

An article on the book, *Incantations*, the collective work of 150 Tzotzil Mayan women from Taller Leñateros (Woodlanders' Workshop) in Chiapas, Mexico, for which the following is the introduction, will be found elsewhere on this site under the title "The Poetic Hearts of Mayan Women Writ Large." For information on how to obtain this extraordinary handwrought book, check the workshop's web site: [www.tallerlenateros.com](http://www.tallerlenateros.com), or write: [tallerlenateros@yahoo.com.mx](mailto:tallerlenateros@yahoo.com.mx).

*She of Great Writing, She of the Glyphs*  
by *Ámbar Past*

THESE *INCANTATIONS* were dreamed by Maya women in the Highlands of Chiapas in southern Mexico. The Tzotzil authors of this anthology claim their spells and songs were given to them by the ancestors, the First Fathermothers, who keep the Great Book in which all words are written down. Pasakwala Kómes, an unlettered seer from Santiago El Pinar, learned her conjurations by dreaming the Book. Loxa Jimenés López of Epal Ch'en, Chamula, tells of an *Anjel*, daughter of the Lord of the Caves, who began whispering in her ear and then, in dreams, showed her the Book with all the magic words to be learned.

*Show me your three books,  
your three letters,  
the ink of the letters*

prays María Tzu to ask for the secret of black dye, directing her verses to the Ancient Earth in Flower, the Coffin Where the Secrets are Kept.

Manwela Kokoroch, from Laguna Petej, Chamula, sings to the Elder Brothers of Writing and Painting, who hold the Book where the names of all the people in the world are written down, along with the dates of their deaths. Here she pleads for a long life:

*Let my animal spirit live  
many more years*

*in the pages of the Book,  
in its letters,  
its paintings,  
on the whole surface of the Earth.*

Even though few of the authors of this anthology can read, even though the Tzotzil Maya have no libraries nor bookstores near their houses, a wise person is said to have «books in the heart,» according to Robert M. Laughlin's translation of a sixteenth-century Spanish-Tzotzil dictionary.

The Mayan word for book, *jun* or *vun*, also means paper, and the making of paper is an important Mesoamerican tradition. During rituals ancient Mayan women pierced their tongues and dripped the blood on paper which was then burnt. Even today in the *amate* papermaking town of San Pablito Pahuatlán in Puebla, paper is still burnt as an offering to the gods.

In Tzotzil, *to write* and *to paint* are the same verb (*tz'ib*), just as the color *yox* serves for what English speakers perceive as both blue and green. Antonia Moshán Culej of Huixtán asks: «*How is it that María Tzu can paint if she can't write?*» Weaving is today considered to be a form of script and Tzotzil women can read the verses on their looms.

The ancient Mayan god Itzamná is credited with the invention of writing. His wife is said to have created the universe by painting everything into existence. The Fathermothers gave birth to one of the few civilizations in the world that conceived a way to write down its language. The ancestors of Loxa Jiménez, María Tzu, and Manwela Kokoroch created the Maya codices, magnificent books written when only Native People inhabited these lands. On stuccoed bark paper pages they painted forecasts of the movements of the heavenly bodies, prophecies, divinations, and spells. In his chronicle *The Conquest of New Spain*, Bernal Díaz de Castillo, a soldier who accompanied Cortes in the invasion of Mexico, wrote:

*We found temples and places of sacrifice, and blood splashed about, and the incense they burnt, and other properties of their idols, also the stones on which they*

*made their sacrifices, and parrots' feathers, and many of their books, which are folded as cloth is in Spain.*

The Maya seem to hold ancient memories of their libraries. Even today, the oral poetry of ritual speech is referred to as *tz'ib* «that which is painted or written down.» Poetry is called *nichimal k'op*, «the word in flower.» We know of only four precolombian Mayan books that survived the ravages of time and war; many were destroyed by Friar Diego de Landa in the sixteenth century, as documented in his *Relación de las cosas de Yucatan*:

*[The Maya] wrote their books on a long sheet of paper doubled in pleats, the whole thing enclosed between two boards that made them very attractive....*

*There were many beautiful books, but as they contained nothing but superstitions and falsehoods of the Devil, we burnt them all, and this affected [the Maya] deeply, causing them great sorrow and grief.*

Song is a book that will not burn. In the early colonial period a number of ancient texts in verse were dictated to European friars who transcribed the Mayan words in Latin characters and translated them into Spanish. The best known of these is the *Popol Vuh*-the sacred book of the K'iché. The Yucatec Maya conserved their magical writings in the *Books of Chilam Balam*, the *Codex of Calkiní* and-perhaps the most exquisite poetry left us by the ancient Maya-a volume of incantations entitled the *Ritual de los Bacabes*.

It is clear the First Fathermothers were writers, and it is rumored that some of their books-that no one can read anymore-lie hidden in old chests in Chamula. Each year they are taken out with great reverence, perfumed with incense and wrapped up again in embroidered cloths. Some say the books inside the chests have begun to talk. Women who learn the words are said to have writing in their hearts.

*Incantations by Mayan Women* is the first book Mayan people have created, written, illustrated, printed and bound-in paper of their own making-in nearly five hundred years.



TUESDAY is the best day for curing a woman. The *h-ilol*, which means «seer,» cures her patient before an altar of sacred plants and candles in a cloud of copal incense. Her prayers may take all night.

*The words grow out of the heart  
and flow along the ways  
of our lifeblood.*

-Munda Tostón

If the sickness is very serious, the ceremony may go on for three days. The patient lies in a nest of flowers while the seer visits the holy places in caves and on mountain tops, offering sacred songs to the Fathermothers.

*The seer comes singing  
and finds the word,  
the caress of the word  
inside the veins.*

-Munda Tostón

The word comes from the mouth of the seer. It lives a life of its own in the body of a snake. The word is larva that penetrates the Earth, emerges from the caves, flies through the air to fall as rain, sprinkling our bodies. The word penetrates the veins and the seer feels it in the pulse of the sick person. Words take the forms of stars, circles, of glyphs drawn on the face of the blood.

The conjurer massages the patient with her song. The words form a ball of fire that challenges the hex of an enemy. The seer takes hold of the words of a witch and turns them

against her so she wounds herself with the spell she meant for another.

We become ill when our soul is stolen from our body, or when we fall down and are frightened. The conjurers call to the soul to come back, whistling to it on a little gourd.

*Bring her back  
with pine cones,  
with wild berries,  
and candles of many colors.  
Let her come with her flowers blooming,  
with flowers in her body,  
Holy Mother Breast,  
Sacred Earth,  
Holy Wildwood.*

-Petú Bak Bolom

Children run the risk of losing their souls in places they don't know. Twenty years ago, when María Tzu, her baby Mateo, and I went to Mexico City, at every moment María called and shepherded the spirit of her child through the labyrinth of the subway.

*Mateo, Mateo, come home,  
come back to your body.  
Come back, Mateo, to your mama.  
Back to your clothes.  
Back to your diaper.  
Don't be afraid of the roads.  
Don't be frightened by the cars.  
Don't let your soul become tangled up  
in the hand of the Anjel Diablo.*

-María Tzu

In addition to her soul, each person has an animal companion called a *wayhel*, a word grown from the root (*way*) of the verbs *to sleep* and *to dream*, and associated with shamanism,

the portals to the Underworld, communication with the gods and the dead. The *wayhel* accompanies its alter ego from the moment it is born and may be a jaguar, a hawk, a hummingbird, a butterfly, a weasel, a caterpillar, or a water snake. Instead of a head, it may have an ax, a machete, a pair of scissors or even a cast-iron skillet stuck on the end of its neck. Witches may possess several *wayhel*; whirlwinds, rainbows, lightning bolts, and shooting stars. One of the most powerful forms of *wayhel* is the Writer, the *Scribanó*. This kind of *wayhel* is immortal because even after death she can recreate herself through marks on a piece of paper, or, as Pedro Pitarch explains: «...they invent themselves, writing themselves into existence.»

The soul companions live with the Fathermothers in the heart of the mountain, sitting on the thirteen levels of bleachers inside the Earth. There the *wayhel* have radios, jukeboxes, even computers and e-mail.

In dreams, the *wayhel* souls escape like naughty children and run around loose out in the woods. If anything happens to her *wayhel*, a person will become ill. In these times when men are blasting new roads with dynamite, the earth trembles and the *wayhel* are afraid and can even die. A bad person may capture a *wayhel* and sell it to the Lord of the Cave, as happened to poor Maruch Vet. The soul is held captive in the way prisoners of war were held in ancient Mayan times, chained or tied with ropes awaiting sacrifice. The *wayhel* loses its appetite and becomes ill; its owner also gets sick. The seer offers a black hen to the cave so it will give back the stolen *wayhel* before her patient dies.

