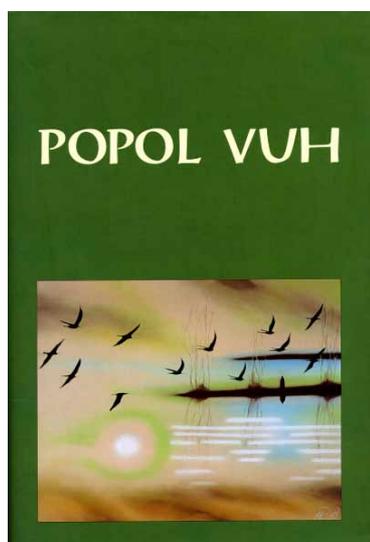


BOOK REVIEWS

Ruth Lias (translator)

POPOL VUH. KITŠEE MAIADE RAAMAT (*Popol Vuh. The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya*). Tartu 1999. 240 pp. In Estonian.

This treatise is to celebrate the publishing of *Popul Vuh* in Estonian. Despite the modest number of the speakers of the Estonian language, we boast a significant amount of translations of the epics of different, mostly European, cultures. First came the Finnish *Kalevala*, familiar to us in many ways, and remained the only one for a long time. Around the same time attempts were made to translate the epic poems of classical antiquity. Major achievements in the field, however, came only in the Soviet period. The Communist ideology, on the one hand, favoured the epic genre: it was considered patriotic and exemplary with heroic actions, thus making it a powerful propagandistic tool as opposed to the formalistic literature of the “degrading” Capitalist regime. On the other hand, the generation who had either received their education during the First Republic of Estonia, or had been born, raised and, at least partly, schooled before the occupation, had reached their creative period by the times proven very tragic for the Estonian people: the incorporation into the Soviet Union at the break of the WW II and the following wars, periods of occupation and repression. Their accomplishments were impressive, since the future translators of epics had to endure repression on various grounds. A remarkable example is Rein Sepp, who after his return from a concentration camp did a grand work under very unfavourable circumstances, translating the *Niebelungenlied*, the *Poetic Edda* and *Beowulf* into the Estonian lan-



guage. Epics of the geographically most distant people and countries that have been translated into Estonian are from the Caucasus and the Middle East.

Just before the end of the 20th century, the horizon was expanded once more in the newly established Republic of Estonia. *Popol Vuh*, one of the fundamental texts of Native America has been translated into Estonian.

We have only to regret that the text has not been translated directly from the Quiché language, though who knows how many generations we might have had to wait for that to happen. We missed an opportunity a few decades ago, when Uku Masing (1909–1985), a theologian, orientalist, folklorist and poet of remarkable talent and versatility, found inspiration in the Mayan languages and even compiled the grammar. He had read *Popol Vuh* and rated it highly through different associations. Had he had supporters back then, we can only guess... But there were none. During the last few decades of his life, under much restraint and distress, Uku Masing turned his attention towards folklore studies. Among other things he was a contributor to *Enzyklopedie des Märchens*, the encyclopaedia of fairy tales that is published even today.

The current translation from Spanish was therefore inevitable; fortunately, we have what seems to be an excellent translation. Ruth Lias, an experienced translator of Spanish fiction, has taken this copious task very seriously. She has read material on the subject and has used several other academic publications, mostly in Spanish, to supplement the A. Recinos' translation. Wherever authoritative authors have disagreed on the meaning of some Quiché words, R. Lias has referred to questionable meanings in footnotes. In addition to extensive comments the publication contains a name index and a rather thorough preface, indispensable for the Estonian reader. The Estonian version of *Popol Vuh* by no means represents a purely academic type of publications, where the scope of comments exceeds by far the scope of the text itself, but it is nevertheless very educational and quite reliable. Those who wish to go deeper into the subject continue through references.

Since I have read no other translation of *Popol Vuh*, all kinds of interesting thoughts came to my head. In brief, some of these can

be associated with this amazingly versatile and rich text itself, some with its reception. In the mid-19th century, when the Quiché epic was introduced in major European languages, the arrogance of white imperialist nations must have been at its peak. Estonians, the natives of Europe, were in these times still doing *corvée*; the power of German landlords on these lands was virtually unlimited. But during the very same period slight changes began to take place: the economical and legal status of the Estonians began to improve and cultural progress reached the point where the authentic archaic heritage was dropped to make way to a new European native culture. In 1857, the year the first edition of *Popol Vuh* was published, which, by the way, was soon available in the Tartu University Library, the first parts of *Kalevipoeg*, the national epic of the Estonians, were released. The author of *Kalevipoeg* was Fr.R.Kreutzwald, who made use of the legends of heroes and giants, and folk songs. The epic served its purpose raising the national awareness of the Estonian people: for us *Kalevipoeg* was something comparable to the epics of classical antiquity and the *Nibelungenlied*.

Circumstances for the adequate reception of *Popol Vuh* became favourable only in the late 20th century. The great wars of white men, progress in the field of anthropology, and the change of millennium, a time of retrospection and pondering.

For the Estonians the period was particularly advantageous. First, we learned more and more of our ancient native culture, especially after the restoration of independence, and second, the general attitude was gradually shifting from that of an overly eager apprentice: we no longer had the need to regard the Quiché epic from the perspective of the *Nibelungenlied*. We can compare the heritage of the two native people from different continents with no interfering associations, which should provide us rather intriguing material.

