levels of English. The challenge: how to make the Popol Vuh relevant to children from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and South America.

This curriculum unit will begin with an adaptation of the Popol Vuh as a play. Technical suggestions will follow for sound, set design, character development and costumes. The unit will end with a recipe for tamales, a symbolic creation of people of corn.

The Popol Vuh is appropriate for Social Studies and Language Arts instruction for intermediate and high level ESOL students, grades 4-8, and satisfies Goal 2, Standard 2 of the National ESOL Standards, "To use English to achieve academically in all content areas." (2) It may also be used by teachers in mainstream classes, grades 4-8.

Children are rarely more excited or focused during Language Arts than when they read a play. ESOL students in particular are often reticent to speak publically and it is useful for them to assume character roles to break this barrier. The teacher has the discretion to use this play simply as a dramatic reading or as a full-scale production or anything in between.

The Popol Vuh

Characters

Narrator 1

Narrator 2 (words quoted, with permission, from Edmonson's translation)

Plumed Serpent

Heart of Sky

Grandmother of Light

Grandfather

Dog

Turkey

Grinding Stone

Fox

Coyote

Parrot

Crow

Chorus of animal, mudmen, woodmen, and human sounds

Narrator 1: The ancient world had its beginnings here in this place named Quiché. The sea was calm. The sky was empty. Silence. Darkness.

Narrator 2: There was not, then, anything in fact

That was standing there.

Only the pooled water,

Only the flat sea. (3)

Narrator 1: There were no people, no animals, no fish, no birds, no mountains, no forests. The god of the sea, Plumed Serpent, and the god of the sky, Heart of Sky, were both great knowers and great thinkers. They talked, they thought, they worried. They joined their hearts and their thoughts.

Plumed Serpent: We will create life!

Heart of Sky: But how? How will we make the earth?

Plumed Serpent: If we remove much of the water, the earth will rise from the sea.

Plumed Serpent

Heart of Sky EARTH

(together):

Narrator 2: So then this the earth was created by them.

Only their word was the creation of it. (4)

Plumed Serpent

Heart of Sky MOUNTAINS

(together):

Narrator 2: Then the mountain was asked to come from the water.

Straightaway there were great mountains.

Just their power,

Just their magic

Caused the making then,

The invention

Of mountains

And valleys. (5)

Plumed Serpent

Heart of Sky FORESTS

(together):

Narrator 1: And the trees spread across the mountains, and great woods and forests were formed.

Narrator 2: Then they thought further

Of the wild animals,

Guardians of the forest,

And all the population of the wild. (6)

Plumed Serpent

Heart of Sky DEER. BIRD. PUMA. JAGUAR. SERPENT. RATTLESNAKE.

(together): FISH. SEA TURTLE. MONKEY. DOLPHIN. DOG. TURKEY. FOX. COYOTE. PARROT. CROW.

Narrator 1: And the animals filled the earth and the sea. They tains, to the forests, to the rivers. The birds raced to the moun- flew into the trees.

Plumed Serpent: Wild beasts of the fields, drink from the lakes and sleep in the meadows, rest in the canyons.

Narrator 2: And so the homes

Of the animals were the earth. (7)

Plumed Serpent: Look at the wonderful animals we have made! Now it is the duty of these creatures to thank us.

Heart of Sky: They must tell our great story to the other gods so we will be honored.

Chorus: (animal sounds)

Plumed Serpent: (raising his voice) Talk! Speak! Stop moaning! Stop crying!

Heart of Sky: (shouting) Name our names! Praise us! Speak now!

Narrator 2: But they did not succeed in talking like men.

They just pretended to.

They just rattled;

And they just croaked. (8)

Plumed Serpent: Oh no! What have we done?

Heart of Sky: Who will tell our story? Who will remember how the earth began?

Plumed Serpent: (angrily) You will serve each other since you cannot serve us. Your flesh will be eaten, the strong among you will kill the weak.