*Mother of the Night,  
Father of the Night,*

*Great Star of Venus,  
Mother Month, Mother Moon:*

*Get up! Put on your best clothes.  
Let Maruch Vet's body  
out of where she's scared to death,  
sold to a cave, sold to a mountain.*

-Antel Péres Ok'il

The force of the word can cure or kill. Some words must never be uttered unless the intention is to do evil, for pronouncing the name of something calls it to life. Euphemisms are employed when touching certain powerful themes. The *wayhel*, for example, might be referred to as sheep, and the Fathermothers as shepherds. A person's true name is known only to her parents and the seer and is considered to be so powerful that a child intentionally named for another will be known as that person's substitute, and is thought to acquire characteristics of her namesake.

Envious people cause sickness through witchcraft and noxious spells they chant in caves at night. You have to be careful not to make your neighbor envious of your new house, of the corn you are harvesting or the tortilla you put in your mouth. This is not easy in these times in which Maya people lack just about everything. «*Or you starve to death or they kill you with their envy,*» as my friend María Gutierrez explains.

*How much will I harvest, Kajval?  
How many of your sunbeams?*

*How much of your body  
will I put in my basket, Father?*

*Let no one take it from me.  
Let no one want what I have.*

-María Tzu

Dreams can provoke a sickness called *Potzlom*, a form of cancer that causes eclipses of the Sun. A witch converts herself into a nightmare animal, a jaguar or a ball of fire that falls from the sky, causing swelling of the body and bad tumors. *Potzlom* can be cured with women's urine and poetry.

Seers acquire their gift within the womb. Four-year-old girls play at being *h-iloles*, creating tiny altars in their yards where they cure their dolls. When the girls are a little older, they dream the Fathermothers make them a present of incense and sacred herbs. They are given a whistling gourd to call the souls, a shot glass, and candles of every color. «*Take this,*» the Fathermothers say to them while they sleep, «*this is for you.*» Every night they dream in couplets and in this way come to know the incantations for curing. The *h-iloles* dream they are shown the Great Book where all the spells are written down.

A witch dreams of snakes: she grabs one, she bites it, she swallows the snake meat and it crawls down her throat very slowly. That is where her force is born. If she has enemies, she thinks, «*I am going to hurt them before they hurt me.*» In Tzotzil, the witch is *ak'chamel*, «the giver of sickness.» Witchcraft is practiced behind closed doors. If people find you out, they'll chop you up with a machete. A curer can denounce the witch she believes is hurting her patient, and if the person dies her family members have the right to take justice into their own hands. A man is supposed to kill his wife or his mother-in-law when he catches either of them witching.

A witch is also called the Mother of Sickness. Sometimes you come upon processions of men and women singing and laughing under the black star-studded sky as though they were on their way home from a party, the men playing their harps and the women walking behind carrying incense burners filled with copal. These are the Mothers of Sickness and they always seem to be very happy.

The most powerful seers among the Tzotzil are the *Me' Santo*, the Saint Mothers, who cure with the words of a singing gourd or a talking box. The tradition of this Maya oracle is ancient. The goddess *Ixchel* spoke through a talking saint on the island of Cozumel long before Christ came to the Caribbean.

*Four are the heads of Acantún, Talking Stone,*

*Four are the heads of Acante', Talking Tree.*

*-Ritual de los Bacabes*

In 1711, Dominica López, a Mayan woman from Chamula, discovered a Virgin in her cornfield. The Virgin was carved of wood and spoke through the voice of Dominica. In 1712, a young woman in Cancuc became the interpreter for the Virgin of Candelaria when she spoke to the Tzeltal Maya people. Her words, uttered from behind a curtain of straw in the name of the Virgin, incited an Indian rebellion with the participation of the soldiers of the Virgin, allied with four witches named Earthquake, Lightning, Flood, and Wind. Fray Francisco Ximénez describes this uprising in *Historia de la Provincia de San Vicente de Chiapas y Guatemala*:

*There was an Indian girl who had her coven of witches and she promised her following that they had naught to fear for they had power over the storms and the lightning that would strike down their enemies, and in this way the Indians came out of their mountain towns four hundred strong along with two old women from Yajalón and two young women from Tila and an old blind man from the same place who was called King of the Witches, and they came to a place called the Hill of Vaquitepeque...carried in chairs covered with mats. When they asked the witches why no miracle had happened, it was explained that their language was not as strong as it had once been; that words in Spanish had defeated their Mayan prayers even though they had prayed long into the night. Because of this defeat their people called them liars, but even so, they kept the faith in their witches and the effectiveness of their spells, the last resort they had to free themselves from the Spanish.*

During the Caste War in 19th-century Yucatán, wooden and stone crosses spoke to the Maya people in their own language inciting rebellion. In 1867 the Chamula shepherdess Agustina Kómes Checheb found three stones fallen from the wind. The stones began to speak. She put them in a wooden box and their voice led the Indian autonomy movement called the War of Saint Rose. Even today the place where the people gathered to listen to the talking stones is called *El Baúx*, «The Box.»

Some say the Mayans originally learned to cure from talking boxes that told them secrets. Women hear voices even today. Six years ago a woman from Epal Ch'en dreamed a voice was talking inside her head. The voice asked for its box, saying, «*Mama, you are getting married.*» It was a talking saint. The woman got married, but her husband walked out on her, left her with three children; he couldn't take it that she talked to saints. Lots of people came to pray, bringing incense and candles to consult the Saint about fevers, robberies, boundary lines. The box spoke: it could tell you the names of your enemies, it baptized babies, it found what had been lost. And so the civil authorities came and burnt it up, saying it wasn't right for a woman to be the Mother of the Saint; they tied her to an oak tree as punishment. There are a great many Mothers of Saints in the Highlands of Chiapas today, and some of the «Mothers» are men, although the tradition was once female. The voice from the talking box of María Ernánides Kokov, a modern commercialized version of a Mayan oracle, was taped in 1996 during an eclipse of the Moon seen from her house up on Huitepec Mountain in between the antennas of Televisión Azteca and a traditional animistic shrine. The Saint, named *Pagresito*, «Little Daddy,» spoke with a falsetto voice to his keeper, María Ernánides Kokov, who calls herself the Defender of the Angels. She takes care of the Saint, intercedes with *Pagresito*, pleading for the interests of those who consult her, and performs all sorts of cures at specialist rates. I saw a fifty-peso bill on the Saint's altar and next to it was a scrap of paper with this message written by one of the clients:

*Pagresitos:*

*Please tell the manager  
of the Koka Kola plant,  
tell him in his heart,  
that his word better be good.*

EVERYTHING ON EARTH HAS A MOTHER. The Mother of Blood is the heart; the Mother of Water is thunder; the Mother of the Hand is the thumb. Mother of Lightning sends the rain; Mother of the Light is a hydroelectric dam.

Mother of Corn is a double ear of corn; you only find one or two in each cornfield. It looks like the body of a woman with long hair. When a Mother of Corn is discovered in the milpa, incense is burnt and ancient Mayan stories are remembered:

*Mother of Corn is the daughter of Lightning. Long long ago a man found a snake which had been hurt. The snake asked him to please take her home and he did. She lived with her father in a cave full of snakes. Her father was so grateful that he offered the man whatever he wanted as a reward for saving his daughter. About this time the snakes turned into women and the man was dazzled by their looks. «No, I don't need anything,» he said politely.*

*«Do you have a wife?» asked Lightning. « I could give you one of my daughters.»*

*«That would be good,» said the man, and he picked out the prettiest one, who just happened to be the snake he had saved out on the path. He took her for his wife. She was the Mother of Corn and if she harvested just one ear of corn from each corner of the field, it would multiply and her net would be filled with corn. She and her husband would have big fights because he thought she was picking all his corn. But she was just magic. One time when her husband hit her, Mother of Corn wiped the blood from her nose with an ear of corn. This is how the red corn came to be. Where Mother of Corn peed, the first squash vines grew, when she peed again, a chayote came up.*

-María Xila

At harvest time, ceremonies are held in the milpa to call the soul of the corn that didn't grow, or that was eaten by a raccoon.

*Soul of corn:  
come back from where the raccoon took  
you,  
from where the grackle ate you,  
from the mole's tunnel,  
the weevil's mouth,  
the gopher hole,  
the rat's den.*

Xpetra Ernánides López

Mother of the Fire is one of the three hearthstones in the center of the Mayan house.

