

First Weeding

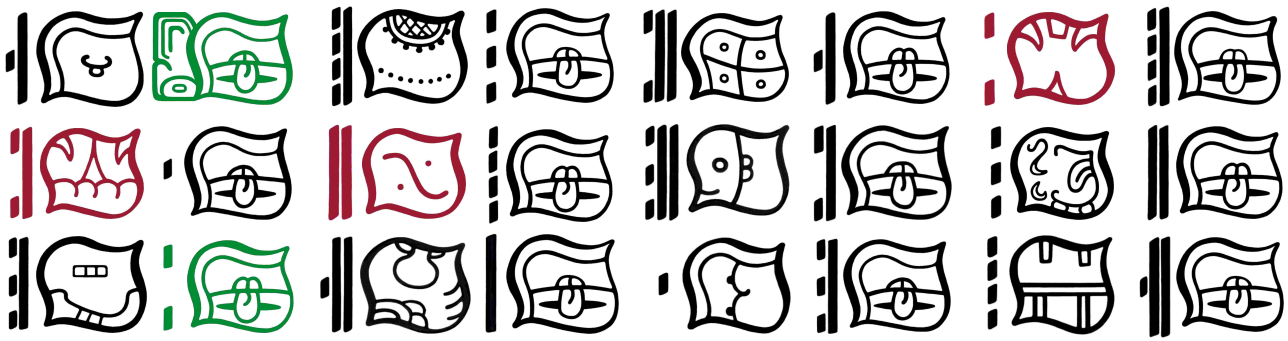
This is what happened when I was nine years old: because of the story of the babies and the understanding it gave me about camazotz' and balam, I noticed the storyteller and

the path he walked. His name was K'aakik', or Fire Wind, that was the name he took when he became the storyteller. He was a quiet man in his years of strength who was not much seen in the village, he stayed in his field or the storyteller's hut almost all the time.

On days when there was to be a story, K'aakik' would hang a mask on the pole in the center of the village plaza, and if people wanted to hear they could come to the telling. Most stories are told at the end of the day, when the work is finished, as Father Sun leaves this world. First the storyteller makes a fire and drops many balls of copal incense into it, and then he goes away. People come and sit around the fire pit—for holy day stories everyone in the village comes, but usually it is just those who want to hear a story. Because there are huts all around the village plaza, the voice of the storyteller can be easily heard even in the back, even when everyone is there. Many people bring food to the telling, and gourds full of drinks, and they throw the husks and the rinds into the flames, but when the story is told they are quiet. There are only a few stories where people can make noise or shout at the things that are said.

When the people are all there, when Father Sun is disappearing into the western mountains, the storyteller brings all the masks for that telling and sets them in a little circle around the fire pole. These are masks of gods and goddesses, spirits and animals and ancestors. Then he puts on the first mask, and the everyone becomes quiet. And this is the way of the storytelling: K'aakik' speaks and dances around the fire, and sometimes he removes a mask and puts on another one, and when he does this he looks only at the ground and never at the people. It is only when he is wearing a mask that he looks up. His face is always painted white in the story circle, the white takes away his true face so that he becomes only the person of the mask. Sometimes he drops balls of copal incense into the fire, sometimes he drops





sticks of cedar or balls of pine pitch or a strip of white cloth, because the name of a god or goddess is spoken, and there must be a sacrifice.

Before my brother went to the mountains I just laughed at the words of foolish story-animals and enjoyed the storyteller dancing around the fire, but after the story of the babies I began to hear the words and to think about what was said. I came to understand that all the parts of the story tellings went together: the words and the masks and the size of the fire and the kinds of incense that were thrown in and the days chosen for the tellings. And the words of the stories were not just words such as people speak but were different, they were very careful and wise, and though I thought about this, the reasons for these things were not clear.

It was my mother I spoke to about storytellings, because she listened to my boy's questions.

"This is what does not make sense, mother: when people in the village tell stories, their words change each time, but when the storyteller tells his stories, the words are always the same, even if the tellings are far apart. Why does the storyteller always tell the same stories?"

My mother was weaving a new k'ub for herself, it was a bright skirt she was making, so I could not go too close to her while she worked. I was sitting behind her and speaking to her back. For a time she only moved her hands, and then she said,

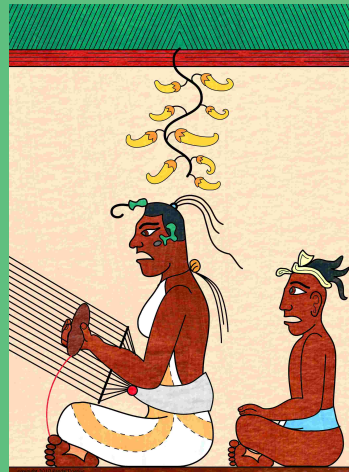
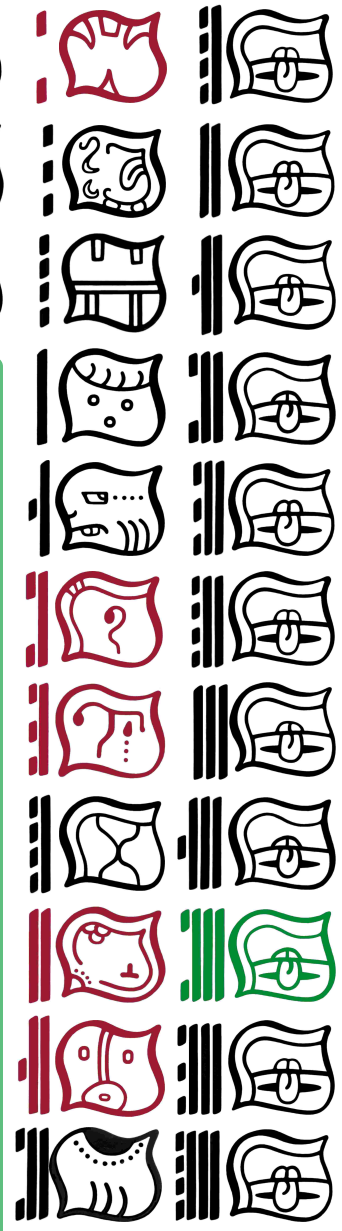
"What are all the storyteller's stories about? When did the people in those stories live?"

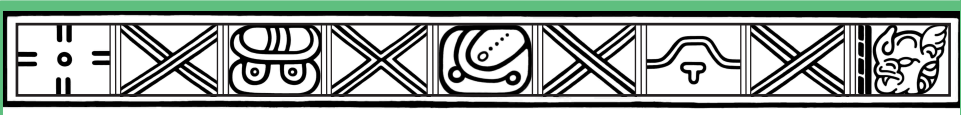
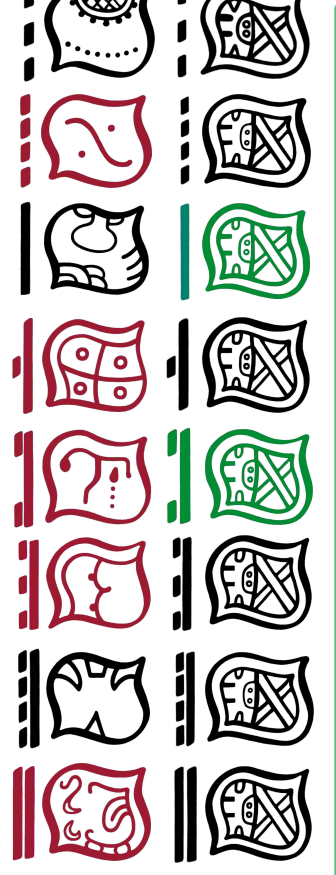
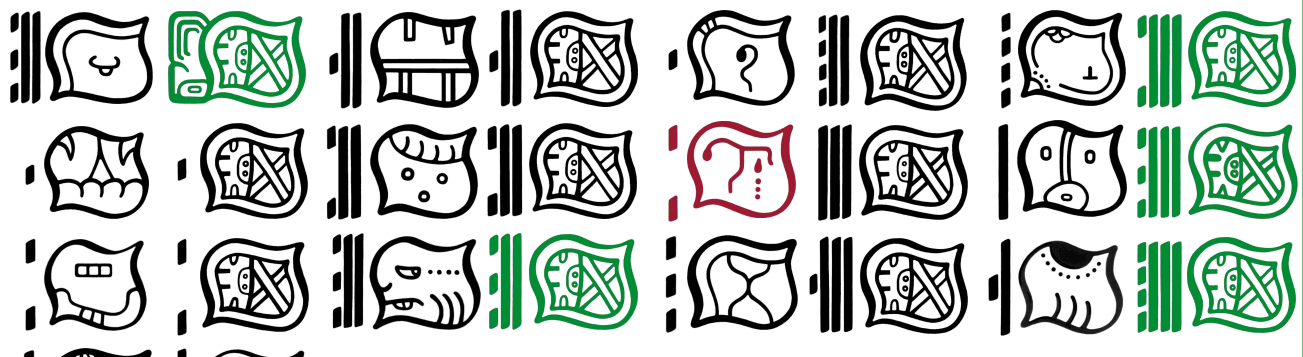
"If I knew these things, I would not be asking you," I said, but these were only irritated words that she pretended not to hear. After I thought about her question I said, "The storyteller's stories are always about the old times. The stories other people tell are about people from today, or just yesterday."