Of the four parts of *Popol Vuh*, the first two are the most interesting. Several motifs introduced in Part 1 and 2, e.g. virgin conception, the sacred twin gods, cyclic chronology, are very widely spread, almost universal. The term “culture universal” is certainly a convenient answer if one has no wish to elaborate on other reasons of concurrent motifs. There could well be random concurrence next to uniform human nature, and there definitely is genetic consan-

guinity, where you can hardly believe it. An identical motif on the Baltic Coast and in Central America? The distance itself should rule out the possibility of common origin. Then again, if analogues can be found in, say, Siberia, the idea of genetic similarity appears quite acceptable, though in this case a certain concept or a motif has to be traced back to tens of thousands of years.

Far more can be learned from the motifs that have analogues in a narrower region, mainly from Northern Eurasia, than from the more or less universal ones. From a cultural historical perspective the most intriguing tales are the subjugation of the sons of Vucub-Caquix in Part 1, and subsequent narratives about, first, the twins' father's and his twin brother's fight with the lords of Xibalba, and then the twins' own fight with the same lords. The killing of Four Hundred Boys could be associated with the execution of 40 enemies/plunderers (though the figure appears to be of secondary importance, since it varies in other versions) in the Veps, Karelian, Finnish and Russian folklore. Is it perhaps an ancient boreal motif that has travelled over the Bering Strait with the first settlers of America? Or, if we think of Samson, whose analogous act ended with his own destruction – could it still be a universal? A motif, where the antagonist orders some of his/her followers to execute the protagonist, is well known in the fairy tales of the Old World. The executor, overcome with sympathy, chooses to disregard the order and presents the cruel master false evidence (*Popol Vuh*, Chapter 3 of Part 2).

Several of the trials of Xibalba (Part 2) are familiar to us from fairy tale types, widely spread in the Old World (e.g. an unusually cold and another, an extremely hot house, a building filled with beasts, etc.), but some are less known, and are therefore more intriguing. First there is the sc. Hot Hollow, a hollow filled with flames and burning ashes, where the twin gods meet their end. Similar method of execution can be found in numerous tales and epic songs from Southeast Estonia and Karelia to Siberia. In the archaic tales and songs of Southeast Estonia the Hot Hollow may prove fatal even for the protagonist (the sister in tale type AT 452C*, also in the legend song *The Death of Jesus*, concepts of a great hollow and fire are combined to describe the execution sites of Jesus). In Karelian runo songs the Hot Hollow hinders Lemminkäinen on his way to Pohjola. In the Baltic and Siberian tales, however, it is more often the an-

tagonist, a mythological creature, who is executed in the Hot Hollow. But can we extend the trail from the Baltic region through Siberia to America; i.e. can we believe the common origin of this concept? Perhaps we can, especially considering that analogous motifs stretching from Estonia to America have been pointed out before (U. Masing, A. Annist, J. Kaplinski).

And then there are analogues that, as expected, enable to associate *Popol Vuh* with the folklore of various native cultures of NE Asia and North America. The characters of twin brothers Hunahpu and Xbalannque, for example, who are the *trickster*-type culture heroes highly characteristic of North American culture area. They triumph over their opponents with knavery, often with mischievous deceit, miraculous legerdemain and trickery. The tale about the subjugation of atheistic Vucub-Caquix, where the brothers used the help of false curers-manikins, unintentionally reminds of the Estonian tales of the Stupid Ogre (AT/Tales of the Stupid Ogre/). O. Loorits, who sometimes tended to idealise the ancient Fenno-Ugrians, has attempted to justify this often extremely cruel nature of the tales of this group with the unfavourable impact of the German culture. *Popol Vuh* serves as a sufficient argument against such ideological explanations, since the text was written relatively soon after the Spanish conquest, and the Europeans could in no way affect the Quiché worldview by that time.

The first two parts relate the events of the “pre-human era”, according to the Quiché chronology, and describe the interaction of animals and gods/deities. We come across aetiologies about how the mouse got its naked tail, the becoming of the Moon and the Sun, etc. With the beginning of Part 3, describing the creation of “permanent humans” (all previous attempts of creation failed and ended in the destruction of humans), the general aspect is gradually becoming more humane. Myths are replaced with historical accounts, though still mythological by nature. Finally, the genealogy of rulers and also the fall of the Quiché State, brought along by the Spaniards, are accounted. The succeeding parts are also intriguing and thought-provoking, but these thoughts are altogether different from those grounded on folkloric studies. These thoughts are inspired from the fact that we are at the break of the new millennium. What will happen to the Quiché, or the Estonians, in the

ongoing 21st century, in this millennium? Whether and how will their languages and cultures survive? What is in the future for written and oral epic?

Regardless of the answers to the above questions, we can only applaud to the Quiché, who once wrote down the heritage of his subdued people in the language of his conquerors, and the Spaniard, who had good sense to rewrite and translate it. And, ultimately, we can celebrate the fact that it has now been published in the Estonian language. *Popol Vuh* is a brilliant reading material for those who just love stories. One does not necessarily have to search for parallels in the mythology and folklore of other people, or trouble oneself with etymologies, etc. just to enjoy, say, Chapter 5 of Part 2, recounting the newly acquired monkeyishness of the artisans, or the incident of animal messengers in Chapter 7. Considering the latter episode, in particular, you cannot help wondering why nobody has turned it into an animated film. Or perhaps someone has?

The uprising of the animals and tools in Chapter 3, Part 1, serves as a cautionary tale. Though presented as a past event, it is obvious that all that was considered condemnable with the wooden people could be attributed to us, the people modelled from the corn dough, according to *Popol Vuh*. Another call for caution is written in the conceited statements of atheist Vucub-Caquix, who boasted “I am the Sun” or “I am the creator of the Earth” (Chapter 4 and 5). Everyone who has lived under totalitarian regime knows is well aware where the arrogance behind such statements can lead.

Kristi Salve