*Sacred Fire:  
Give me something to eat.  
My griddle rests here,  
Sacred Stone.  
I make my tortillas  
on the face of your hearth.  
On your mask of stone  
I bake my bread.*

-María Tzu

«The Three Hearthstones» or Ox Yoke is the name for the holiest mountain of the Zinacantecs. The Tzotzils consider the mountain tops to be sacred, especially if they are very high and have natural springs or caves at the summit. When such natural formations are lacking as a backdrop for rituals, cement altars and concrete grottos may be constructed as a stage for cosmic theater. All mountains are addressed as Fathermothers, the tutelary gods.

The Earthquake Mother is one of four enormous snakes that hold the world on the tips of their tails. The Earth shakes when the snakes roll over.

*Earthquake Mother:  
Don't touch me.*

*Don't knock down my house*

-Munda Tostón

In downtown San Cristóbal, carved on the outside corner of the colonial palace of the Conquistador Diego de Mazariegos, you can see the stone bas-relief of a mermaid with a serpent's tail whom the Chamulas call the Earthquake Mother.

Mother of Night can't sleep because the little red worms that live in her vagina keep her awake, and the only way to cure the itch is by making love with twelve or fifteen men. In his *Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo Zinacantán*, Robert M. Laughlin writes that loose women-and this includes those who laugh out loud-are punished in hell by having a red-hot wire stuck into their vaginas; but according to kitchen gossip, all women have little desire worms and want their husbands to do a good job in bed. Even though a man may hoe many rows of corn in a day, his wife expects him to make love to her twelve times each night to wear out those worms. They say there was a woman who was so promiscuous her animal spirit *must* have been a worm!

Mother of Ice can find treasure with a special mirror she has that also makes everything freeze over. After midnight if you see a shooting star that looks like a blue rattlesnake, you can be certain it is the Mother of Treasure. Where the star falls to Earth, you will find a machine for making money. As you dig, it helps to pray:

*Holy Snake:  
Please give me some pay.  
I want food  
and money.*

-Munda Tostón

Finding treasure will make you poorer than ever, because treasure, *takin*, is literally the «Sun's shit»; filthy money will always jinx you.

Mother Wind knocks down the cornfield. She is a two-headed woman-hair all tangled up with leaves and twigs—who walks very fast and is covered with bruises from bumping into trees and rocks that get in her way. She lives in a cave with the Lord of the Earth, and goes out in the sleet to steal the soul of the corn.

*Wind has a scarlet heart,  
she knocks down our milpa.  
Wind is an envious thief  
who steals our corn on the cob.*

-Petú Bak Bolom

The rainbow is called Mother of Evil, because she seals off the caves with her tail so the rain clouds can't get out. The colors of the rainbow come from her urine; cover yourself with your shawl when you look at her, or you'll get a headache. Spit tobacco juice at the rainbow, throw rocks at her, or three heads of garlic to frighten her away. Show her your penis or your pussy, but never point at a rainbow or your belly button will rot.

*The rainbow bites me, Kajval.  
She's spying on me,  
chasing me into the house.  
Get her out of here!  
Run her off, Kajval!*

-  
María Tzu

For the ancient Maya, the «Great (or Red) Rainbow» *Chak-chel* was the old Moon Goddess, the midwife of creation. Karen Bassie believes that *Chak-Chel* is from the Underworld because in Classic iconography she is «*pictured just as an Underworld deity with death eyes and death bones.*» The contemporary Tzotzil rainbow is said to emerge from caves

and to be evil. She is one of the *Pukuj*, a name that recalls *Ah Puch*, the god of death of the ancients. *Pukuj* are strong animal companions who suck the life out of other animal companions. They are evil *wayhel* who cause sickness.

There are *Pukuj* who steal babies out of the bellies of their mothers, or change them into monkeys. Some damage the Moon and the Sun. Daylight Savings Time is called *Pukuj* Time because it is said that the *Pukuj* have stolen an hour of light.

The Charcoal Cruncher's head comes off at night. She leaves her body in bed with her husband while her head bounces over to the fire so she can eat charcoal. As soon as the man realizes what is happening, he must put salt on the stump of her neck so the head won't stick on again when she comes back to bed. Another *Pukuj*, *Yalem Bek'et*, the «Body Stripper,» gets up at night and goes out to walk in the graveyard. She sits down next to a cross, pulls the flesh off her bones, then flies through the air as a skeleton.

The hummingbird that sings at night is a *Pukuj* errand boy for the Earth Lord who warns us of sickness or death. To soften a woman's heart, a man going courting takes along a hummingbird tied with green ribbon.

*OK, Ámbar:*

*If you don't want the Pukuj  
to come to your house in the night,  
bar the door,  
and rub garlic on your bedpost.*

-

Xun Okotz

How can you tell in the dark if it's a real *Pukuj* who offers you his hummingbird? How can you tell the difference between your woman and the chimerical *Xpakinté* in a world where hummingbirds turn into bats?

HERE in the abode of the Tzotzils-*People of the Bat*-the limestone mountain landscape is pockmarked with caves,

sinkholes, grottos swallowing whole rivers, and springs where the water flows out of the rock. The cave is the setting for the mythical drama in which the Maya soul is a principal actor. In the Netherworld death is transformed into life. Animal spirit companions and plumed serpents of ancient songs live within the Earth alongside the capricious Maya gods and goddesses.

The Earth Goddess is *Kaxail* or *Kaxil* a name that recalls the Yucatec Maya word *kax* or *k'ax* meaning the uncultivated Earth. *Kaxail* is the Holy Wildwood, the Sacred Coffer Where the Secrets are Kept. She is the supreme force of life, creator and mother of the Sun, the Moon, and all living beings and rules the forest primeval where life regenerates itself. The incantations for curing the soul are directed to her; half the texts in this collection are for *Kaxail*.

*I step and walk  
on your flowering face,*

*Holy Mother,  
Sacred Earth,*

*Mother Breast,  
Holy Wildwood.*

*Show me the way, Mother,  
put me on the right track.*

-Maruch Méndes Péres

The Earth is so great she cannot be seen, so powerful her true name is seldom mentioned directly. Instead, she is called the *Our Mother on Whom We Tread*, the *Woman Who Appears in Dreams*, or *Me'me' Chuchu'*, «Mother Breast.» Those who address her beg her pardon for having urinated and defecated on her face. Out of fear of reprisals from the Earth, animals hunted in the wild are referred to by euphemisms such as *te'tikal chij*, «woods sheep,» for a deer or *ch'enal k'otz*, «cave chicken,» for quail. That which springs from her can be

dangerous because of the great power she holds. One must ask her permission to plant the Earth with her son, her corn.

*I'm going to dig a hole  
in your face,*

*Sacred Earth.  
I'm digging into your body.*

*I am planting my cornfield.  
I am planting my work.*

*Fill my gourd, Holy Earth.  
I want you to fill my bean pot.*

-Jwana te la Krus

In *Perils of the Soul*, anthropologist Calixta Guiteras Holmes records the cosmic vision of Manuel Arias Sojom, a Tzotzil leader in San Pedro Chenalhó during the 1950s:

*The Earth is the mother of universal life. She is the most compelling power in the universe. She is the supreme power. All others seem to form part of her or to have proceeded from her depths. She is goddess of the wilderness and mistress of the forest. Her wrath is easily roused and she bestows her gifts only when she is pleased.*

*She brings forth and fosters all creatures, but is simultaneously their common grave. She relentlessly swallows back, as a monster, the beings that she produces. All that live on her surface come from her interior and return there. She is all-producing, all maintaining, all-devouring.*

*The cosmic forces-fire, wind, rain, the eclipse, the earthquake-are manipulated by the earth. Disease and famine are manifestations of her wrathful moods. The forces of evil can be traced to the earth. Evil and good*

in man are related to his wayhel, the animal soul that makes him one with the earth.

She grudgingly tolerates man's living on her surface, and allows him to prey on her creatures. She takes advantage of any opportunity to drag man's ch'u'el into her recesses. When she is offended by the stench of human excrement, she will sicken man and prevent his recovery. She resents procreation.

Her deadly creatures of darkness are related to the destructive sky gods. Her instruments of evil are the Pukuj and the Potzloom.

Direct contact with all that is brought in from her wilderness and to man's use is deadly, and destroys fertility. Things from the wild can only be tamed by those who possess the esoteric knowledge.

It is she who is first invoked in prayer. It is in her power to exchange an evil wayhel for a good one. She is asked for life, for health, for protection. She is asked to kill and to destroy.

She is the cause of all harm that may befall the entire group. Only by obtaining her permission may man occupy her with his home and his fields. Any change of residence, any enlargement of the milpa, must be her gift.

She punishes and destroys. She commands continual respect and sacrifice. Her protection can be acquired only with constant care and vigilance and is forfeited by the slightest breach or misdemeanor. She is man's conscience and appears to him in the guise of a woman; her commands are strictly obeyed.