"And why do you think everyone must hear the holy day stories, even the caçique?"

This was a startling question for me, and all I could say was, "I don't know," and walk away. So it was that I began to wonder about these things.

On 12 Yax 9 lx the woman Chelna Yaxtun died in childbirth. This is when it happened: in the morning, not long after Father Sun rose. I woke



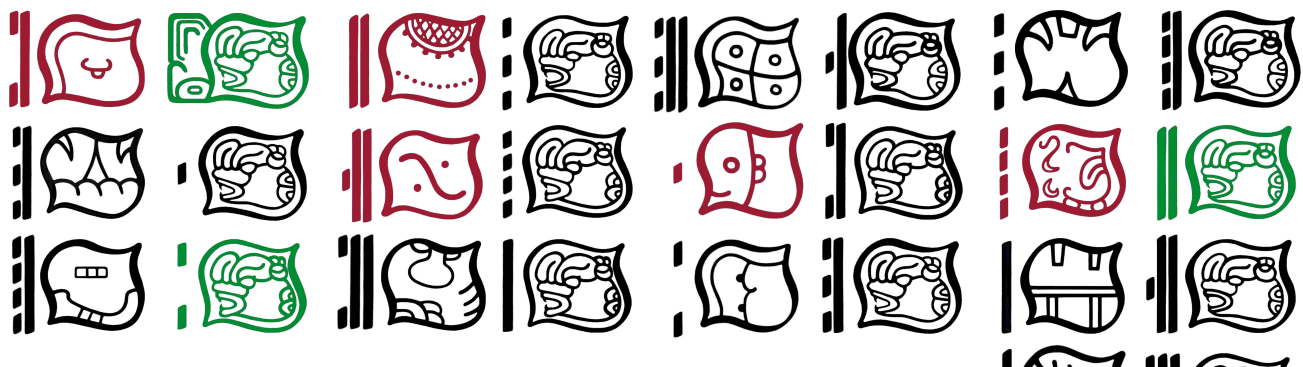


sickly and went to throw up the poisoned juices of the night at the edge of the jungle, and in the quiet of early morning, after all the farmers and fishermen had left our village, I heard a whimpering sound. The hut of Chelna's husband was not so far from my own lineage-compound, and I went carefully to the wall that faced the path and found a small hole in the mud plastering. Inside the hut, the priest and the wise-woman herbalist and Chelna were together in a small room. Chelna was on her back on a sleeping bench in the middle of that little room, and the priest had his hand on her mouth and his back toward me. She was looking upward, and her eyes were huge and weeping and filled with pain. Never had I seen a person's eyes in such a way, even Atlatla when he was beaten until his mouth and nose burst. I could not see what was happening below her belly, because my seeing-hole was too small, and at first I did not understand that she was giving birth. I only saw that she was shaking, her body was soaked in sweat. Then I saw that blood was coming between the fingers of the priest, she was biting his hand so that blood was flowing. She was whimpering, and her fingers were clutching the sleeping bench so that they were white, and then she arched her back into the air. Though what I was seeing was fearful I could not leave that place; the pain in her eyes held me there.

The priest and the wise-woman were quietly talking, and the priest rubbed one hand on Chelna's belly. I could not see the wise-woman, I only heard her, and I understood from the way things were said that Chelna was having a baby and that something was very wrong. I began to pray then, I whispered for Father Sun and Mother Moon to ease this woman's hurting and keep ah-Puch away, and I was afraid for her because even when I was that small I was beginning to comprehend ah-Puch's strength in this world. Chelna's suffering went on for a long time, Father Sun climbed well into the sky while she twisted and wept. All this time the priest was praying, and the wise-woman was praying, and I whispered my own prayers. Then Chelna's eyes bulged greatly, and much blood came from between the fingers of the priest, and the wise-woman herbalist said, "No."

From the mat house came the sound of laughter. The men of power were meeting, all were there except the priest, their burst of laughter was the sound I heard when Chelna died.



