



Religion and Literature: The Popol Wuj, Past and Present

RELI 235-003

Religious Studies, George Mason University

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 office hours: Te&Th 3:00pm-4:30pm
 (or by appointment when available)

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Course Description

Referred to by some as “the Bible of the ancient Maya,” the Popol Wuj (or “Book of the Council”) is the oldest and most complete collection of religious epics and creation stories written by any Native American group in either North or South America. Compiled and edited into a single volume by Maya elites in the 1550s, this set of Maya myths and pre-Hispanic history has become an increasingly influential text since its rediscovery in the 1850s. Archeologists use it as a lens to interpret scenes depicted on ancient murals and pottery. Ethnohistorians (historians interested in native accounts of the Americas prior to and immediately during the arrival of Europeans) comb it for indigenous understandings of society, time, and the cosmos. Latin American authors—namely in modernism and magical realism—were inspired by its alinear and fantastical narratives. Post-colonial theorists cite it as evidence of native resistance to Spanish and Catholic hegemony since the 16th century. And present-day Maya and other Native American activists—many within the Catholic and Protestant churches—make it a core of a current religious and social movement to critique the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s first voyage back in 1992.

This course will center on a close reading of the Popol Wuj in light of the wider literary (particularly poetic) and religious traditions of the Highland Maya of Guatemala, especially until and during the initial period of contact with Hispano-Catholicism. From this understanding and a comparison with other Maya and Aztec myths, two additional novels will explore the continued influence of the Popol Wuj in later fiction: *Men of Maize* by Miguel Ángel Asturias (the second Nobel laureate in literature from Latin America) and *Time Commences in Xibalbá* by Luis de Lión (the first Maya author to write a novel).

Learning Objectives and Goals

Students who complete this course will:

- become familiar with one of the most important indigenous texts of the Americas;
- become familiar with indigenous (Maya) genres and poetics;
- learn how to conduct comparative, critical, and close reading of primary texts;
- appreciate and critically assess the nuanced tensions within and problems behind any translated material...
 - even in unfamiliar languages (such as K'iche' Maya), and
 - especially complex literature like religious “scripture”;
- learn how to evaluate and assess different qualities of secondary source materials; and
- further develop professional research and writing skills.

Methods of Instruction

The core of this course will consist of close readings of foundational primary texts. You will be expected to have read thoroughly and reflected on all texts assigned every week prior to coming to class. Each class will consist of lectures germane to the topic of the texts but may not necessarily always be on the texts themselves. Lectures will be accompanied by discussing and exploring together the claims made in the assigned texts, what resources they draw upon, what specific assumptions they make, et cetera. Though class will also involve close as well as comparative readings of the assigned texts; therefore you are required to bring the relevant assigned book(s) in hardcopy (no e-book versions allowed) to every class.

Note: By now the amount and diversity of literature (primary and secondary) on pre-contact indigenous religions is extensive and highly variable in quality. The readings selected for this course are among the more significant and academic for the purposes of this course. You are welcome to seek out used copies (found through on-line sites like www.bookfinder.com or www.powells.com), but please do so with enough time to complete the readings and assignments before class – late work will not be accepted due to book delivery delays.

For required readings found on Blackboard (Bboard) as PDFs: *you must print, read, mark up, and bring to class hard copies* – consulting electronic versions of these texts on your **computer, smart phone, or equivalent device during class is not allowed.** In this respect, *please have all computers and phones turned off* (and not merely on “vibrate” as this is still distracting from your learning and to those around you) and put away prior to the start of class (exceptions—including the need to audio record class lecture-discussions—will be made only with prior approval by the instructor; students requesting additional learning provisions should also consult GMU’s Office of Disability Services. If you have a documented learning disability or other condition that may affect academic performance you should: 1) make sure this documentation is on file with Office of Disability Services (SUB I, Rm. 4205; 993-2474; <http://ods.gmu.edu/students/>) to determine the accommodations you need; and 2) talk with me to discuss your accommodation needs.

Also please note that I (the instructor) reserve the right to change the syllabus during the term if and/or when need arises (e.g., to meet the learning outcomes of the course). You are responsible for checking for such changes (checking Bboard often) and updating your copy of the syllabus.