(animal sounds stop)

Heart of Sky: We must try again.

Plumed Serpent: We will try to make a human being who will give us praise and respect. A provider. A nurturer.

Heart of Sky: But how? With what?

Plumed Serpent: Look around us. Surely we can use material we have created.

Narrator 1: And they talked and they thought and they decided to make men out of the mud that remained when earth and sea were divided.

Plumed Serpent

Heart of Sky MUDMEN

(together):

Narrator 1: Together they made a body, but it wasn't right.

Chorus: (mudmen sounds)

Plumed Serpent: (raising his voice) Talk! Speak! Stop moaning! Stop crying!

Heart of Sky: (shouting) Name our names! Praise us! Speak now!

Plumed Serpent: Oh no! What have we done? Who will tell our story? Who will remember how the earth began?

Heart of Sky: Careful! It's starting to separate and crumble! What a lopsided and twisted mess!

Plumed Serpent: It's loosening! It's softening!

Heart of Sky: Oh no! It's disintegrating!

Plumed Serpent: It's dissolving in the water!

(mudmen sounds stop)

Heart of Sky: We must try again.

Plumed Serpent: Let us consult the great god and goddess, Grandfather and Grandmother of Light. They will be able to guide us.

Heart of Sky: Yes! They are both very wise. They will count the days in lots of four and seek an answer for us.

Narrator 1: So they journeyed beyond the heavens to visit Grandfather and Grandmother of Light.

Grandfather: Welcome, Plumed Serpent and Heart of Sky.

Grandmother: You both look very worried. How may we help you?

of Light:

Plumed Serpent: Great god and goddess, we have tried to make creatures who will speak our names, honor us and give us praise. We have failed so far! The animals growl and hiss, the mudmen babble.

Heart of Sky: Who will tell our story? Who will remember how the earth began?

Plumed Serpent: We truly need your great wisdom.

Grandmother (moving her hands slowly over seeds in groups of four)

of Light: Wood! Wood! You must carve mouths and faces in wood!

Grandfather: Let them sing your praises and give you the respect you deserve!

Grandmother: Let them be your providers, your nurturers, these men of wood!

of Light:

Plumed Serpent

Heart of Sky: WOODMEN

(together):

Narrator 2: Their legs were not filled out,

Nor their arms.

They lacked blood

And serum.

They lacked sweat

And fat. (9)

Chorus: (woodmen sounds)

Plumed Serpent: (raising his voice) Talk! Speak! Stop moaning! Stop crying!

Heart of Sky: (shouting) Name our names! Praise us! Speak now!

Plumed Serpent: What a horrible noise! There is nothing in their minds!

Heart of Sky: There is nothing in their hearts!

Plumed Serpent: They do not remember us!

Heart of Sky: Who will tell our story? Who will remember how the earth began?

Narrator 1: And so, Plumed Serpent and Heart of Sky harnessed the waters and a great flood covered the earth. The creatures of the forest came into the dwellings of the woodmen.

You
have
chased
us
from
our
Dog: homes,
so we
will
take
yours
now!

Turkey: You have caused us pain, so now we shall eat you!

Grinding Stone: You have pounded on us. Now, we will do the same to you!
(woodmen sounds stop)

Heart of Sky: What are we to do? The animals cannot sing our praise, the mudmen
dissolved, and the woodmen had no hearts or minds.

Plumed Serpent: Look at the mountain in the distance. What do you see coming
towards us?

Chorus: (animal sounds - fox, coyote, parrot, crow)

Heart of Sky: Four animals, but I don't know which ones - they are too far away.

Plumed Serpent: I can see clearly now! Fox, coyote, parrot, crow!

Fox: We bring you great news! We have found ears of yellow corn and
white corn.

Coyote: This is the ingredient you have been looking for to create human
flesh!

Parrot: The mountain we have just come from is thick with corn.