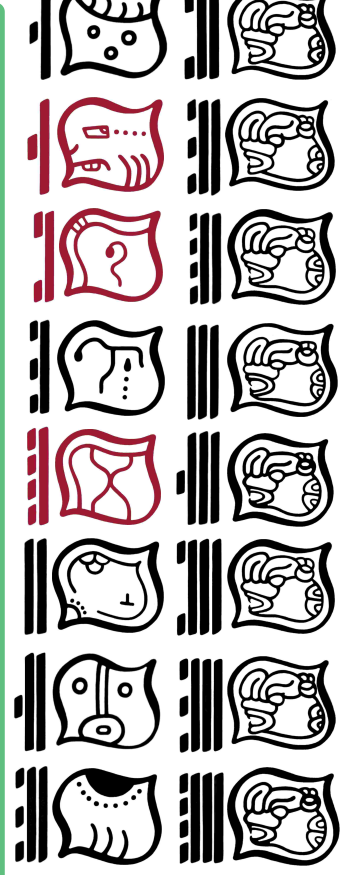


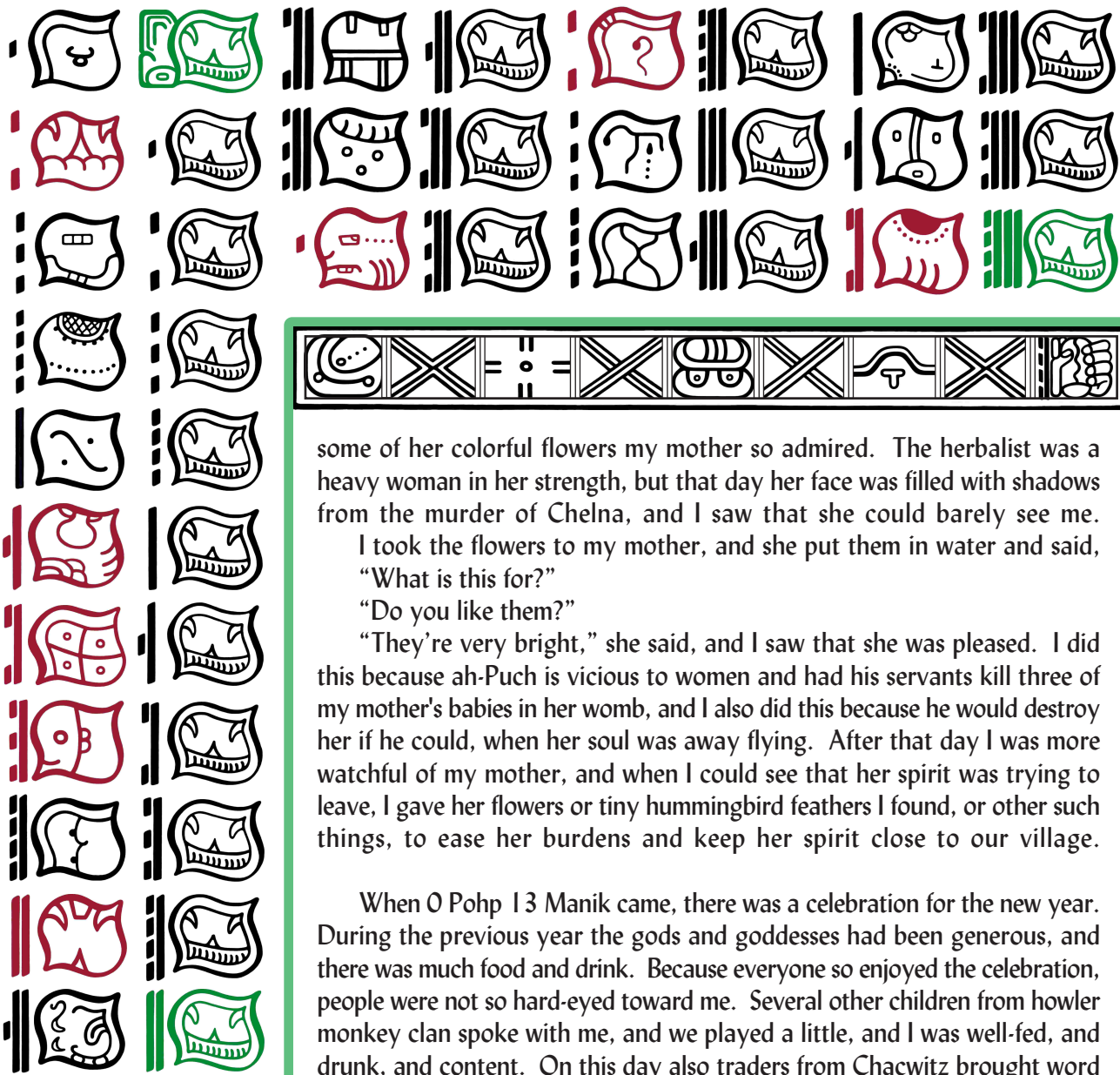
I let go of the wall where I had been seizing it. My hands had dug into the dried mud, and my fingertips were bloody. I felt cold even in the hot morning light, and I stumbled away and walked until I grew warm again. All that day my fingers ached from the death of Chelna, all that day I was sickly. This murder was close to the center of the village, ah-Puch seized that woman and killed her right in the hands of the priest and the wise-woman. Father Sun did nothing, there was not even an easing for her pain, and this is what I thought: it is said that Father Sun is stronger than his brother ah-Puch, but this was clearly not so. There are more shadows in this world than light. I thought of the blood running down the fingers of the priest, and I remembered the blood of balam, in the jungle, and I heard the laughter of the killer bat camazotz, whose realm is death by terror. I understood then that it was this lord of the night who put the hole in the wall of that hut, so that I would see his strength. And when I realized this I did not want to eat, I did not want to drink, I only walked around the village praying for myself and my people.

The next day was 13 Yax 10 Men, and on that day the body of Chelna was burned. There was no village ceremony, only her lineage attended her, but everyone saw the black smoke and heard of her murder. Her infant boy had been born dead, and he was burned with his mother in the fierce light of the strongest part of the day. And this was the word of the priest, after his divination, that the spirit of Chelna was taken to the garden of the gods, beyond the reach of ah-Puch and his servants. Her lineage-shaman was careful in the keeping of the holy days, and so her ancestors protected her spirit after ah-Puch murdered her body.

All that day I was queasy, my stomach vibrated this way and that from this demonstration of ah-Puch's strength, but I did not tell my mother or father. After each meal I went to the edge of the jungle and let the food back up, for animals to eat. It was Chelna's eyes that did this, it was her pain that made my head ache. The names of the women were in my head, all the women I had heard of who had died in childbirth, there were so many, and I feared for my mother whose spirit sometimes flew to the mountains.

So this is what I did: I went to the hut of the wise-woman herbalist, and with three bright, clear pebbles I had found by the river I bought from her





some of her colorful flowers my mother so admired. The herbalist was a heavy woman in her strength, but that day her face was filled with shadows from the murder of Chelna, and I saw that she could barely see me.

I took the flowers to my mother, and she put them in water and said, "What is this for?"

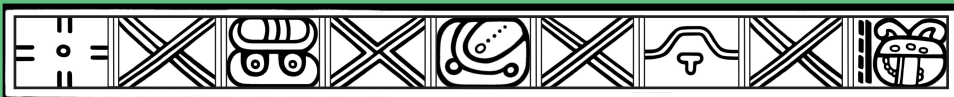
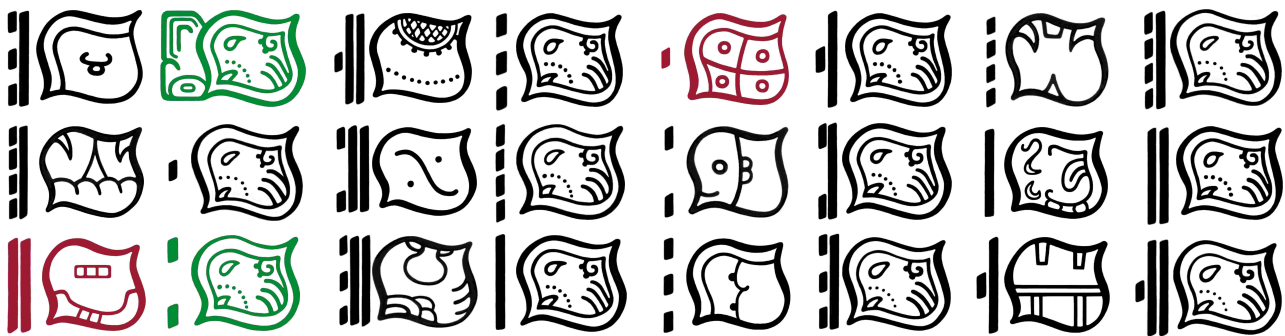
"Do you like them?"

"They're very bright," she said, and I saw that she was pleased. I did this because ah-Puch is vicious to women and had his servants kill three of my mother's babies in her womb, and I also did this because he would destroy her if he could, when her soul was away flying. After that day I was more watchful of my mother, and when I could see that her spirit was trying to leave, I gave her flowers or tiny hummingbird feathers I found, or other such things, to ease her burdens and keep her spirit close to our village.

When O Pohp 13 Manik came, there was a celebration for the new year. During the previous year the gods and goddesses had been generous, and there was much food and drink. Because everyone so enjoyed the celebration, people were not so hard-eyed toward me. Several other children from howler monkey clan spoke with me, and we played a little, and I was well-fed, and drunk, and content. On this day also traders from Chacwitz brought word of my brother, who was well, and this made the celebration even better.

On the next day, I Pohp 1 Lamat, one of my cousins was married. That was the middle daughter of my father's oldest brother, the last of his daughters, his hut was empty after she left. The wedding was a rich one, because it was during the new year's holidays, and many people from our clan came to the center of the village to see it. My cousin's husband was of the lineage K'an K'in, which like our own is a small but old lineage. Her husband paid no bride service price, this was because my cousin had a baby boy not so long after the marriage. It was only some gifts that my uncle received for his daughter, but if he was unhappy at this, his irritation was not shown. This cousin said ugly things to small boys sometimes just for pleasure, and I was not sorrowful to see her leave our lineage.