Semester Outline of Topics (to be divided appropriately between class times every week)

Week 1 – Introducing the Maya and Maya Literature

Aug. 29 & 31

general introduction to course

- **read** and discuss (found on Bboard):
the course syllabus (PDF) – *you shouldn't sign a legal deed or a loan agreement without first reading through the contract; don't take a course without first reading the whole syllabus.*

Martin, Laura. "Mayan Language History," *Revue* 27 no. 4 (June 2015). (PDF)

Tedlock, Dennis. "Introduction," "Early Mayan Writing," "The Alphabet Arrives in the Highlands," *2000 Years of Mayan Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 1-10, 25-30, 297-304. (PDF)

Christenson, Allen J. "Introduction," *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003), 26-42. (PDF)

Week 2 – Maya Poetics and High-Registers of Discourse

Sept. 5 & 7

- **read** and discuss (found on Bboard):
Christenson, Allen J. "Introduction," *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003), 42-52. (PDF)

Sam Colop, Luis Enrique. "Poetics in the *Popol Wuj*," *Parallel Worlds* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2012), 283-309. (e-Reserve)

Christenson, Allen J. "The Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K'iche' Maya," *Parallel Worlds* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2012), 311-336. (e-Reserve)
- suggested reading:
Hull, Kerry. "Poetic Tenacity: A Diachronic Study of Kennings in Mayan Languages," *Parallel Worlds* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2012), 73-122. (e-Reserve)

Week 3 – Popol Wuj

Sept. 12 & 14

- **read** and discuss:
Tedlock, Dennis, trans. *Popol Vuh*, Revised and Expanded (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 63-74 and 214-238.
OR
Christenson, Allen J., trans. *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003), 59-93.

Week 4 – Popol Wuj, continued

Sept. 19 & 21

- **read** and discuss:
Tedlock, Dennis, trans. *Popol Vuh*, Revised and Expanded (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 77-88 and 238-249.
OR
Christenson, Allen J., trans. *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003), 94-111.
- suggested reading:
Tedlock, Dennis, trans. “Preface” and “Introduction,” *Popol Vuh*, Revised and Expanded (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 15-60.

Week 5 – Popol Wuj, continued

Sept. 26 & 28

Due on Sept. 26 Short Assignment 1: Maya Poetics in the Popol Wuj

- **read** and discuss:
Tedlock, Dennis, trans. *Popol Vuh*, Revised and Expanded (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 91-142 and 249-288.
OR
Christenson, Allen J., trans. *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003), 112-191.

Week 6 – Popol Wuj, continued

Oct. 3 & 5

- **read** and discuss:
Tedlock, Dennis, trans. *Popol Vuh*, Revised and Expanded (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 145-175 and 288-315.
OR
Christenson, Allen J., trans. *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003), 192-255.
- suggested reading:
Sachse, Frauke. “Over Distant Waters: Places of Origin and Creation in Colonial K’iche’an Sources,” *Pre-Columbian Landscapes of Creation and Origin*, John Edward Staller, ed. (New York: Spring Science+Business Media, LLC, 2008), 123-160 (PDF).

Week 7 – Popol Wuj, continued

Oct. 12

Due on Oct. 12 (Thurs.) Short Assignment 2: Outline of the Popol Wuj.

Note: No class on Tues., Oct. 10 for the Day of Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples.

- **read** and discuss:
Tedlock, Dennis, trans. *Popol Vuh*, Revised and Expanded (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 179-198 and 315-335.
OR
Christenson, Allen J., trans. *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003), 256-305.

Week 8 – *Men of Maize*

Oct. 17 & 19

- **read** and discuss:
Asturias, Miguel Ángel. *Men of Maize*, Critical Edition (University of Pittsburg Press, 1993), 7-69 (and respective endnotes).

Week 9 – *Men of Maize*, continued

Oct. 24 & 26

Due on Oct. 24 (Mon.) *Short Research Paper 1* – on the Popol Wuj.

- **read** and discuss:
Asturias, Miguel Ángel. *Men of Maize*, Critical Edition (University of Pittsburg Press, 1993), 70-98 (and respective endnotes).

Week 10 – *Men of Maize*, continued

Oct. 31 & Nov. 2

- **read** and discuss:
Asturias, Miguel Ángel. *Men of Maize*, Critical Edition (University of Pittsburg Press, 1993), 99-154 (and respective endnotes).