Potters ask permission of the Earth before making use of her clay. Maruch Méndes Péres worked as a child in the house of a potter; the old woman sang as she kneaded her clay:

*Holy Earth: I need you,  
I work you.  
You will sustain me,  
you will buy me food and drink.*

-Beronika Uch

The Tzotzils invoke the Earth before using her mud for plastering their houses; they beg her leave before cutting trees for house beams, firewood or for making charcoal:

*Don't kill me, don't fall on me,  
Sacred Tree, Sacred Pine.  
It's because I am in need  
that I cut down  
your Sacred Tree, your Sacred Vine,  
Holy Earth, Holy Sky.*

-  
Antonia Moshán Culej

The Earth has a dark side that draws beings into her dangerous depths: she is the mother in a rage who whips her children, the *Pukuj* who wears a mask with the face of the sweetheart, concealing her wild matted hair. She opens her jaws during an earthquake, blows down the milpa with her breath, kidnaps souls and animal companions, devouring those who dare live in a mud house without asking for permission with animal sacrifice and a gift of song. To inaugurate a house constructed on the face of the Earth with her mud and thatch, an old woman is called upon to light the first fire in the hearth and placate the Earth with prayers:

*We are going to sleep here.  
We are going to rest here.*

*We are going to sin here.  
We are going to make love.*

*Protect us from being bitten  
by a vine or a stick.*

*Save us from being devoured  
by your new thatch, the shiny nails.*

*We offer you gifts, Kaxail,  
so the new house won't eat the people in  
it.*

*-Xunka' Utz'utz' Ni'*

Mesoamerican archeologist Karl Taube associates the Mayan Earth goddess with the Aztec «Earth Lord,» *Tlatecuhtli*, which he calls «a monstrous devouring being clearly depicted as female.» The ancient Mayans related the Earth to the Young Maize God, whom Tzotzil shaman Maruch Méndes Péres calls the Son of *Kaxail*. As this book goes to press, Maruch showed Carter Wilson and me a couple of dozen stalactites she keeps on her altar in between two wooden crosses adorned with pine boughs. Maruch called our attention to the resemblance between the stalactites and ears of corn. She insists they are the «saints» of *Kaxail* and must be treated with great reverence. To illustrate her point, she tells a story about stalactites:

*When I was a child a neighbor found many stalactites in a cave. A boy helped the man carry them home and they threw them in a pile in the yard. Little girls played with them as though they were dolls, they dressed them and carried them in their shawls. Children played with the stalactites and little by little the stones became lost among the weeds.*

*One day during Carnival, the five Lost Days, the neighbor was cooking up a great pot of atole outside his house. The maxes, who dress as monkeys, were dancing around and singing when a huge snake appeared out of nowhere. It was as thick as a man's leg, very long and it glittered just like the crystals inside stalactites. No one had ever seen a snake like this: it glowed blue-green and it climbed up onto the roof of the house. All the people who were gathered around for the fiesta saw it.*

*The snake slithered into the house through the thatch and was crawling along the rafters inside. The seers were summoned, and they spit liquor at it, they threw handfuls of snuff at the snake to make it dizzy.*

*The serpent crawled down to the floor and curled up in a spiral. The neighbor struck it on the head with a stick, he killed it and skinned it, throwing the meat to the vultures.*

That night the seers dreamed the Earth was angry because of the stalactites. They gathered up the broken stones, they took the doll clothes off and returned them to the cave. The seers dreamed again and the Earth told them she didn't want the stalactites back, they had been defiled and she didn't want them anymore. What she wanted was human lives.

The neighbor who had found the stalactites came down with a fever that killed him in three days. The boy who had helped him carry the stalactites and one of the girls who had played with them also became sick, but the seers burned incense in the cave and prayed, and the children survived.

Once when I was watching my sheep down by the river, I slipped and fell down the embankment in a landslide of rocks and earth. One of the sheep broke her leg, a little lamb was killed. I dreamed that night that a foreign woman led the lamb away tied to a cord. I understood this to be the Lord of the Earth and I realized she had also led my soul away. Now my soul was working as her maid. My soul swept the Earth Lord's house, washed her clothes, cared for her children.

I realized that my soul actually LIKED working for the Earth Lord, she was getting used to eating chicken every day. At least my soul thought it was chicken, I knew it was snakes she was fattening up on.

I became very angry with my soul. I paid the seer to pray for her to come back, and she did, but she'd only stay with me for a couple of days before she ran off to the Earth Lord again.

This was very upsetting. My soul didn't want to be with me anymore and I just couldn't put up with this situation any longer. I cut three switches and began to hit the Earth. I yelled at the Earth. I gave her a good scolding.

«Give me my soul back!» I shouted. I didn't drink any liquor or burn candles or sacrifice a black hen. No. I just beat the Earth and yelled:

«Earth: I don't owe you a thing.

I have not sinned.

I'm just dizzy, I'm just stupid.

I fell down, I slipped.

Don't tie me up!

I never wanted your gold!

I never asked you for corn!

*I don't want your beans!  
I never asked for anything.  
You have no reason to make me your slave,  
I won't be your servant,  
Sacred Mother, Holy Kaxail,  
Holy Earth, Sacred Sky,  
Sacred Soil, Holy Land.  
Holy King, Sacred Ajau,  
Holy Snake, Sacred Chauk.»*

-Maruch Méndes Péres

*Chauk* is another name for the Earth Lord, *Yajval Banumil*, often described as a fat rich *kaxlan*, foreigner, who lives in caves and controls natural resources including rain and buried treasure. In prayers he is often addressed as King.

Is *Chauk* the consort of the Earth? If so, this mixed race marriage mirrors the Conquest and the subsequent domination of *Kaxail* by alien gods and men who possess the Earth, taking her when they will. María Gutiérrez is of the opinion, however, that *Chauk* is the *offspring* of the Earth, «a child born of rape who came to no good.» The Earth Lord is a *Pukuj* bastard son gone bad who has taken over the running of estates and the administration of rents. It seems there are many Earth Lords now, many *Kaxlanes*. The old Earth lives in hiding, her powers scourged by Inquisition, torture, and self-racism. In Renaissance Europe witches, infidels and devils were hunted and burned. The culture of the New World was damned and condemned to death in the name of God.

The European invasion of the land of the Earth Mother in the 16th century drove the Mayan goddesses underground in fear and humiliation, displaced by imported gods of great splendor and power. The Earth is violated; she gives birth to halfcastes who suppress the language, culture, and religion of their mother. The Lords are ashamed of her and wear the mask of their father's gods, repudiating the Earth as primitive, pagan, a stepdaughter to filth and witchcraft. The

new Christians were taught to fear nature and to consider the woods to be savage and dangerous, a place for shitting and throwing garbage. The vanquished are forced to live in towns, they grow ashamed of thatch and mud, as though the Earth were a sickness they do not want to catch.

When a goddess falls from favor she is bound to be accused of evil. Just about the only surviving female descendant of the Earth Mother is the malignant *Xpakinté*, the Woman of the Woods, who tricks drunks on their way home at night. At first she appears to be the poor fellow's own wife, but then she lures him down the wrong path to his death, over a cliff, impaled on a maguey cactus. The Fathermothers of Yucatán called her *Ix Paclah Actun*, «She Who Fornicates in Caves.» If embraced, the *Xpakinté* becomes a rotten tree trunk. Her head is found to be hollow in the back, filled with furry caterpillars that sting like fire. A man must take off his pants to save himself from her-and then put them on again inside out. Even though the Earth Goddess is now considered old-fashioned and never mentioned among the men, contemporary Tzotzil women continue directing most of their incantations to her. To ask for rain to make her milpa grow, Maruch Mendes Péres addresses *Kaxail*, the Earth, and then *Chauk*, the Earth Lord:

*Sacred Mother, Sacred Breast,  
Sacred Kaxail,  
Holy Earth, Holy Ground,  
Holy Thunderbolt,  
Sacred Ahau,  
Holy Snake,  
Holy Chauk:  
Fill my mouth with food.*

Prayers are said in caves, springs, and forest shrines:

*Father Thunder,  
Mother Thunder:  
We don't want lightning.  
Nor roaring thunder, nor hail.*

*Just water, Kajval,  
to wet the dust,  
to end this drought that bites us.*

-María Xila

*Father Thunder, Mother Thunder* refer to *Chauk*, great-grandson of the ancient Maya rain god *Chac*, who sends the rain and the lightning bolts. Each year, in the dry season, *Chauk* travels to Guatemala on the back of a deer to bring back gunpowder for his lightning bolts. His whip is a snake and his saddle an armadillo. *Chauk's* daughters, the *Anjel*, are maidens who take on the form of snakes. They fluff up the clouds inside the caverns, preparing them as they would cotton for spinning.