Because of the questions my mother asked me about the storyteller's stories, I began watching the tellings closely and listening carefully to the words. And this is what I learned: that the stories told for the holy days are about the different ages of people, from babies to old people, and how we grow and become wiser through our lives. Those are the only stories everyone has to hear, even creation stories are not so important. The storyteller always told his stories in the same words because they are not told for amusement but are about important things that should be learned and thought about. And these realizations made me feel more intelligent, until K'aakik' told the story of Mother Moon and the first maize. In that story Father Sun and ah-Puch fight over Mother Moon, and she is torn to pieces, and ah-Puch nearly destroys Father Sun and his creation. At last I understood ah-Puch's true place, it is only the strength of Father Sun and Mother Moon together that keep him from destroying everything. And now a question came into my head, because I was thinking, because fighting for understanding creates new questions.

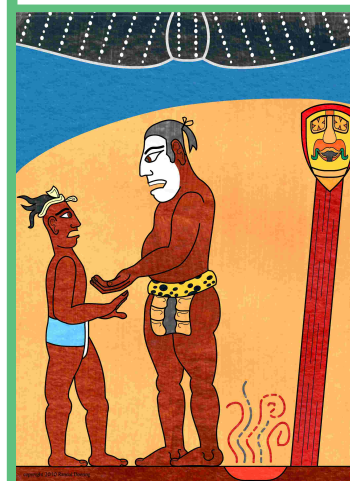
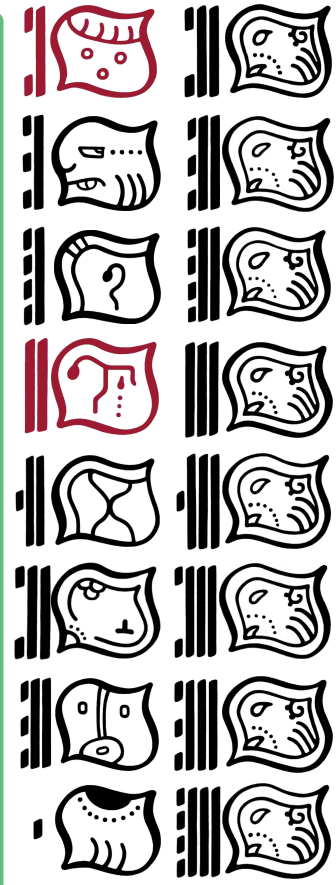
It was then that I made a voice for myself in the village. Children do not speak at the storytellings, except to their parents, and they never speak to the storyteller. But when I heard that story I could not stop myself, when the telling was over I stood up next to my mother and said to him, "Where do these stories come from?"

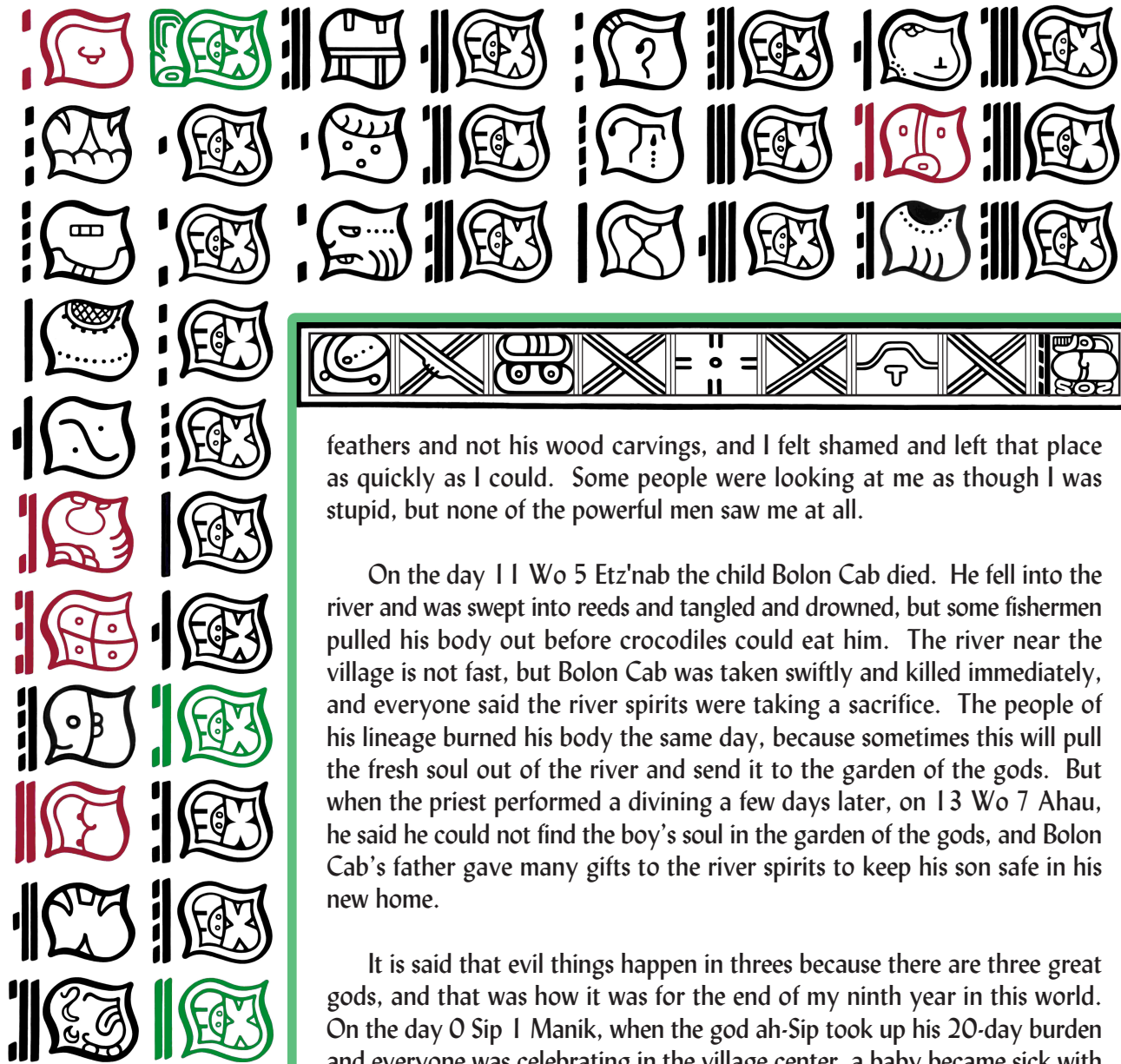
K'aakik' was collecting his masks, and I thought he had not heard me. Many people were leaving, and there was much noise, but I held my place and made my mother stop and wait.

Then the storyteller looked at me with his white-painted face and said, "Some stories come to us from the gods and the goddesses, through dreams they send to the priests and the men of power. The others come from our ancestors, who passed them down to teach us their wisdom." He put his masks on top of each other and was about to leave, and I said,

"So they are made things, like my mother's feather works?" I had not thought of stories as created things before, it was strange to think of words in such a way.

K'aakik' did not answer me; he only turned away with a disgusted look. I realized then that I had humiliated my father by talking about my mother's





feathers and not his wood carvings, and I felt shamed and left that place as quickly as I could. Some people were looking at me as though I was stupid, but none of the powerful men saw me at all.

On the day 11 Wo 5 Etz'nab the child Bolon Cab died. He fell into the river and was swept into reeds and tangled and drowned, but some fishermen pulled his body out before crocodiles could eat him. The river near the village is not fast, but Bolon Cab was taken swiftly and killed immediately, and everyone said the river spirits were taking a sacrifice. The people of his lineage burned his body the same day, because sometimes this will pull the fresh soul out of the river and send it to the garden of the gods. But when the priest performed a divining a few days later, on 13 Wo 7 Ahau, he said he could not find the boy's soul in the garden of the gods, and Bolon Cab's father gave many gifts to the river spirits to keep his son safe in his new home.

It is said that evil things happen in threes because there are three great gods, and that was how it was for the end of my ninth year in this world. On the day 0 Sip 1 Manik, when the god ah-Sip took up his 20-day burden and everyone was celebrating in the village center, a baby became sick with burning pustules. That infant was said to be laughing in the morning but by dark was suffering with bleeding sores. The word of this went from family to family, never had I heard such fearful whispers moving so quickly.

