

# The Popol Vuh of the K'iché' Maya

## Essays towards Improving Translation Accuracy

### Essay 1. From the Beginning through the Defeat of 7 Macaw.

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Through the enormous generosity of Allen Christenson, both freely sharing the electronic files of his recent publications, and in person, I have been encouraged to work on this wonderful text. His line numbering is retained here. The more significant amendments are signaled by [...] or in footnotes.

Translations are sometimes divided into “literal” and “free”. In the field of Maya epigraphy, these terms have been applied in an odd way, often using “literal” to refer to a barely grammatical or even ungrammatical word-for-word substitution, and using “free” to mean what traditionally is simply called “translation” (including both literal and loose translations). Here I use “translation” in the traditional sense, to mean a text which accurately conveys the meaning of the original text. Given differences between languages in grammar, lexicon, and morphology, it is usually not possible to produce a translation which keeps to the word order or lexical item choice of another language.

To be accessible to the widest range of users in the field of Mayan culture and epigraphy, this essay does not use technical morpheme-by-morpheme annotations. Instead, two texts are provided, the K'iché' original text with hyphens showing morpheme boundaries, and an English translation intended to convey the meaning as accurately as possible, with a single concession to original word order that many intransitive verbs will precede their subjects (as is true of an older and elegant English style especially when introducing new actors or events). Very often the word orders will then coincide. But this English text is not yet fully grammatical or meaningful in ordinary English. Both texts are spaced across their pages to reveal as much structural parallelism as can be done in that way. Footnotes clarify, as when idiomatic phrases in K'iché' must be translated with single words in English.

In this essay, one focus has been on how particles signal contrasts and transitions in discourse. Another is on reflecting verbal aspect accurately (notes to lines 1502-5 and 257-260). A third focus is on final vowels of verb stems before intransitives (antipassives –n- and –w-) belonging with the stem or with the affix. This is not yet consistent, and requires a separate list of verb stems linked to their meanings to fully explain and justify it. A topic needing more work is the rendering of directionals like ‘down, out, hither’. Another is spellings of /k, k', q, q'/ which may appear more regular if some translations are changed, different words are identified with spellings in the original text. Resources used include K'iché', Kaqchikel, and Tz'utujil, with *The Kaqchikel Annals* 2006 (Maxwell & Hill).

Why do we need better translations? Meaning is often neglected in treatments of languages, in favor of reasoning based on sounds and morphology, either because meaning seems to be harder to deal with objectively, or because it tends to be taken for granted. Mistakes in attributing meaning to texts in other languages can greatly hinder understanding of those texts, and retard decipherments of scripts like Maya. I ask gentle readers to inform me of all examples they notice of translation errors relating to Maya texts, ethnographic or glyphic (even such simple ones as “Mural of the Venison” instead of the correct translation ‘deer’ for Spanish “venado”; or ‘his house’ instead of ‘the house of [Noun]’ or [Noun]’s house’ for the ergative 3sg. pronoun in Maya when followed by a possessor; or *k'al-* ‘to wrap’ instead of *k'al-* < *\*q'al-* still present in K'iché' *q'al-aj* ‘visible’; various changes of readings in the history of Mayan epigraphy). Results will be systematized and made publicly available.

Inaccurate translations, especially ungrammatical ones, give a very negative impression of an original culture, as incoherent, without sophisticated thought, etc. When a modern people descend from that culture, it actually injures their standing and opportunities in the world. If a translation into English doesn't make sense, it is usually because the translation is at fault (though of course sometimes cultures do differ – but that can be noted where needed). With a correct translation, the minds which produced a text may be revealed as more sophisticated than we thought, even more so than we have been ourselves.

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