Crow: Hundreds of plants grow there, strong and straight and tall.

Narrator 2: And they rejoiced then

	Over the discovery
Of the marvelous mountain,	
	Filled
With quantities	
	And quantities
Of yellow corn ears,	
	And white corn ears. (10)

Plumed Serpent: Let us grind the corn nine times!

Narrator 2: And then the yellow corn was ground
And the white corn. (11)

Heart of Sky: Let us add water!

Plumed Serpent

Heart of Sky MAN

(together):

Narrator 2: The food came

With water to create strength,
And it became man's grease
And turned into his fat. (12)

Chorus: (human sounds)

Heart of Sky: The story of our beginnings will be told!

Narrator 2: Only yellow corn

And white corn were their bodies.
Only food were the legs
And arms of man.
Those who were our first fathers
Were the four original men.
Only food at the outset
Were their bodies. (13)

Plumed Serpent: We will be honored by the gods!

Narrator 2: These are the names of the first men who were made,

Who were shaped:
The first man was Jaguar Quiché,
And the second in turn was Jaguar Night,
And the third in turn was Nought,
And the fourth was Wind Jaguar. (14)

Heart of Sky: Our praises will be sung!

Narrator 2: Red Sea House was the name

Of the wife of Jaguar Quiché;
Beauty House was the name
Of the wife of Jaguar Night;
Hummingbird House was the name
Of the wife of Nought;
Parrot House was the name
Of the wife of Wind Jaguar.
And these were the names of their wives,
Who became queens.
They were the bearers of the little tribes,
The great tribes,
And this was the root of us
Who are Quiché people. (15)

Chorus: (human sounds get gradually louder)

The End

Technical Suggestions

Sound

Ken Hilliard, a Fellow in our seminar, suggested improvising Maya music with glockenspiels and drums. This is a very effective way to evoke the mood of the Popol Vuh and may be used at the beginning of the play to set

the stage, at various points throughout, and at the end, mixed with human sounds. Students may begin by selecting one passage of the Popol Vuh, then translating the words into music by using these instruments.

The Chorus will begin by suggesting animal sounds. Assign each student one animal (there are 16 in all) to practice its particular sound. The Chorus then switches to mudmen and woodmen sounds, which students may interpret accordingly. Finally, human sounds may begin with simple syllables and then proceed to the Quiché words at the end of the play, perhaps delivered several times to make a greater impact on the audience. Students in the Chorus may then speak to each other in their own native languages, before the final curtain.

Set Design

The original Popol Vuh (now lost) was probably written as a folding accordion book made of fig bark or deer skin. Students may use long strips of construction paper (10 inches by 18 inches) glued lengthwise and folded every 8 inches, as they would a fan, to produce their own versions of the Popol Vuh. Each page would include text and illustrations, and selected drawings from these books may then be used as backdrops for the play. Be sure to use both sides of the accordion book.

Character Development / Costumes

It is highly recommended that the teacher use one or both of the coloring books noted in the Reading List for Students at the end of this curriculum unit. Give each student a page or two to color. These Maya drawings are so rich and complex, that costume details, at first almost hidden, will pop out once color is added. This is also an interesting way to introduce students to Maya history and mythology, since each drawing is accompanied by a description.

For a simple reading of the Popol Vuh play, first assign parts to students. Include the additional animals created during the play and the mudmen, woodmen, and human chorus members. If you wish, add the actual names of the original Quiché couples listed at the end of the play. Write each character's name on a strip of construction paper, punch out holes on either end, and tie a piece of string to the label. Drape these around students' necks. If the mudmen and woodmen chorus members are the same, simply write "mudman" on one side of each label, and "woodman" on the other. Students may then remove the labels and become themselves for the human chorus. Deviate from the text, if you wish, to include "mudwoman", "mudgirl", "mudboy" and "woodwoman", "woodgirl", "woodboy".