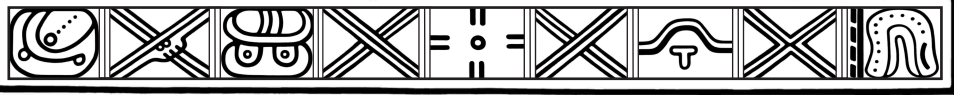
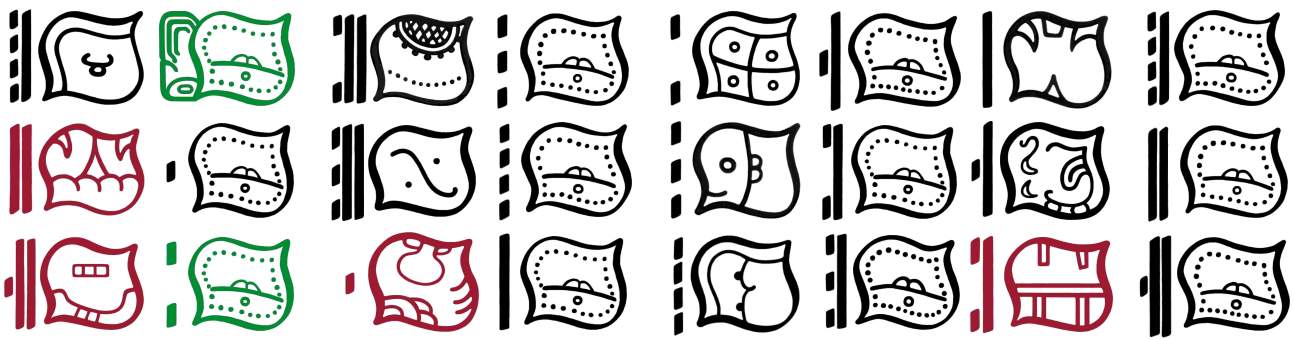
"This happens every generation," my father said to my mother, who asked about this kind of sickness. She had not seen it in the mountains.

"Do many people die?" she asked.

"Sometimes it kills many children," said my father, and he saw me then, he looked to see that my brother's charm-pouch still hung at my neck. "We will perform a kex," he said.

And here is how it was for that month, for all of ah-Sip's time: day and night the smoke of copal incense and sacrificed blood rose into the sky. Droplets of amber were burned, mountain cedar was burned, infants were given herbs to chew and suck. Everyone was praying, the old people and the men and women in their strength and even children were begging ah-

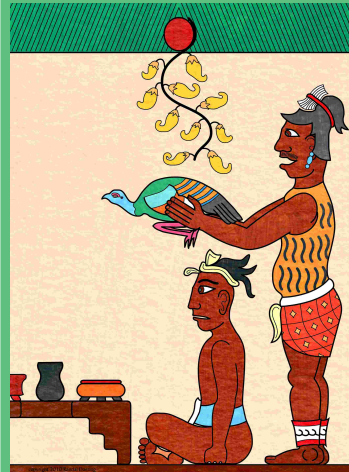
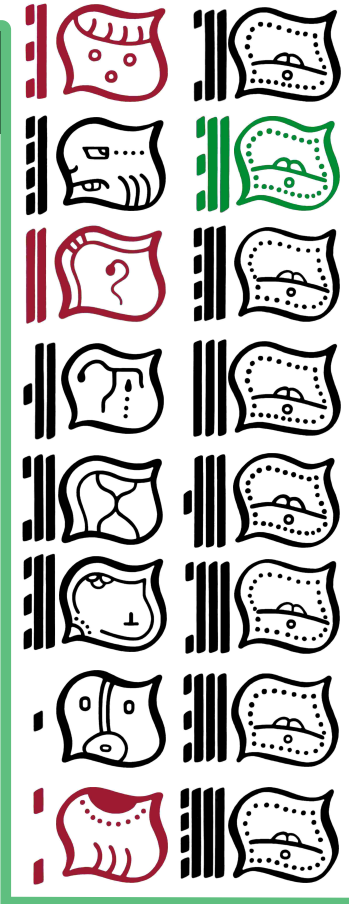


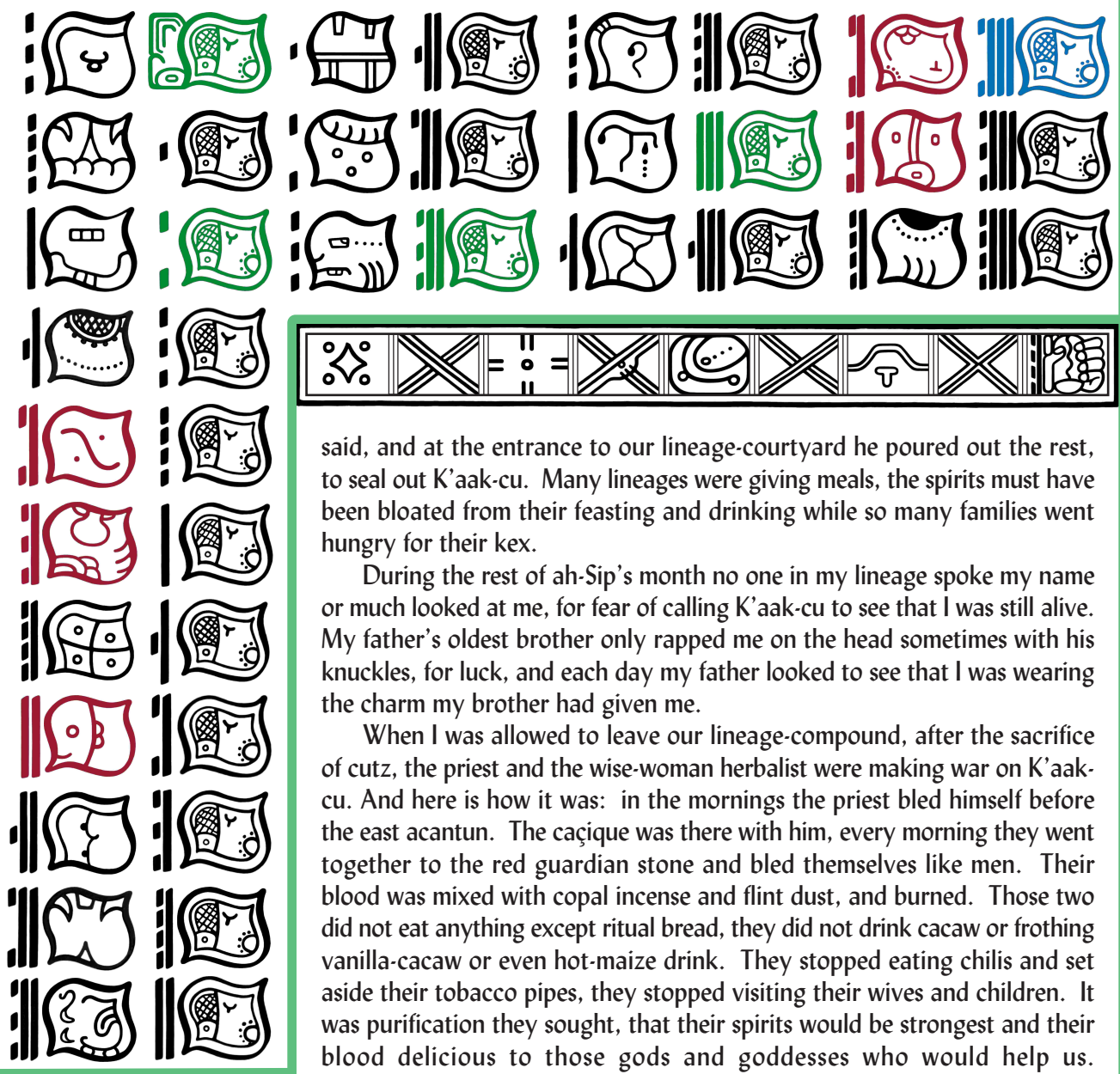


K'awil and ah-Itzamna and Father Sun and Mother Moon and ah-Sip for a little pity for the babies of our village.