Week 11 – *Men of Maize*, continued

Nov. 7 & 9

- **read** and discuss:
Asturias, Miguel Ángel. *Men of Maize*, Critical Edition (University of Pittsburg Press, 1993), 153-195 (and respective endnotes).

Week 12 – *Men of Maize*, continued

Nov. 14 & 16

- **read** and discuss:
Asturias, Miguel Ángel. *Men of Maize*, Critical Edition (University of Pittsburg Press, 1993), 195-251 (and respective endnotes).
- suggested reading:
Harss, Luis and Barbara Dohmann. “Miguel Ángel Asturias, of the Land Where the Flowers Bloom,” 413-433.

Week 13 – *Men of Maize*, continued

Nov. 21

- *Note: No class on Thurs., Nov. 23 for Thanksgiving.*
- **read** and discuss:
Asturias, Miguel Ángel. *Men of Maize*, Critical Edition (University of Pittsburg Press, 1993), 251-306 (and respective endnotes).
- suggested reading:
Vargas Llosa, Mario. “A New Reading of Men of Maize,” 445-458.

Week 14 – *Time Commences in Xibalbá*

Nov. 28 & 30

- *Due on Nov. 28 (Mon.) Short Research Paper 2 – on Men of Maize.*
- **read** and discuss:
Lión, Luis de. *Time Commences in Xibalbá* (University of Arizona Press, 2012), 1-47.

Week 15 – *Time Commences in Xibalbá*, continued

Dec. 5 & 7

- **read** and discuss:
Lión, Luis de. *Time Commences in Xibalbá* (University of Arizona Press, 2012), 48-84.
- suggested reading:
Arias, Arturo. “Afterward: Radicalized Subalternity as Emancipatory Decolonial Project,” *Time Commences in Xibalbá* (Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 84-115.

Week 16 – Reading Days (no class, but extended office hours for meetings prior to final exam)

Week 17 – Paper 3 (and optional extra credit essay) due by...

Tuesday, Dec. 19, 4:15pm

Methods of Evaluation (a.k.a. Grading)

- *Two (2) short assignments* on the Popol Wuj will consist of **10%** (5% each) of the course grade.
 1. The first assignment will focus on the use of Maya poetics, parallelism, and chiasmic structures within the Popol Wuj, especially your ability to correctly identify various different kinds of parallelism in indigenous American religious discourse, and will be due on Monday, Sept. 26.
 2. The second short assignment will focus on the content in and overall structure (or lack thereof) of the text of the Popol Wuj, and will be due on Monday, Oct. 12.

While these two short assignments are not officially due until Weeks 5 and 7, they are designed to aid your deeper reading of the Popol Wuj and should be begun by Week 2 and completed gradually as you continue to read and reread the stories. These are short assignments but will become “big” ones if you wait until the weekend before they are due to begin them.

- *Three (3) short research assignments* of 6-7 pages each will each contribute **30%** to the course grade (and thus 90%). One research paper will be due at the end of each major piece of literature read for the course; so one research paper each on the Popol Wuj, the *Men of Maize*, and *Time Commences in Xibalbá*. Each paper is to be no more than 6-7 pages but also include a complete bibliography and correct citation of all work used. And while you *may* include and use readings from this course, each research paper must also use at least two additional scholarly publications from academic (e.g., peer-reviewed) journals and/or books – **NO Internet sources are permitted**. Finally, each paper should be well-written pieces of professional, academic writing (i.e., an argument) as specified in this syllabus (pages 6-7) and as discussed in class.
- *One extra credit assignment* will be due toward the end of the course for up to **five (0-5) extra points** added to your course final grade. The extra credit assignment will consist of an optional additional paper (*ca.* 5 pages) in which you will analyze and interpret the now-classic independent film “El Norte” through the lens of the Popol Wuj. However, unlike the three assigned papers, no outside research is required for the extra credit paper; though it is highly recommended that you watch the extra features included on the Criterion Collection edition of this film. <https://www.criterion.com/films/972-el-norte>
- Note that there is no mid-term or final exam for this course and, due to the nature of the reading, your first assignments are not due until relatively late in the semester. It is your responsibility to keep up with the readings (have them completed prior to class), attend and actively participate (e.g., take notes during, engage in discussions, etc.) all class sessions, and attend to any changes made in the schedule of the course work syllabus.
- Also note that as a college-level course it is assumed that students are both literate and numerate (can and will have thoroughly read the course syllabus and are able to track and calculate her or his course grade based on the returned work submitted). Graded work is returned to you with constructive comments, which you should read to know how to improve your work for the future; but grades are not posted to Bboard. You are responsible for constantly tracking your learning (and the graded evaluation of it) in this course based on the formula breakdown (percentages) stated in this syllabus. To discuss your grade (or any particular aspect of the course material) please take advantage of office hours.