It is rumored that the Earth Lord's caves run from Guatemala City to the Highlands of Chiapas. A little past the Tzeltal Maya town of Tenejapa, a whole river suddenly disappears inside an immense grotto at Yochi'b, which has been a market place since before Columbus. A few years ago, after several days of underground exploration, a group of Italians wearing black wet suits and accompanied by a huge white dog came out of the cave. The frightened market crowd took them for the living dead who had gotten lost in the bowels of the Earth. The spelunkers had to run for their lives.

Another traveler in the Underworld, linguist and epigrapher Barbara McLeod discovered a one-thousand-year-old Maya altar at the end of a fifteen-day walk within the Earth beneath Belize. One time she and archaeologist Dennis Puleston lost their way inside another cave. They were just about to starve to death when, hallucinating collectively, they saw a shining creature with a body like a glyph who led them to the exit.

Later, in the Maya ruins of Chichén Itzá, Dennis Puleston discovered an underground chamber with stalactites stuck onto the ceiling, forming a kind of Infraworld xylophone. After invoking *Chac* by striking music from the stalactites, the archaeologist climbed the steps of the Castle of Quetzalcoatl where, out of a clear blue sky, he was struck dead by a lightning bolt.

\*

*THERE'S AN OLD STORY about a girl from Tenejapa who married Lightning and created a lake. Her name was Suyul and she was just a babe in arms. Her mother had carried her out by the spring and was trying to wash clothes. Suyul was crying and crying. She wouldn't calm down until her mother put her into a puddle of water.*

*Suyul slapped the water with her hands, she struck the water as a baby does, saying:*

*«Ti suyul ti suyul*

*ti suyul.»*

*Suyul was playing in the water, digging in the mud, and in just a little while she made a big lake. «Go away; I'm staying here,» the baby told her mother. «Because I am not yours anymore. I'm going to where the Lightning lives.»*

*Now it was the mother who cried and cried; «Ay Kajval!» the mother said. She didn't want to go home without her little baby. She didn't want to leave her there all alone.*

*«OK,» said Baby Suyul, «in thirteen days you can come back. But bring me my skirts and my necklaces. Get everyone together playing harp, playing pretty guitar, lighting firecrackers. Burn rows of candles, I want lots of candles,» ordered Suyul.*

*In thirteen days they brought drums, they brought trumpets, they brought music. And when they got to where the puddle had been before, Suyul was swimming in a huge lake. She was a grownup woman. Suyul asked for embroidered blouses, she asked for skirts, she asked for everything.*

*The cloths are carried,  
the clothes are washed.*

*They are taking them to the Virgin,  
giving them to the lake.*

*They put the weavings in a gourd;  
they throw it, spinning it around*

*and around,  
down*

*to the Lady of the Lake,  
to her spring*

*where the water  
is born.*

-María Xila

THE SUN HAS THIRTEEN SHIRTS in thirteen colors for the thirteen steps of the sky. He puts on the white shirt when he shines, the green shirt when it rains, his red shirt when it thunders. At night he wears all thirteen.

Known as *The Scribe*, the Sun carries a book in which he writes down everything that happens each day. You can tell when he is writing because a halo appears around him. At night he goes into his sweatbath beneath the Earth.

Each dawn a Chamula girl-the planet Venus-sweeps the path in the sky, preceding the Sun in his way across the heavens. Behind Our Sun walks his mother, the Holy Moon.

*The Sun asked his mother for a shirt. She picked some cotton and beat it with a dogwood stick so it would mat like felt. She cut a hole for the neck with her machete. The Sun put on his new shirt and went for a walk in the*

*woods. The cotton was pulled apart by the thorns and the first shirt of the Sun disappeared in the bushes. The cotton became the fog of the cloud forest, high up on the mountain tops where we go to pray.*

*-Petú Xantis*

*At the beginning of time, Mother Moon taught the Fathermothers to spin and weave. She climbed up a ceiba, the sacred Mayan silk-cotton tree, and she formed her loom with the branches; she carved her spindle from the twigs. With the cotton silk of the tree she spun the first thread, and wove the first huipil. This done, she climbed the notches of her warping stick into the sky to become the Moon Goddess.*

*Long ago women made threads as today we make our children:  
They spun them with the strength of their bodies.*

*When the Earth began, they say, the Moon climbed a tree. There she was weaving, there she was spinning in the tree.*

*«Learn to weave,» she said to the First Fathersmothers.  
«Learn to spin!» That's how weaving began.*

*-Loxa Jiménez López*

**H**ANDS WEAVE THE WOOL, but it is the soul of the loom that creates the huipil. Through poetry, the artisan tames her weaving sticks and charms her spindles, engaging their spirit so work can be done. Unless tools are well treated, they may rebel. The sacred book of the ancient Maya, the *Popol Vuh*, tells of an insurrection of the cooking pots who attacked their heartless masters, saying,

*You hurt us,  
burning our mouths,  
charring our faces on the fire.  
You burnt us even though  
we did no wrong.*

*When it's your turn,  
you too will burn.*

In order for them to do their job, tools must be sung to and fed. Spindles are kept in a basket of corn and the spun thread is given *ul*, corn gruel, to eat before the weaver measures out the warp of her loom. Otherwise, the cloth might shrink from hunger.

One must also feed musical instruments and give them moonshine *pox* to drink, spraying a mouthful onto the strings of the harp while praying:

*Sacred Music,  
Holy Harp:*

*Here's a little nip  
to lighten your heart.*

-Xpetra Ernánides

It is said that a work reflects the state of the soul of the artisan who performed it. If a weaver is sad, her loom will become tangled. If she dies before her weaving is finished, her soul will never find rest. If a farmer is not joyful, her corn will not sprout and the soul of the corn will suffer within the Earth. To keep the gods and the saints happy, they must be fed on incense and endless songs.

THE FAITH OF THE MODERN MAYA is syncretic, woven from the animistic religion of the First Fathermothers, Renaissance Catholicism, and postmodern Protestant fundamentalism. Christ is the Sun and the Virgin Mary the Moon.

*You have seen my Ten Holy Heavens,  
the Ten Blues of the Sky,*

*Mother Moon, you have watched me,*

*you have seen*

*that I am not stealing,  
Mother Moon, Holy Virgin, Kajval.*

Mikaela Moshán Culej

*Kajval*-from the ancient Maya *Ahau*-means Our Lords and Protectors: the Earth, the Moon, the Sun, *Cristo*, the Virgins, the saints. The adversaries of the *Kajval* are known as *Pukuj*.

When envious *Pukuj* try to steal the light from the sky during an eclipse, women pray and cry out to scare them off, beating on their griddles and pots to protect the Sun and the Moon from death. During a lunar eclipse women leave a gourd filled with water in the yard so that the Moon might wash her face. It is said that when the Moon turns as red as blood, many women die. Antonia Moshán Culej, Roselia Montoya, and Xpetra Ernánides watched as the face of the full Moon turned dark during the eclipse in 1996, and cried with great sadness because they did not know whether the Mother Moon would survive her bout with the *Pukuj*. During a solar eclipse, María Tzu prays so the *Potzlom* won't eat the Sun:

*We can't tell if dawn will come back  
to the sky, Kajval.*

*Something is devouring,  
something is destroying, Kajval.*

Way up in the sky, higher than the thirteen steps of heaven, there is a floating platform loaded with lighted candles, one for each person who has ever lived in the world. When a candle goes out, someone dies. Witches can shorten lives by shaving wax off the candles. Bargains can be struck with the Bearer of Time to make one's life longer.

*Elder Brother Who Feeds the Souls:  
Guardian of the Corral:*

*Bearer of Time:*

*Keep my animal alive  
for many years*

*with pine pitch,  
with tree sap,*

*with rose water,  
with fir cone,*

*laurel knot,  
and thirteen essences of tilil.*

*Make my days longer  
with the sweat of your legs,*

*with your hands  
that glow green*

*as precious jade,  
your green, green blood.*

-Manwela Kokoroch

MAYA WOMEN HAVE POWERS to extend their lives, and to protect themselves from evil. One form of benevolent magic for taming higher forces, called *Yaluat*, consists of taking one's clothes off, baring the naked soul before an adversary. A Chamula woman may tame a wild sheep by raising her skirts and putting the animal's muzzle in her private parts. In Zinacantán during the Christmas dances that represent bullfights, women lift up their skirts to distract the bull. The *Popol Vuh* tells how, to defend his domain against invaders, the king of the K'iche sent his daughters to bathe in the river in view of the enemy army, instructing them to detain the soldiers with nude charms. Similarly, a day before

the conquest of Chamula in 1524, young women of Zinacantán were sent to the waterhole to bathe in an attempt to stop the advance of the invading Spanish troops. This place, where today women wash clothes, is known as Tz'ajom Pik', «Submerged Clitoris.»