More infants became sick, boys and girls both broke out in red pustules that itched and oozed pus and blood. In a few days the wailing of two twenties children filled the village, and the faces of their parents were fearful and desperate. Cutz the ocellated turkey was sacrificed in many lineage-courtyards, turkeys were offered as substitutes for the little ones that the demon-spirit K'aak-cu wished to feast on. My own father took a turkey to his oldest brother, as my substitute, and that was how the *kex* began. For three days all the adults in our lineage called me *cutz* and the turkey, *ah-Maxam*. They said this without smiling, there was no laughter, the faces of my father and mother and my aunts and uncles were drawn and hard. I was kept in my father's hut and did not go out for those days, my mother took my filth out in a pot. She bought herbs from the wise-woman herbalist and made me suck on them, though they were bitter and made my tongue green. Then I spit them into the fire, and she and my father said a little prayer the wise-woman taught them.

On the third night of my staying inside, my father's oldest brother laid out a little feast for K'aak-cu and the other evil spirits of the red pustules. That was late at night on 3 Sip 4 Oc, when Mother Moon's face was mostly hidden. My uncle had me stand before the table, and he stood behind me and said a prayer. The turkey was sacrificed, its neck was snapped over my head, and then my father's oldest brother burned copal incense for me and for the two unmarried girls of our lineage who might be afflicted. No turkey was sacrificed for them; K'aak'cu prefers to devour only tender sprouts. For this reason also, no turkey was sacrificed for *Atlatla*. No one touched the food that was offered to the spirits, no one touched the herb-bundles that lay next to the food on the table, no one drank the *balché*-wine that was set aside. All the members of my lineage ate a little of the special bread that the wife of my father's oldest brother had made, and we drank a little water, and the spirits were allowed to devour the essence of the rest. I was given one bite of the turkey, it was cooked for this, and then my father's brother took all the rest of that meal and set it outside the *acantuns* for the spirits. At the edge of the jungle he poured out half the *balché*, to seal the path, he





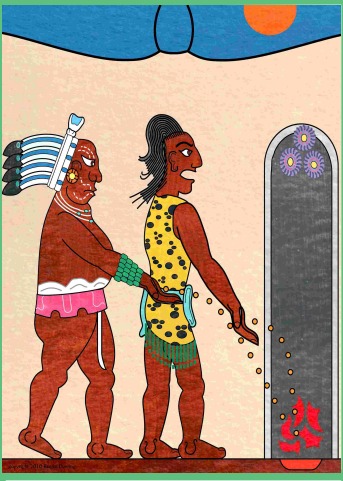
said, and at the entrance to our lineage-courtyard he poured out the rest, to seal out K'aak-cu. Many lineages were giving meals, the spirits must have been bloated from their feasting and drinking while so many families went hungry for their kex.

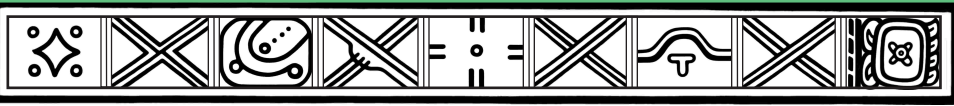
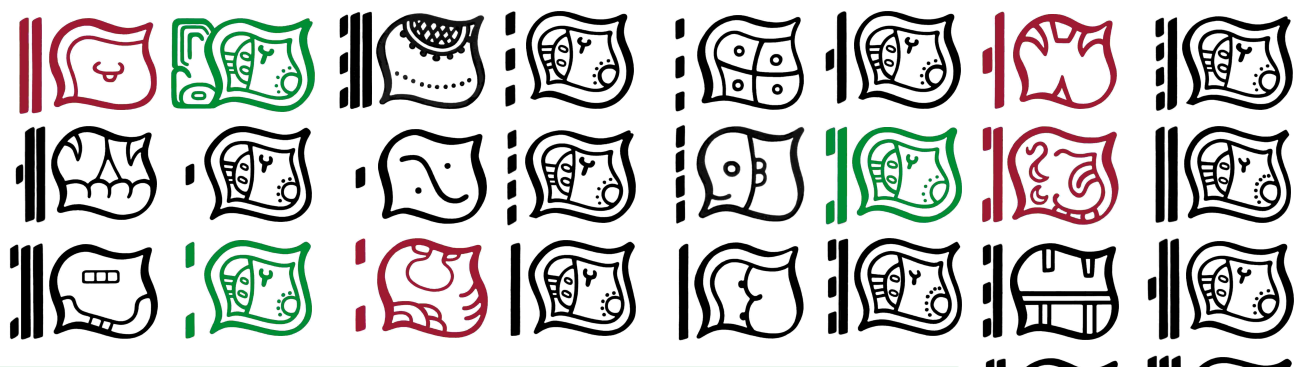
During the rest of ah-Sip's month no one in my lineage spoke my name or much looked at me, for fear of calling K'aak-cu to see that I was still alive. My father's oldest brother only rapped me on the head sometimes with his knuckles, for luck, and each day my father looked to see that I was wearing the charm my brother had given me.

When I was allowed to leave our lineage-compound, after the sacrifice of cutz, the priest and the wise-woman herbalist were making war on K'aak-cu. And here is how it was: in the mornings the priest bled himself before the east acantun. The caçique was there with him, every morning they went together to the red guardian stone and bled themselves like men. Their blood was mixed with copal incense and flint dust, and burned. Those two did not eat anything except ritual bread, they did not drink cacaw or frothing vanilla-cacaw or even hot-maize drink. They stopped eating chilis and set aside their tobacco pipes, they stopped visiting their wives and children. It was purification they sought, that their spirits would be strongest and their blood delicious to those gods and goddesses who would help us.

When the priest said his morning prayers, many people knelt near the guardian stones and said prayers with him. It was amazing to hear all those voices praying at once, all the people whose lips trembled with fear for their children raised their voices to the gods and the goddesses and raised their fists against K'aak-cu and the other wicked spirits that danced around our village. The lineage-fathers also bled themselves into the fire, to call the gods and the goddesses to us.

And this is how the wise-woman herbalist fought the spirits of sickness: she danced in the village plaza when Father Sun rose. She chanted prayers to Father Sun and Mother Moon, and she cried for the little ones of our village and begged the assistance of many gods and goddesses. Other women in their years of strength danced with her, this was something they could do, since only men could give blood for this circumstance. Two twenties women turned and shuffled and swayed. With white fans they hid and