Policy on Expectations

All visual materials (such as charts, graphs, or pictures) used in lectures will be posted onto Bboard along with additional images and resource links. These are to be used for any missed classes as well as further exploration into the issues addressed as the course unfolds. However, lecture notes will not be posted; please secure notes for any missed classes from your cohort.

All written assignments prepared for this class (e.g., the two short assignments on the Popol Wuj, the three short research papers, and the optional extra credit analysis of a movie) should be:

- typed (no handwritten work will be accepted),
- in a 12 point (vs. 11 point or 10 point) and standard serif font (i.e. Garamond, Palantino, or Times New Roman vs. a sans serif font like **Arial**, **Helvetica**, or **Gill Sans** or a non-standard serif font like Papyrus or **Cracked**),
- double spaced (Note: if the default setting on a computer automatically inserts an additional half-spaced leading after a paragraph you will need to change on your document),
- 1" margins all around,
- left aligned (not full justification),
- with your full name and page number in either the header or footer on every page.

These should be well-crafted and revised written pieces,

- free of typos and grammatical errors;
- use only inclusive language unless you are writing about something that is a gender-specific topic (i.e. Catholic priesthood);
- contractions (i.e. “can’t,” “aren’t,” “won’t,” etc.) are inappropriate for professional and academic writing (unless part of a direct quote from another source);
- use of the first person singular pronoun (e.g., “I”)—but also for the most part first person plural (“we”) and second person (“you”)—should be generally avoided with rare exceptions.

To achieve these standards please use the writing center, peer-reviewers, as well as discuss with me a drafts of your assignments during office hours (I’m more than happy to do so). **Major points (e.g., one letter grade) may be deducted from unprofessionally written assignments.**

To help understand what is meant by crafting a piece of argument-oriented writing and correctly documenting the literary evidence required in professional (including academic) genres, students should purchase and use the following *highly* recommended sources:

1. Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, Eighth Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) (older editions will also work);
2. Graff, Gerald and Cathy Birkenstein and Russel Durst. *“They Say / I Say”: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company) (any edition);

as well as:

- Booth, Wayne C. *The Craft of Research*;
- Gould, Jon B. *How to Succeed in College (While Really Trying): A Professor’s Inside Advice*;
- Lipson, Charles. *Doing Honest Work in College: How to Prepare Citations, Avoid Plagiarism, and Achieve Real Academic Success*; and
- Lipson, Charles. *Succeeding as an International Student in the United States and Canada*.

Whether or not you read these specific books and are familiar with what they cover, as a college student you are expected to *know, understand, and agree* with these standards and expectations.

Academic Integrity

“I was thrown out of NYU my freshman year for cheating on the metaphysics final... I looked within the soul of the boy sitting next to me.” – Woody Allen¹

“Academic honesty boils down to three simple but powerful principles:

- When you say you did the work yourself, you actually did it.
- When you rely on someone else’s work, you cite it. When you use their words, you quote them openly and accurately, and you cite them, too.
- When you present research materials, you present them fairly and truthfully. That’s true whether the research involves data, documents, or the writings of other scholars.”²

Violation of the academic honor code (i.e. plagiarism or cheating on any course assignment) will not be tolerated in any degree and will be referred to the Office on Academic Integrity.

The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. GMU has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental and rather simple principles to follow at all times are that: (1) all work submitted be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification. No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. Plagiarism means using the exact words, opinions, or factual information from another person without giving the person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes. Paraphrased material must also be cited. All written work is to be your original thoughts on the assigned texts with references and occasional cites from that text. The format and style rules of all of your assignments should be typed and conform to the *MLA Handbook* or *Chicago Manual of Style* (including *Turabian*). A simple listing of books or articles is not sufficient. Plagiarism is the equivalent of intellectual robbery and cannot be tolerated in the academic setting.