A priestess or goddess, surrounded by clay idols within a cloud of incense, was carried by the Chiapaneco Indian soldiers during the battle they sustained with the Spanish earlier in the 1524 campaign, here described by *Conquistador* Bernal Díaz del Castillo:

*The woman on the litter and the young girls who escorted her were nude, their bodies painted and adorned with brightly colored macaw feathers and bolls of white cotton.*

Wouldn't you like to imagine Spanish soldiers overtaken by the splendor throwing down their harquebusses to join in the pagan rites? The chronicles, however, report a massacre. Cathedrals were built using stones from the pyramids. The goddesses went into hiding, but their words have never ceased to inspire the Mayans to defend themselves against their oppressors.

The Maya rebellions of 1712 and 1869 in Chiapas were led by women who incited the men to take up arms. Agustina Kómes Cheheb was directed by clay idols and accompanied by a saint called the Mother of War. Many women fought alongside their husbands in hope that the coldness attributed to females might cool down the enemy's artillery fire. Chamulas who took part in the Indian movement of 1911 tell how 45 virgins from their town ambushed the Federal Army. They lifted up their skirts and threatened the soldiers with their sex, brandishing weaving sticks and yelling: «*We advance with red huipils! Onward with red huipils!*»

During the Mexican Revolution, the troops of Obregón and Pineda hid in a cave on the sacred mountain of Mother Chaklajún. The mouth of the cave closed in on them and the soldiers were trapped inside. According to Xun Okotz, they are still there; when the sky thunders you can hear them firing their cannon. Xunka' Utz'utz' Ni' begs Mother Chaklajún to defend her people from the armies that have

threatened for hundreds of years. Her prayer *So the Armies Won't Come* is from January of 1994 when the National Army sexually assaulted Mayan women all over Chiapas:

*Don't let them torture us.  
Don't let them rape us  
in our houses, in our homes.*

Violence is enough to drive you crazy. María Kartones covers her face with mud and screams, «*Protect me from the soldiers. They are killing me, AAAAAAY!*» reflecting the horrors of war that scar women's lives forever and drive them from their homes.



*THE VIRGIN* was trying to find a place to live. Who knows how many years she searched? Who knows where she started out from? Maybe she came out of a cave or down from the sky, no one knows. They say only that she came to this land with her brothers and sisters. Saint Juan Chamula was the elder brother and Saint Marta the littlest girl. They walked over from the other side of the sea carrying their little siblings in their shawls: Saint Pegro, Saint Pablo, and Saint Antrés. They were looking for a place to live. They went through Jitotol, they went through Plátanos, through Chabajebal, «*The Place of the Cornfields,*» but couldn't live in these places. There were too many mosquitoes, the land was too hot.

The Virgin was trying to find a place to build her house. No one knows how long she had been looking. When she arrived here she climbed a tree with great branches so she could see way off into the distance. There she was, way up in the tree, covered with resin and beeswax. The Virgin saw this was a good place to stay. Her daughters could live here.

«*I want my house,*» she said, and the men and women came together to build the town because the Virgin wanted it so. The men built the church and the women the courthouse, the House of the Women. They made the mortar

*of mud with lime and egg yolk. They called to the stones and beams:*

*«Rise up vine, rise up tree, rise up vine, rise up tree,» they said, and with a tremendous sound the timber came to them-all by itself-no one had to carry it on a tumpline.*

*We can't get the beams to come to us now, nor the stones. We are not as strong as we used to be. We don't know the words anymore. We can't say the spells.*

*-María*

*Álvares Jiménez, Me' Avrila*

Nevertheless, the saints continue to speak to Mayan women. The Virgin calls to Loxa Jiménez López in dreams, inviting her to take the cargo of *Martoma Sakramento*:

*Please, carry me.*

*Please, with harps and rattles!*

The tradition of the cargo system is one of community service: noble, sacred work, a sacrifice of time and money for the saints, the gods and goddesses. During a time, usually a year, the cargoholder carries the weight of the universe for her community. The *Martomas* who keep the saints burn incense before the images and carry them on their pilgrimages. They must learn to recite many hours of ritual couplets as part of the fiesta. The stage for this extravaganza, once the pyramid and ball court, is now the town square and the street. Those who produce the sacred dramas and play the main roles can earn great prestige in the eyes of the community. They also go into debt for the rest of their lives paying for the music, fireworks, candles, flowers, incense, liquor, tamales, and even bulls for sacrifice. In this way the wealth of a few is, ideally, shared with everyone in the community.

Apart from the cargos for a man and his wife together, there are one or two for single women. In Tenejapa the Moon's Weavers are women who devotedly create the clothes for the Virgin. In Chenalhó, the *Me' Tzebetik*, the «Mother of the Girls,» dedicates her life to teaching rites and spells to young women. In Chamula, prestigious widows or virgins are chosen to attend the birth of the *Ch'ul Niño*, the Christ Child, the new Son who is also the new Sun. They dance and lull him with their songs. María Patixtán Likán Chitom has this cargo now; she is known as *Martoma Sakramento*. Her whole house has been turned into an altar, pine needles are spread on the floor, various kinds of *bromelia* flowers adorn the enormous crosses outside and in. The cargo holder's house is filled with incense, the splendor of the shining candles and the song of the harp. The *Martoma* undresses in front of all those gathered in her house, she takes a ritual bath, then puts on her ceremonial black huipil adorned with yarn and ribbons, plaiting pompons of colors into her braids. The midwives to the *Ch'ul Niño*, spend Christmas Eve singing to the child who has come into the world:

*I am a girl, my girl.  
I am a woman, my woman.*

*I am your reflection in the mirror.  
I am just like you.*

*I am woman, I am women.  
I am girl, I am girls.*

*Woman, Mother of the Sky.  
I am a girl, Mother of Happiness.*

*I am the Martoma.  
I am the girl Martoma of San Juan.*

*You are a woman, a woman  
You are a girl, a girl.*

-María Patixtán Likán Chitom

A NEWBORN BABY GIRL is presented with the implements of a woman's work: the spindle, the carding combs, the weaving sticks, the grinding stone, a tumpline for carrying firewood.

*Here is a tumpline  
to help you with your burden  
when you gather kindling  
for the fire  
to keep you warm,  
to cook your food,  
to boil the water.*

-Rosa Xulemhó

The midwife puts a pinch of salt in the baby's mouth, a taste of chile, saying:

*When you grow up,  
when you can speak,  
  
you will work in the cornfield,  
you will weave,  
  
you will earn money  
to buy your salt.*

-Rosa Xulemhó

Little by little the child learns her mother's work. A wife is known as the Owner of the House or the Mistress of the Bed. Often she is already married when she begins to menstruate. The young man comes courting, bringing cane liquor, bread, meat, cigarettes, and, of course, money, to ask for her hand. At the suitor's first visit, the parents of the girl contend they have no children, no children at all. The second time the young man comes calling they might admit to having a daughter, but say she is very lazy. «*The only*

*thing she knows how to do is to eat candied pumpkin,»* they tell the boy.

Xun Okotz became annoyed when he read Xpetra Ernánides's prayer titled *So the Dog Won't Bark at My Boyfriend*. Xun insisted, *«Even though Xpetra says the fiancée talks to the dog, this is not true. The girl isn't even supposed to know anyone has come to ask for her hand.»* The young couple never speak to one another during courtship. *«Well, that is how it was before,»* Xun admits. *«Now the girls have gone crazy. They go out looking for the boys and give themselves freely without asking any bride price. In the old days wives were asked for and paid for.»*

Xpetra laughs at Xun's allegations. *«What does he know?»* she says. *«The fathers have no idea the boyfriend comes courting secretly, because the dog doesn't bark. The girl prays so he can sneak over without her father finding out about it. It's true a girl shouldn't talk to boys, but with one look you can say everything.»* Love charms are important for getting your man:

*I want him to talk to my body.  
I want his blood to ache for me  
when he sees me on the way to the market.  
I want to join myself to him.  
I want this man to be my other half.*

-Xpetra Ernánides

In *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo Zinacantán*, Robert M. Laughlin mentions that when the parents of a girl don't accept the proposal of marriage, the boy's family throws water on the fire and the ashes fly through the air.

Calixta Guiteras Holmes writes that in Cancuc in the 1940s men could buy a permit from the town mayor to enable them to kidnap any woman they liked. A widow with no desire to remarry would have to pay a fee to the civil authorities so she wouldn't be abducted. The great majority of Maya women confess they were married off or, as they say, *sold* by their fathers to men they had never seen before. Their first sexual

experience-known in Tzotzil as the *bite of the bat*-is in effect rape. However, as time goes by some women come to care for their husbands. As in other cultures, the ritual phrases you hear at weddings express an ideal that often differs from the reality of everyday life. Many women of the new generation are simply not getting married; they work, earn their own money, and support their children alone, asking, «*Why put up with a drunk who beats me?*» Domestic violence due to alcoholism is the universal theme of Tzotzil lullabies.