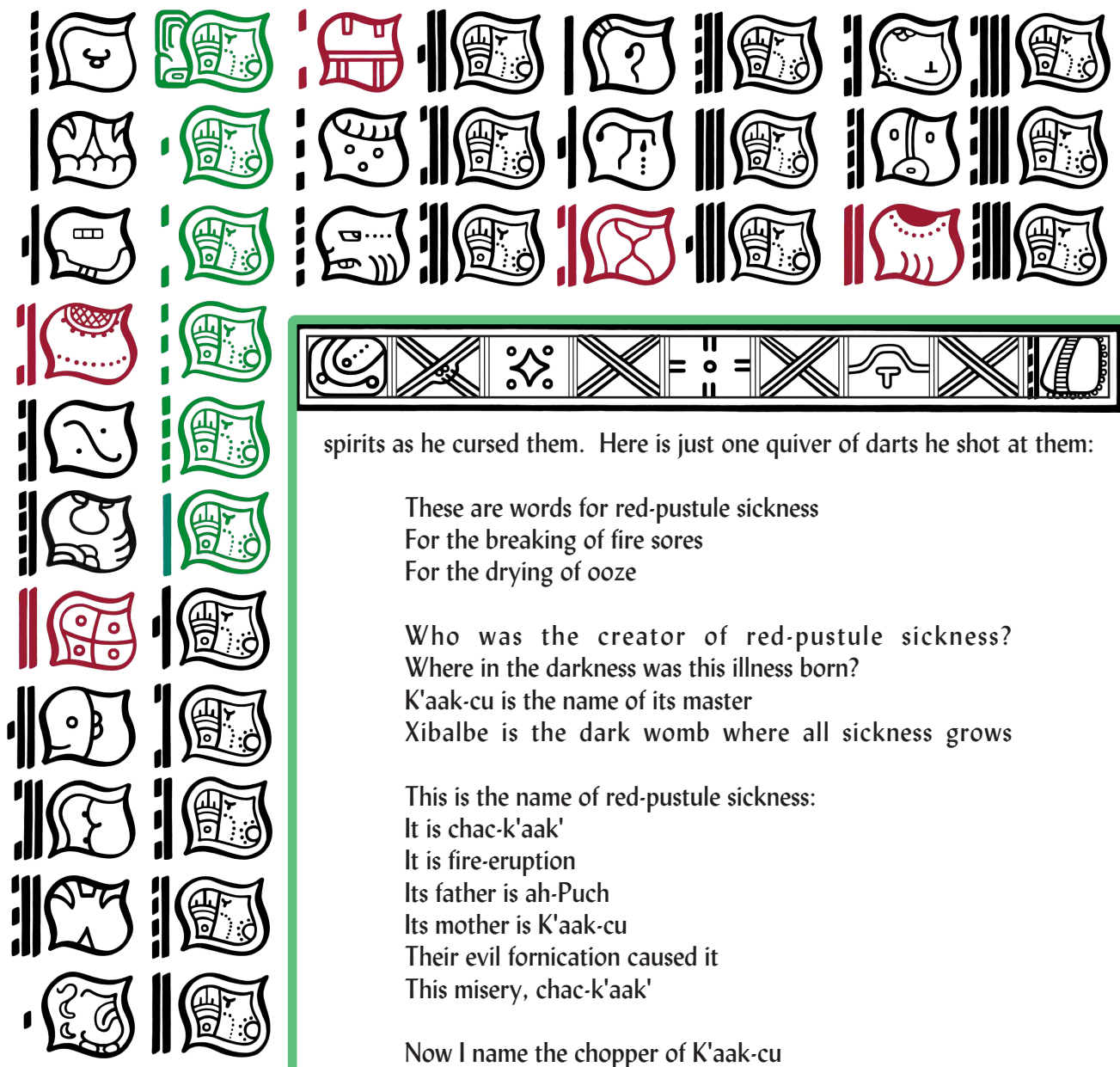


showed their faces, just as Mother Moon hides and shows her face, and they said prayers to her and called her to soothe the suffering children. Those wise women came every morning with little packets of leaves and cotton and threw them into the fire in the center of the village. I did not know what sacrifice was in those packets, no one would tell me, I never learned their contents. Many children brought their own gifts to the dancers, who threw those into the fire also. The gifts were substitutes for their burning brothers and sisters who were abused by K'aak-cu, it was another trick played on that spirit.

Each day when Father Sun was high, the men of power bled themselves at the acantuns; at the standing stones they knelt and pierced themselves. Their backs were to the people when they did this, other men shielded them, and when I asked my uncle, he told me they were giving blood in an intimate way. They dripped onto disks of copal incense, and they burned these and prayed to Father Sun and ah-K'awil and ah-Itzamna. It was the strongest gods they called, they did not trouble the younger gods and goddesses. They touched their heads to the acantuns and prayed, and they pierced their hands in the webbing between fingers and smeared their essence on the stones. The mouths of the lineage-fathers were firm, they did not beg or ask anything in particular but only said the names of the afflicted children, again and again, and gave sacrifice.

And here was the priest in the evenings, when Father Sun was leaving this world: he was terrifying to see, the fire in his eyes roared. He shook his fist at K'aak-cu and the other servants of ah-Puch, and he cursed them in a hoarse voice that could be heard across the village. He never shouted, always his voice was his own, and he looked out into the jungle with murder in his eyes. Men backed away when they saw this, the eyes of the priest were so fearful, even powerful men would not look at him when he was this way. Every evening the priest went to the acantuns and broke sacred bread to nourish the spirits of the guardian stones, and then he pierced his own tongue with a cactus thorn that he snapped in half in his fingers. The wise-woman gave him a bundle of herbs, and he chewed this and spat the bundle into the fire. His spit and blood and green herb-juice he gave to the jungle, he stood inside the safety of the acantuns and spat into the faces of the evil





spirits as he cursed them. Here is just one quiver of darts he shot at them:

These are words for red-pustule sickness
 For the breaking of fire sores
 For the drying of ooze

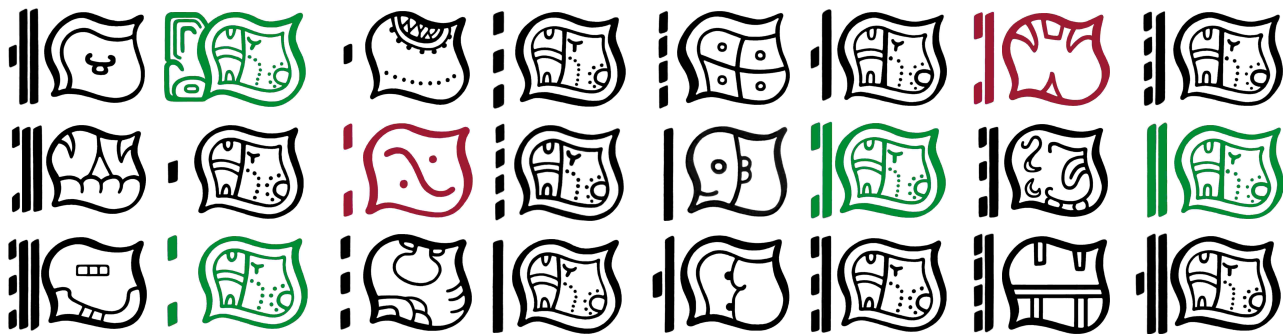
Who was the creator of red-pustule sickness?
 Where in the darkness was this illness born?
 K'aak-cu is the name of its master
 Xibalbe is the dark womb where all sickness grows

This is the name of red-pustule sickness:
 It is chac-k'aak'
 It is fire-eruption
 Its father is ah-Puch
 Its mother is K'aak-cu
 Their evil fornication caused it
 This misery, chac-k'aak'

Now I name the chopper of K'aak-cu
 ah-ltzamna is his name
 The oldest son of ah-Kinich Ahaw,
 Who is our Father Sun
 He is Lord Medicine by the axe
 The breaker of wicked spirits

Now I name the healer to the afflicted ones
 ix-Chel is her name
 A daughter of the heavens
 Oldest wife of any god
 She is Lady Medicine by herbal wisdom
 Lady Hope by her dancing
 Who created red-pustule sickness?
 K'aak-cu is his name





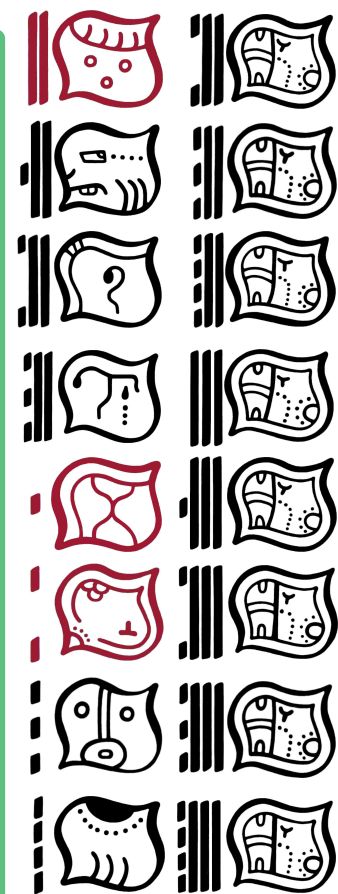
Where was red-pustule sickness born?
In Xibalbe it first was known