The drawings included at the end of this curriculum unit may be used for simple stick puppets (increase the size on a photocopier) or as masks or costume suggestions for a full-scale production. Since Maya drawings could not be found for all characters, students may design the missing ones: Turkey, Grinding Stone, Fox, Parrot, Deer, Puma, Sea Turtle, Dolphin.

For the chorus, make clay figurines for the mudmen and carve wood for the woodmen. Make traditional corn husk dolls for the people of corn, or bring in a dozen ears of corn, husks and all, and dried and popped popcorn. Let students create their own chorus members.

Sweet Tamales

In addition to fashioning people of corn, students may prepare this tamale recipe. The symbolic process of shaping the dough and wrapping it in a corn husk gives the impression of creating humans from corn. The importance that corn plays in the life of the Maya can be seen in their word, *wa*, which means food, maize,

tortilla, and tamale. Ground corn is used for tortillas, a staple of the Maya diet. It is also used for their drinks, atole and pozole. Cornmeal is the basis of the traditional tamale mixture, wrapped in a corn husk. Tamale preparation in Mesoamerica pre-dated the European explorations by hundreds of years.

Corn husks are available in Mexican and Latin American groceries. If there are no markets in your area, you may carefully shuck fresh corn and dry the husks, or use them green. If corn husks are not available, tamales may be wrapped in aluminum foil. Corn husks, however, do flavor the tamales and are the preferred wrapper. These are not edible!

There are dozens of tamale recipes, each a variation on the theme of a flavored cornmeal dough wrapped and tied in a corn husk and then steamed. The following recipe is this writer's own combination of ingredients and cooking methods taken from various cookbooks and from participating in a cooking class graciously given by Genoveva Palmieri, a Fellow in this Institute. The tamales Genoveva taught us to make were from Colombia, her native country, and were meat-filled.

The sweet tamale recipe described here was chosen for its simplicity, since none of the ingredients need to be cooked prior to wrapping. Once the teacher is comfortable with the basic process of tamale preparation, other, more complex recipes may be chosen. Tamales, labeled differently according to country, are eaten throughout South America and have hopped onto Caribbean islands and crossed the Atlantic to West Africa. The following recipe reflects this international flavor. It has been successfully prepared several times in teacher workshops and with students. For a one hour class, pre-soak the corn husks, assemble the dough, fill and tie the tamales. Refrigerate. When the class meets again, tamales may be steamed and eaten.

Enjoy!

Recipe for Sweet Dessert Tamales (serves 12)

Ingredients

12 dried corn husks

3 cups cornmeal

1/4 cup flour

1 cup sugar

1/2 cup grated coconut

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon ground allspice

1 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon molasses

2 tablespoons vanilla extract

2 1/2 cups coconut milk

Equipment

24 - 8 inch lengths of string

2 bowls

Wooden spoon

Cup measure

Teaspoon and tablespoon measures

Large pan and cover

Vegetable steamer

Hot plate

Pot holders

Plates and spoons (one per student)

Scissors

Paper towels

Soak corn husks for one hour in a pan filled with hot water. Place a heavy plate over the husks so they do not float to the top of the pan.

Blend cornmeal, flour, sugar, grated coconut, cinnamon, allspice and salt. In a separate bowl, mix molasses, vanilla, and coconut milk. Add this liquid to dry ingredients. Mix thoroughly.

Dry the corn husks with paper towels. Spoon the mixture onto the center of each husk. Be sure to leave a 1" frame of corn husk around the dough. Tuck one long side of the husk under the other and tie each end with string. Place the vegetable steamer in the large pan and add only enough water to touch the bottom of the steamer. Tamales should never boil. Place the tamales, seamed side up, on the steamer, cover the pan, and steam for 40 minutes. Be sure to add water approximately every 10 minutes so the pan doesn't burn. Remove tamales, place one on each plate. Cut string with scissors, open husks, and eat with a spoon!

