

**THE POPOL VUH, THE MYTHIC  
AND HEROIC SAGAS  
OF THE KICHÉS OF CENTRAL  
AMERICA, PP. 213-271**

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Lewis Spence

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the Kichés of Central America

By

Lewis Spence

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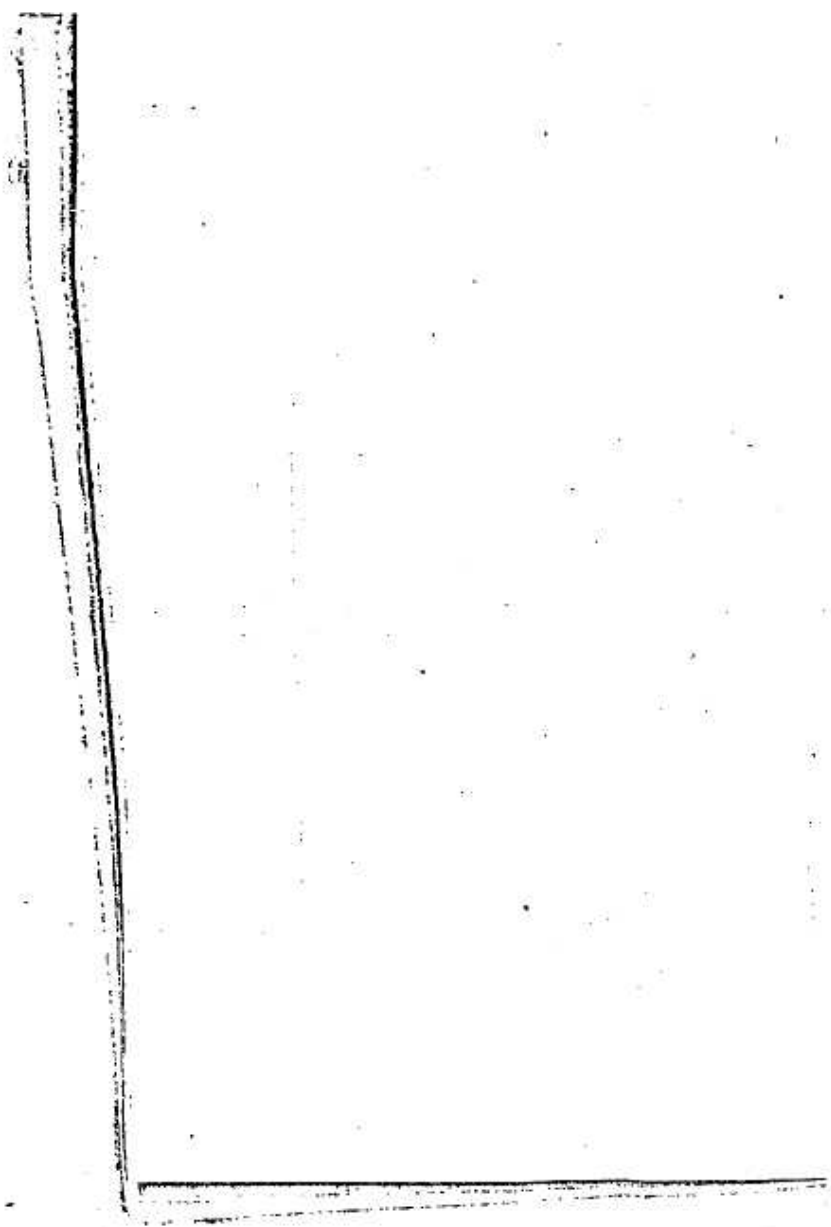
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## PREFACE

THE "Popol Vuh" is the New World's richest mythological mine. No translation of it has as yet appeared in English, and no adequate translation in any European language. It has been neglected to a certain extent because of the unthinking strictures passed upon its authenticity. That other manuscripts exist in Guatemala than the one discovered by Ximenes and transcribed by Scherzer and Brasseur de Bourbourg is probable. So thought Brinton, and the present writer shares his belief. And ere it is too late it would be well that these—the only records of the faith of the builders of the mystic ruined and deserted cities of Central America—should be recovered. This is not a matter that should be left to the enterprise of individuals, but one which should engage the consideration of interested governments; for what is myth to-day is often history to-morrow.

LEWIS SPENCE.

*July 1908.*





## THE POPOL VUH

[The numbers in the text refer to notes at the end  
of the study]

THERE is no document of greater importance to the study of the pre-Columbian mythology of America than the "Popol Vuh." It is the chief source of our knowledge of the mythology of the Kiché people of Central America, and it is further of considerable comparative value when studied in conjunction with the mythology of the Nahuatlacá, or Mexican peoples. This interesting text, the recovery of which forms one of the most romantic episodes in the history of American bibliography, was written by a Christianised native of Guatemala some time in the seventeenth century, and was copied in the Kiché language, in which it was originally written, by a monk of the Order of Predicadores, one Francisco Ximenes, who also added a Spanish translation and scholia.

The Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, a profound student of American archeology and languages (whose euhemeristic interpretations of the Mexican

myths are as worthless as the priceless materials he unearthed (and valuable) deplored, in a letter to the Duc de Valmy,\* the supposed loss of the "Popol Vuh," which he was aware had been made use of early in the nineteenth century by a certain Don Felix Cabrera. Dr. C. Scherzer, an Austrian scholar, thus made aware of its value, paid a visit to the Republic of Guatemala in 1854 or 1855, and was successful in tracing the missing manuscript in the library of the University of San Carlos in the city of Guatemala. It was afterwards ascertained that its scholiast, Ximenes, had deposited it in the library of his convent at Chichicastenango, whence it passed to the San Carlos library in 1890.

Scherzer at once made a copy of the Spanish translation of the manuscript, which he published at Vienna in 1856 under the title of "Las Historias del origen de los Indios de Guatemala, por el R. P. F. Francisco Ximenes." The Abbé Brasseur also took a copy of the original, which he published at Paris in 1861, with the title "Vuh Popol: Le Livre Sacré de Quiché, et les Mythes de l'Antiquité Américaine." In this work the Kiché original and the Abbé's French translation are set forth side by side. Unfortunately both the Spanish and the French translations leave much to be desired so far as their accuracy is concerned,

\* Mexico, Oct. 15, 1860.

and they are rendered of little use by reason of the misleading notes which accompany them.

The name "Popol Vuh" signifies "Record of the Community," and its literal translation is "Book of the Mat," from the Kiché words "pop" or "popol," a mat or rug of woven rushes or bark on which the entire family sat, and "vuh" or "uuh," paper or book, from "uoch" to write. The "Popol Vuh" is an example of a world-wide genre—a type of annals of which the first portion is pure mythology, which gradually shades off into pure history, evolving from the hero-myths of saga to the recital of the deeds of authentic personages. It may, in fact, be classed with the *Heimskringla* of Snorre, the Danish *History of Saxo-Grammaticus*, the Chinese *History in the Five Books*, the Japanese "Nihongi," and, so far as its fourth book is concerned, it somewhat resembles the *Pictish Chronicle*.

The language in which the "Popol Vuh" was written, was, as has been said, the Kiché, a dialect of the great Maya-Kiché tongue spoken at the time of the Conquest from the borders of Mexico on the north to those of the present State of Nicaragua on the south; but whereas the Mayan was spoken in Yucatan proper, and the State of Chiapas, the Kiché was the tongue of the peoples of that part of Central America now occupied by the States of Guatemala, Honduras and San