*Go to sleep little baby, go to sleep.  
Your daddy's drunk*

*and if he hits me,  
I'm running to the woods.*

-  
Petra Tzon Te' Vitz

A newborn baby boy is presented with a tiny pine torch, according to Romín Teratol of Zinacantan, so in the dark of night he can guide his drunken dad home.

Still it is considered important that a man be present at birth to give the mother strength and support. She kneels on a palm straw mat, holding onto the back of a chair or a rope hung from the rafters, and prays to the Mother of the Most Difficult:

*Don't deliver me to darkness.  
Don't abandon me to the night.*

-Munda Tostón

When a baby cries, her mama will rub her private parts to make her happy and pray to the Mother Breast, the *Me'me' Chuchu'*, so she herself will have milk. Clay drums are referred to as *breasts* in Chamula, they resemble cooking pots and may represent the abundance of the Mother Earth, who is also called «Sacred Breast.» Stillborn babies are suckled by a breast tree in the Underworld. The mother who has lost her child prays that she might forget her pain:

*Little dead one, my gift,  
my suffering, my son,*

*my ear of corn  
just beginning to grow.*

*Let him be gone from my memory,  
Flowering Mother of the Sky.*

-Loxa Jiménez López

YOU HAVE TO BURY THE DEAD WELL, preferably under the floor of the house. Together with the corpse should go all the hair combings and fingernail clippings from her whole life, a ball of ground black maize, and a gourd for drinking *matz*. Women save their most beautiful huipils for their burial. If the dead woman has held a cargo, she is dressed in ceremonial clothes, ribbons and necklaces. Only at the wakes of the poorest is there no harp. It is better to do without a coffin than to have a funeral with no singing.

A candle is put into the hands of a dead woman and called her «*compañía*» so she will not feel alone and call another living person to accompany her into the Underworld. A few coins are tucked in with her to buy sugar beer or sweet lemons on the way to *K'atinbak*, the «Place Where the Bones Are Warmed.»

«We have to cross a lake to get there,» says Me' Avriila. «A river of blood. A black dog carries us on his back. That is why we talk gently to the black dog. You musn't hit him nor kill him, but give him his tortilla every day and pray to him so he will take us to where we have to go.

«My parents call to me. They are dead now. 'Come, daughter,' they say, 'Come with us,' they say. I don't want to go. I am so used to not being dead.»

When you give the dog his food, you pray to him so he will help you when the time comes:

*Good dog:*

*Take your tortilla.  
When I die,  
you will carry me  
across the water  
to K'atinbak.*

-Munda Tostón

The souls of the dead work for the Earth Lord and visit their families once a year on the Day of the Dead. When the dead are born again, the men will become women and the women men.

HERE IN THE BELLYBUTTON OF THE WORLD, as the Tzotzil call their homeland, the women live very much apart from the men. With the exception of married couples, women and men do not speak to each other, a contrast to the occidental tradition of not speaking *after* marriage. In Tzotzil, «to speak» implies «to have sex.» When a woman must talk to a man who is not her husband, she will cover her mouth with her hand and avoid looking him in the face. Due to the distance between the sexes, women have maintained their own cosmologies the men know nothing about.

To see how separate the universes of men and women might really be, we enlisted the help of Xun Okotz, co-translator of the texts in this book, who knows just about everything a Tzotzil man can know about his culture. Xun Okotz started working as an informant for anthropologists from the University of Chicago and Harvard almost fifty years ago. Over a lifetime he has transcribed thousands of hours of tapes in which scores of Tzotzil men were interviewed about all aspects of life. Here is what this scholar said about the goddesses Tzotzil women address in their spells:

*Mother of the Night, I don't know.  
Mother of the Month, not either,  
Mother of Wind, don't know.  
Mother of Hail, more or less.  
Mother of Corn, don't know.*

*Mother Breast, don't know.  
Mother of Mist, don't know.  
Woman's Rock, don't know.  
Mother Earth, don't know.  
Mother of Water, don't know.  
Mother of the Hearth, don't know.  
Don't know anything about these things.  
My father is dead and he never  
mentioned any of this at all.*

The separation of the sexes is also reflected in the division of labor into men's work and women's work. I've only heard of two Mayan men who could weave, for example, and they were looked upon as outcasts. One was from Zinacantán and he wore a skirt. He was said to be a witch and a trader; he and his wife would walk all the way down to hot country peddling their wares, both of them wearing skirts.

Tzotzil men make fun of a coward saying that he has a «blue ass,» because skirts dyed with indigo tint women's buttocks navy blue. The women walk down the path behind the men, who may be riding horses. María Gutiérrez met such a pair on the road and asked the man: «*Why is the woman walking when you ride?*» She says he answered, «*Because she has no horse.*» In rural taxis, the men occupy the seats; the women go in the trunk. In some villages women are treated with more respect than in others. Women in Chamula can own land and the Zapatistas have introduced universal suffrage, which—although guaranteed by the Mexican constitution—had been a privilege for males only in the Highlands of Chiapas. In Zinacantán, a relatively prosperous community, women seem to have to ask a man's permission for just about everything.

*But in Venustiano Carranza, it's the woman who tells the man what to do. They go down to the river to wait for the mule drivers who pass by on their way to the mountains, and when a man comes near them they transform themselves into bulls, run after the men, and try to gore them with their horns. If the man flees he'll turn into a woman and*

*won't be able to leave there ever. How could he go home as a woman? How would he explain it to his wife?*

-Guadalupe Domínguez

Tales of men turning into women often spice up the gossip among the *comagres*:

*A long time ago a couple of compadres wanted to know which one had the biggest penis. They climbed up on a rock which was still soft to measure theirs, but found them changed into vaginas; the compadres were now women.*

-Munda  
Tostón

In Chamula there is said to be a stone called *Pisom At*, the «Penis Measurer,» where males may compare themselves with giants. In Zinacantán there is talk of *Antzil Ton*, the «Woman's Rock,» but nobody will say what it's for.

In Chenalhó there are several important lifetime cargos held by men who dress as women during Carnival, including the *Me'el*-«Mother,» the *Me' Ka'benal* -«Lacandón Maya Mother,» and the «Guatemalan Mother,»-representing a Central American prostitute who caters to soldiers. Among their many duties the Mothers conduct well attended sex education sessions as one of the rituals during «Crazy February,» the five lost days of the Mayan calendar. These performances take place on straw mats in the houses of the religious officials and the young are encouraged to pay attention. The naughty Elder Brother *Ik'al* addresses the children in a playful tone, reciting bawdy couplets about coupling:

*This is how we do it.  
Each taking his turn.*

*Check out these positions  
husbands and wives can learn.*

Later that night other transvestites, the *Antzil Ak'ot*, «Dancing Women,» sing on the church steps: «*I am half woman, I am half girl.*»

In Carnival in Chamula, the *Senyora de Nana María Kokorina* is played by a man who personifies-*La Malinche*-Cortés's Amerindian mistress and interpreter. There are also men who dress as the «Perfumed Woman,» the *J-xinulán*, during the fiesta of San Sebastián in Zinacantán, impersonating and ridiculing «loose» foreign women who comb their hair in public and stink of toilet water.

*I am a perfumed woman.*

*I am a perfumed girl.*

*I am a bought woman.*

*I am a paid girl.*

*I am a puta woman.*

*I am a puta girl.*

*The Sun is dancing.*

*The Moon is dancing.*

-Tonik Nibak

THE FATHERMOTHERS taught the Tzotzil incantations for every occasion. There are magic words to win the love of a man, and others to kill him if he is unfaithful. Verses to lull the baby and to cure the *loco*:

*We will shake him thirteen times  
so he stops counting  
his heartbeats.*

*So the devils will stop teasing him.  
So the Pukuj will leave off frying him.*

-Xunka'  
Utz'utz' Ni'

The women sing to borrow a gourd from the neighbor or to order a water jug from the potter:

*Find me the Earth,  
find me the clay,*

*to make my pot,  
to make my jar.*

-María Tzu

Or to ask for help in preparing the fiesta:

*Tire yourself to death  
preparing my sweet beer.*

*Lend me your tiger  
to carry my sugarcane.*

*Because there's not enough drink,  
there's not enough strong chicha.*

-María Álvares  
Jiménes, Me Avrila

The seers burn copal and say spells so drunks will stop drinking and the Catholics will leave off fighting over teetotalism with the heavily-armed Protestants:

*Let them have a drink,  
let it go down smooth.*

*Let them lose their heads,  
so they don't remember their AK-47s.*

Xunka' Utz'utz' Ni

Tzotzil women compose verses and more verses for the endless *Drunken Women's Song*. They sing to the Sacred Virgin and to the Godmother of Drunk Women.