Bibliography for Teachers

Edmonson, Munro S. *The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh of the Quiché Maya of*

Guatemala. Publication 35. New Orleans, Louisiana: Middle American Research

Institute, Tulane University, 1971. English translation of the Popol Vuh, side by

side with the Quiché, written in verse. Footnotes include detailed comparisons of

11 other translations. Good Bibliography and Index.

Fussell, Betty. *The Story of Corn*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.

Comprehensive study of history, mythology, and science of corn. Lengthy discussion of Popol Vuh and historical references to tamales.

Goetz, Delia and Morley, Sylvanus G. *Popol Vuh, The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya*. Trans. Adrián Recinos. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950. Detailed historical introduction followed by prose version of the Popol Vuh. Good Bibliography and Index. Includes a map of the Maya-Quiché region and a copy of the first page of the original Ximénez manuscript of the Popol Vuh.

Maudslay, A.P. *Biologia Centrali-Americana*. 4 vols. London: R.H. Porter and Dulau and Company, 1889-1902. Extraordinary photographs of archaeological expeditions in the 1880's to document Maya sites. Maps and line drawings of ruins and their complex decorations.

Nelson, Ralph, trans. *Popol Vuh*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976. Prose version of the Popol Vuh with historical commentary. No footnotes.

Tedlock, Dennis, trans. *Popol Vuh*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1985. Prose translation of the Popol Vuh. Maps, drawings, glossary. Photographs of contemporary Maya and their continuing relationship to the Popol Vuh. Pronunciation guide for Quiché words.

Recipe Books

Bayless, Rick. *Authentic Mexican*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1987. Good introduction to Mexican cooking. Wide assortment of tamale recipes.

Kennedy, Diana. *The Art of Mexican Cooking*. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.

Detailed description of ingredients and equipment needed for perfect tamales.

Helpful illustrations.

Miller, Mark; Pyles, Stephan; Sedlar, John. *Tamales*. New York: Macmillan

Company, 1997. Well documented notes on tamale preparation. Exquisite color photographs.

Reading List for Students

Caraway, Caren. *The Mayan Design Coloring Book*. Maryland: Stemmer House

Publishers, 1981. Clear line drawings with well documented descriptions, including size. Pages numbered with Maya symbols.

Gerson, Mary-Joan. *People of Corn*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1995. Begins with a description of the importance of corn for the Maya. Continues with a simple retelling of the Popol Vuh, appropriate for younger children.

Lattimore, Deborah Nourse. *Why There Is No Arguing In Heaven*. New York:

Harper and Row Publishers, 1989. The Popol Vuh for middle school students.

Wonderful drawings based on Maya sites and objects.

Turner, Wilson. *Maya Design Coloring Book*. New York: Dover Publishers, Inc.,

1980. Clear line drawings with well documented descriptions. Includes a few color illustrations which suggest the original designs.

Endnotes

1. Munro Edmonson, *The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh of the Quiché Maya*

of Guatemala (New Orleans, Louisiana: Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, Publication 35, 1971), lines 4815-4822, p. 148.

2. Marilyn Kupetz, editor, *ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students* (Bloomington, Illinois: Pantagraph Printing, 1997), p. 83. 3. Edmonson, lines 129-132, p. 10. 4. Edmonson, lines 215-216, p.12. 5. Edmonson, lines 223-230, p. 13. 6. Edmonson, lines 261-264, p. 14. 7. Edmonson, lines 317-318, p. 15. 8. Edmonson, lines 363-366, p. 16. 9. Edmonson, lines 649-654, p. 25. 10.

Edmonson, lines 4771-4778, pp. 146-147. 11. Edmonson, lines 4799-4800, p. 147. 12. Edmonson, lines 4803-4806, p. 147. 13. Edmonson, lines 4815-4822, p. 148. 14. Edmonson, lines 4823-4828, p. 148. 15. Edmonson, lines 5029-5042, pp. 153-154.

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