The Wooden People

The K'iche' Maya · the highlands of Guatemala

Where It Comes From

The *Popol Vuh*, "the book of the council" or "of the people", is the great sacred book of the K'iche' Maya of Guatemala. It was written down in the K'iche' language, in Latin letters, by K'iche' nobles in the 1550s, a generation after the Spanish conquest, drawing on far older tradition. That first copy is lost. A Dominican priest, Francisco Ximénez, copied it with a Spanish translation around 1701, and his copy is now in the Newberry Library in Chicago. We follow Allen Christenson's English translation.

What Happens

The makers, the Framer and the Shaper, try several times to make beings who will speak to them, remember them and honour them. Their first attempts fail.

Then they carve people out of wood. The wooden people walk and talk and have children, but they have no hearts and no minds. They do not remember who made them.

So Heart of Sky sends a flood upon them. The text speaks of a great flood of resin falling from the sky, and of a black rain falling day and night. Fierce creatures come to tear at them.

Even their own things turn on them. Their dogs and turkeys, their grinding stones and cooking pots rise up and complain of how badly they were treated. The wooden people run, and the trees and caves refuse to shelter them.

They are destroyed, and the book says the monkeys of the forest are what is left of them.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. The wooden people did not remember or honour those who made them.

Who was saved, and how. No one. This is the end of a failed creation, not a rescue.

The boat or the refuge. None. Even the caves close against them.

What came after. Much later, after the adventures of the hero twins, the makers at last make true people, out of maize, who give thanks.

In the *Popol Vuh* the flood is one step in a long search for beings who can know and love their makers. Christenson notes that the passage about the flood is confused in the manuscript, so details differ between translations.

THINK IT THROUGH

The wooden people's own dogs and pots turned against them because of how they had been treated. What does that suggest about how we treat the ordinary things and creatures around us?

Sources

Allen J. Christenson, trans., *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (2003; Mesoweb edition, 2007), the making of the wooden people.

The Newberry Library, "Popol Vuh" research guide, on the manuscript.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.