While it is often quipped that “it is better to apologize afterwards than ask for permission before,” this does not hold in academia; please feel free to ask for clarification regarding any of the expectations for this course **before** due dates. For more information, see the [University Catalogue regarding the Honor Code](#). If you have questions about how to properly cite published work in your writing please consult the Writing Center or me during office hours.

Privacy Policy

Students must use their MasonLive email account (aka @gmu.edu) to receive important University information, including messages related to this class. Unless your e-mail to your instructor is from your MasonLive email account your instructor will not be able to reply.

Please see <http://masonlive.gmu.edu> for more information.

¹ Charles Lipson, *Doing Honest Work in College: How to Prepare Citations, Avoid Plagiarism, and Achieve Real Academic Success* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 8.

² Ibid., 3.

Instructional Materials

Required Primary Sources

Asturias, Miguel Ángel. *Men of Maize: The Modernist Epic of the Guatemalan Indians*, Critical Edition (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1993).

Lión, Luis de. *Time Commences in Xibalbá* (Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 2012).

Taube, Karl. *Aztec and Maya Myths* (Austin: University of Texas, 1993).

and either:

Tedlock, Dennis, trans. *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of The Mayan Book of The Dawn of Life and The Glories of Gods and Kings*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

or:

Christenson, Allen J. *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003) or (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

Secondary Sources

Hull, Kerry M. and Michael D. Carrasco, eds. *Parallel Worlds: Genre, Discourse, and Poetics in Contemporary, Colonial, and Classic Maya Literature* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012), selected chapters (e.g., Christenson, Hull, and Sam Colop) (e-reserve).

Martin, Laura. "Mayan Language History," *Revue* 27 no. 4 (June 2015) (PDF).

Miller, Mary Ellen and Karl Taube. *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

Sachse, Frauke. "Over Distant Waters: Places of Origin and Creation in Colonial K'iche'an Sources," *Pre-Columbian Landscapes of Creation and Origin*, John Edward Staller, ed. (New York: Spring Science+Business Media, LLC, 2008), 123-160 (PDF).

Tedlock, Dennis. *2000 Years of Mayan Literature* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), selected chapters (PDF).

Media

Amlin, Patricia, "Popol Vuh: Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya" (Berkeley: Berkeley Media, 1989).

"El Norte" (Criterion Collection, 1983).

Christenson, Allen J., *Popol Vuh CD-ROM: Sacred Book of the Ancient Maya Electronic Database* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

Regarding Diversity

The academic study of religion includes the analytical (dissecting in various ways) and critical (bringing various criteria to bear) reflection on a diversity of religions and cultures including, in particular, their diverse order of values – including one’s own. The question, therefore, is not whether or not you (dis)believe, (dis)like, of (dis)agree any particular religion or even some aspect of it (let alone “religion” all together) but rather whether you understand “religion.” This requires thick description along with respectful engagement with a diversity of peoples, thought, and values.

To this end...

George Mason University promotes a living and learning environment for outstanding growth and productivity among its students, faculty and staff. Through its curriculum, programs, policies, procedures, services and resources, Mason strives to maintain a quality environment for work, study and personal growth.

An emphasis upon diversity and inclusion throughout the campus community is essential to achieve these goals. Diversity is broadly defined to include such characteristics as, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation. Diversity also entails different viewpoints, philosophies, and perspectives. Attention to these aspects of diversity will help promote a culture of inclusion and belonging, and an environment where diverse opinions, backgrounds and practices have the opportunity to be voiced, heard and respected.

The reflection of Mason’s commitment to diversity and inclusion goes beyond policies and procedures to focus on behavior at the individual, group and organizational level. The implementation of this commitment to diversity and inclusion is found in all settings, including individual work units and groups, student organizations and groups, and classroom settings; it is also found with the delivery of services and activities, including, but not limited to, curriculum, teaching, events, advising, research, service, and community outreach.

Acknowledging that the attainment of diversity and inclusion are dynamic and continuous processes, and that the larger societal setting has an evolving socio-cultural understanding of diversity and inclusion, Mason seeks to continuously improve its environment. To this end, the University promotes continuous monitoring and self-assessment regarding diversity. The aim is to incorporate diversity and inclusion within the philosophies and actions of the individual, group and organization, and to make improvements as needed.

Classmate Contacts:

Name

E-mail

Phone
