



# MAYAN

ORIGIN STORY

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BIG HISTORY PROJECT



# MAYAN

THE POPOL VUH

Compiled by Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

This is the beginning of a long, complex story called the *Popol Vuh* which means “council book.” It was told by the Mayans who long ago lived in the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico.

*This origin story was told by the Mayans, who flourished in Mexico and Guatemala from around 250 to 900 CE. It's the beginning of a long, detailed story called the Popol Vuh which means "council book." It was first translated from Mayan hieroglyphics in the 16th century.*

Now it still ripples, now it still murmurs, still sighs, and is empty under the sky. There is not yet one person, not one animal, bird, fish, or tree. There is only the sky alone; the face of Earth is not clear. Only the sea is under all the sky. Whatever else might be is simply not there.

There were makers in the sea, together called the Plumed Serpent. There were makers in the sky, together called the Heart of Sky. Together these makers planned the start of life.

The Earth arose because of them. It appeared simply by them speaking. It arose suddenly, like a cloud unfolding. Then the mountains were separated from the water. All at once great mountains came forth. The sky was set apart, and the Earth was set apart in the midst of the waters.

Then the makers in the sky planned the animals of the mountains. They made the deer, pumas, jaguars, and rattlesnakes. Then they started the nests of the birds, great and small. "You precious birds; your nests are in the trees and bushes." Then the deer and birds were told to talk to praise their makers, to pray to them. But the birds and animals did not talk; they just squawked and howled. So they had to accept that their flesh would be eaten by others.

The makers tried again to form a giver of respect. They wanted to create a creature who would nurture and provide. They made a body from mud, but it didn't look good. It talked at first but then crumbled and disintegrated into the water. Then the Heart of Sky called on the wise ones, the Grandfather Xpiyacoc and the Grandmother Xmucane, to help decide how to form a person. The Grandparents were also creator gods. They said to make wooden carvings that were human in looks and speech. So wooden humans came into being; they talked and multiplied. But there was nothing in their minds and hearts. They had no memory of their builder, no memory of Heart of Sky.

Then there came a great destruction. The wooden carvings were killed when the Heart of Sky devised a flood for them. It rained all day and all night. The animals came into the homes of the wooden carvings and ate them. The people were overthrown. The monkeys in the forest are a sign of this. They look like the previous people — mere wooden carvings.

*The story continues with the final people being made from corn. The all-important crop enabled the Mayan people to move from being a hunting-and-gathering society to a more advanced civilization.*

# Sources

Edited from Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*  
Rev. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 64 – 73.

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