*I am the drunken woman.  
I am the drunken girl.*

*You gave me my drunkenness,  
Godmother of the Drunks.*

*I feel very sweet.  
I feel very sour.*

*This booze has a taste like melon.  
Like watermelon.*

*The vapor from the kettle,  
the sweat of the coiling snake,  
the rum that rinses out the barrel.*

-Maruch Méndes Péres

Maruch Méndes Péres sings to the coil of her clandestine still and also to the penis with its head like a firemen's helmet or little hat, *sombrerito*:

*Sombrerito today.  
Sombrerito tomorrow.*

*I want sombrerito, Kajval ooo.  
Give me sombrerito, Sagrado Pagre.*

*La la ti la la bi.  
La la ti la la bi.*

*I drank, Kajval.  
I am drunk, Sagrado Pagre.*

*Bolom Chon in the sky,  
Bolom Chon on the Earth.*

*Bolom Chon*, title of the most popular Tzotzil song, means jaguar, according to Xun Okotz. Xpetra Ernánides says the *Bolom Chon* are all the different varieties of *wayhel*: tigers, chickens, possums; the animal kingdom in general. For Robert M. Laughlin, the *Bolom Chon* is a velvet ant. For musician Xun Calixta, *Bolom Chon*-which literally means «Tiger Snake»-should be translated as Dancing Tiger. María Gutiérrez says she has no idea how to translate *Bolom Chon*; Munda Tostón finds a sexual connotation for this lame serpent that grows long and shrinks up:

*Stand up, Papa.  
Stand up, Mama.*

*Climb on, Papa.  
Climb on, Mama.*

María Tzu concludes *Bolom Chon* doesn't mean anything at all; it's just the name of a drinking song the Fathermothers made up when the world was created so people could have fun at the fiesta, stomping their feet on the surface of the Earth.

DRINKING WITH FRIENDS is considered one of the greatest of life's pleasures. Men and women consume barrels of sweet cane *chicha* in the fiesta and eighteen-liter jugs of *pox*, moonshine rum distilled in the Chiapas hills. Most non-protestants consume an alcoholic drink or two every day as part of some ritual. To ask a favor or to borrow money, a drink of *pox* is offered. If you accept the shot, it means you are willing to help out your friend. A lone drinker is just about as rare as an abstainer.

During a curing ceremony liquor is served to each person present in a tiny gourd cup or a *kurus bis*-one of those small glasses that *veladora* candles come in, the kind with a cross on the front. If you don't want to drink too much, you say politely, «*Just up to the cross, please.*» One person pours

the *pox* and passes the glass; each person drinks in turn, swallowing the firewater in one gulp. «*The gourd is empty,*» you say while handing the glass back to the drink server. In a fiesta, women exchange toasts and couplets, ceremoniously thanking everyone present for each drink:

*I'll take it, Mother of Boiled Corn,  
I will drink it all down.*

*I'll take it, Father in Charge of  
Fireworks.  
To the bottom of the gourd!*

-Mikaela Moshán Culej

Rum lubricates the gears of society, but alcoholism becomes a plague. When a drinker dies, his friends are obliged to consume all the *pox* the dead man left in his house; otherwise the deceased would suffer a never-ending hangover. The mourners bring several of their own bottles along, burials have been known to turn into serial wakes.

On the last day of the Fiesta of Santa Katarina of Pantelhó, the plaza resembles a battleground. Men and women sprawl unconscious wherever they downed their last toast, their lips moving in silent songs.

THOUGH THE TZOTZILS RECITE POETRY every day, the language of their poems is not colloquial. The vocabulary of the *Incantations* is very old. To understand Tzotzil ritual poetry we were obliged to consult bilingual dictionaries made by colonial friars, contemporaries of Shakespeare and Cervantes. As Loxa Jiménez explains, «*We don't understand it all now, but it forms a part of our flesh and we dream it every night.*»

Neoliberalism has left its mark on the world and on language; today Tzotzil women pray so their *Pexi Kola* will

sell, and so they won't have to look for work as illegal  
imigrants in the USA.

*Take into account, Kajval,  
how much you are going to give me.*

*I don't want to go to Los Angeles.  
I don't want work in Florida.*

*-Xunka' Utz'utz' Ni'*

There are more than a million Mayans now living in the  
States, many of whom still remember how the Fathermothers of  
Yucatán spoke when they dictated the incantations of the  
*Ritual de los Bacabes* to friars in the 17th century:

*Through writing we know  
the origins of the word.*

*The glyphs will give us the answer.  
How will it be said?*

*Glyphs of the skies.  
Glyphs of the clouds.*

*Orange Sun,  
Orange Moon.*

Scholars who decipher Mayan glyphs say they were written  
originally in *Ch'ol*, a language spoken today by neighbors of  
the Tzotzil. Linguist Kathryn Josserand finds a likeness  
between the ritual language of the present-day *Ch'ol* and the  
couplets the Fathermothers carved on the stones of Palenque.

The glyphs speak to our eyes when we see a little hand or a  
jaguar carved on the stones. Some glyphs have voices; their  
sounds go into the ear and tell us the words.

*The corresponding glyphs,  
the ones that went together,  
separated,  
from this came*

*incantations of the saliva.*

-Ritual  
de los Bacabes

The poetic word of ritual is discreet, it covers its face with metaphors; this is the secret language of Zuyua as defined by ancient Mayan seers in the *Books of Chilam Balam*:

*«My son, bring me three rays from the  
sun;  
I wish to eat them.»*

*«Let it be,  
Oh father!»*

*What he is asking for is Sacab,  
a corn drink with no lime.*

*The language of Zuyua  
is for praying for what one wants.*

The Tzotzil seers of today keep alive the ancient Mayan poetic tradition of metaphors dear to the gods. Corn is still referred to as «the Sun's rays,» and beans are called «Your shadow» because the Lord Sun, the Sacred Mirror, provides the light which makes the milpa grow. The face of the Sun is «filled with flowers,» his eyes are said to «bloom.» Ceremonial liquor is called «your flower, your tree leaves.» «Your sprouts, your buds» means sheep. The child is «my gift, my pain.» A woman is known as the «Likeness of the Goddess» and «She Who Rivals the Moon.» Men and women are said to have been created to keep the gods happy with songs of praise.

*To the Grandmother of the Day:  
To the Conjurer of Dawn:*

*To the Diviner:  
To the Soothsayer:*

*We need to find,*

*we need to discover*

*how we are going to create,  
how we are going to make*

*beings who will nourish  
and sustain us,*

*invoke  
and venerate us,*

*when there is light  
when there is day.*

*Our recompense will be the song.  
Our recompense will be the word.*

-Popol  
Vuh

Poet Ernesto Cardenal writes that

*Adam in paradise spoke in verse, according to an ancient Islamic tradition. Poetry is the first language of humanity...In ancient Greece even the laws were written in verse; many so-called primitive people know only verse. Poetry seems to be the most natural form of language. All over the world the First Fathermothers of humanity produced great works of literature in verse, among which are the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Navajo Night Chant*. According to Jerome Rothenberg, the first peoples of the American continents*

*created a poetry as diverse as the peoples themselves. As classic for its times & places as Homer was for Europe or the Book of Songs for China. Rooted in oral tradition & the potentialities of human voice & presence.*

Before there was writing, poems were chanted over and over, generation after generation, so they would not be forgotten. Each singer adds something from her own harvest. The song is polished in the flowing of the years and tongues.

The Tzotzil incantations are characterized by an endless chain of couplets that spirals towards *Kajval*. The complete text of any of these songs would fill several volumes; we could not include every word.

The seers never tire of singing. They endure fiestas that last three days and nights. They climb the path of the holy mountain to toast each cave, at every spring. They follow the wanderings of the *wayel* with their song. They herd the souls, address the Moon, sweep the sky with their voices so the Sun can drive across the heavens. The words gather the clouds together and awaken the rain. The voices fill the cooking pots, and charm the harp.

My goal as translator was to recreate-in another language-poetry as beautiful and fresh as the original. Both the Spanish and the English versions of the texts were translated directly from the Tzotzil. Some concepts-*Kajval*, *Pukuj*, *Kaxail*, *wayhel*, *Potzlom*-and plant names-*tukum*, *xjuj*, *konkon*-for which I could find no equivalent, were left untranslated. The Mayan metaphors were respected; the syntax, metric, and titles are my own. These are not line by line translations, but renderings of magic. Echos from the eye of the universe call to the bird of our heart. From the womb of song the seers come to life.