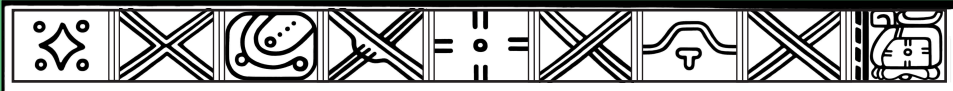
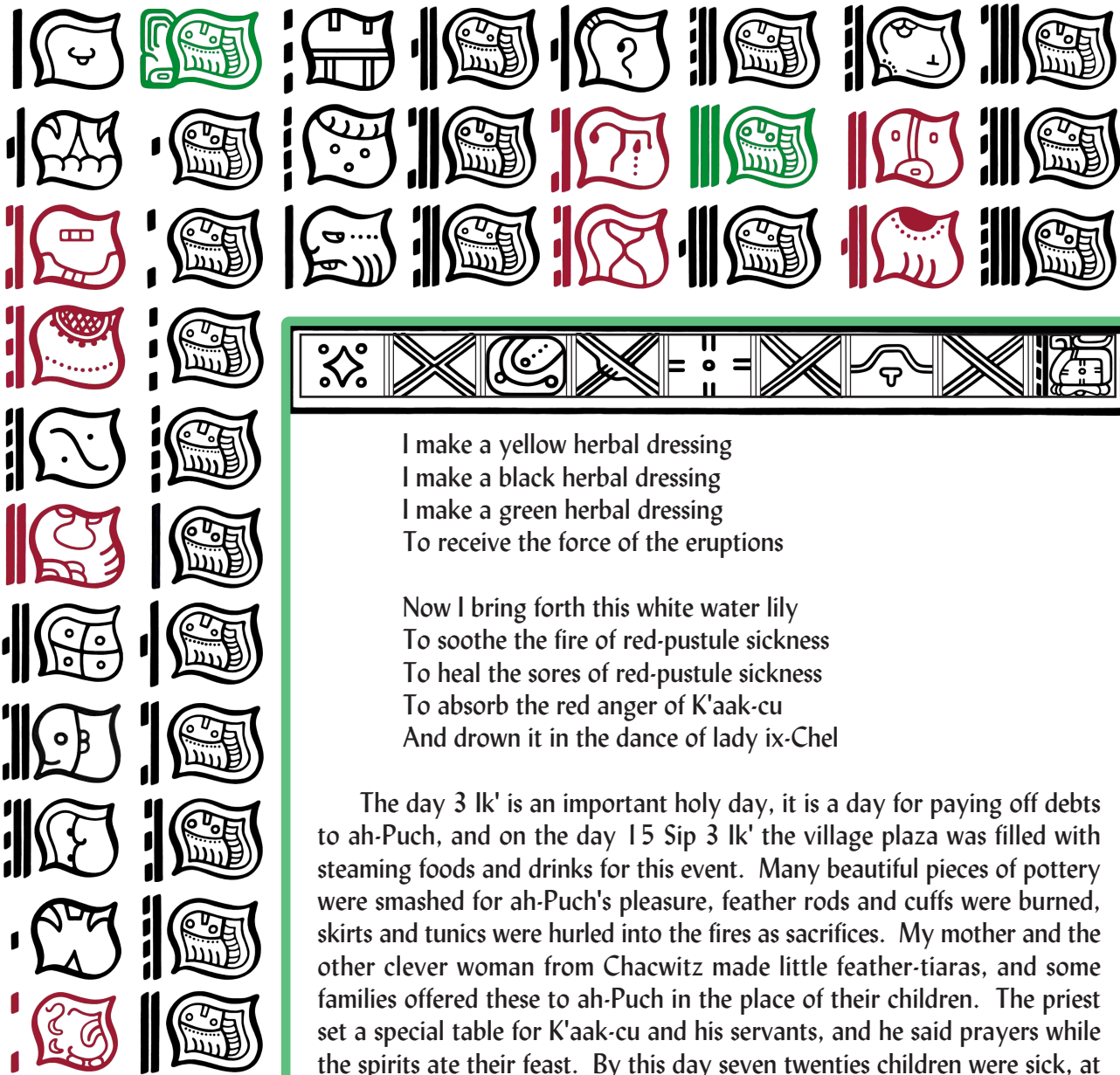
This is the opening of the heavenly fan
Its spines are sting ray
Its web is blood

This is the raising of the heavenly staff
Its wood is chacté
Its tip is blue lightning

Here is the breaking of K'aak-cu
His cord is severed
His head is chopped
At the place of Can-yah-ual-k'aak this happens
At the place of ix-Usihnal
There he is slapped by lord ah-ltzamna
There he is beaten by the oldest son
With the open spines of the heavenly fan
With the blazing tip of the heavenly staff

And here is the alleviation of misery
For the little sufferers,
The burning ones
I call white hail-stones
I call red hail-stones
I call yellow hail-stones
I call black hail-stones
I call green hail-stones
To put out the burning
To cool the skin
To melt away the fire
I make a white herbal dressing
I make a red herbal dressing



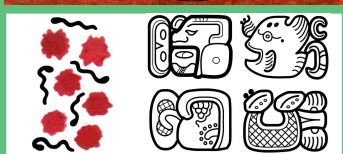
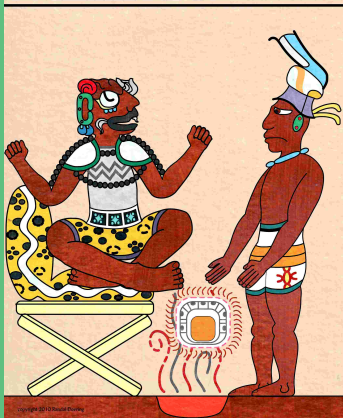


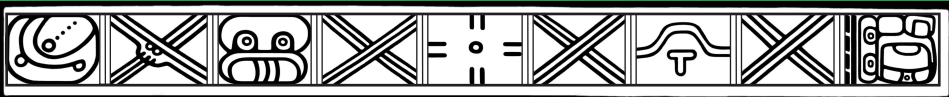
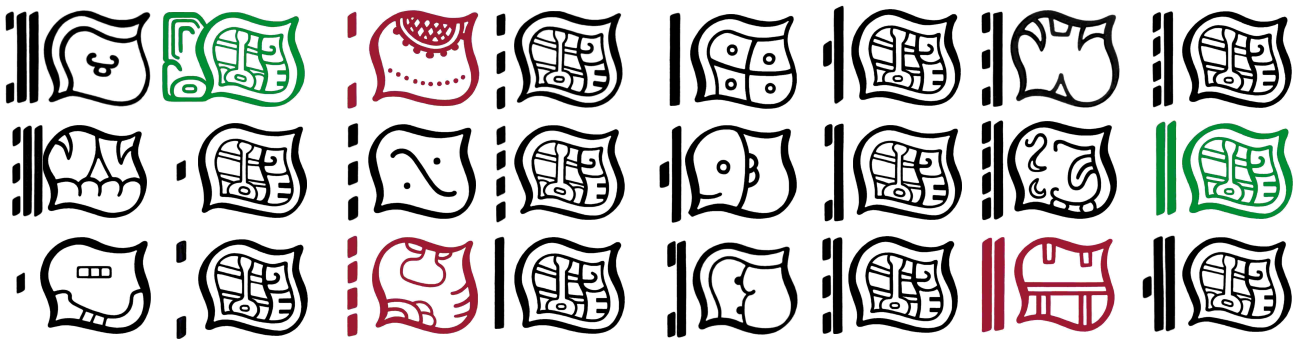
I make a yellow herbal dressing
 I make a black herbal dressing
 I make a green herbal dressing
 To receive the force of the eruptions

Now I bring forth this white water lily
 To soothe the fire of red-pustule sickness
 To heal the sores of red-pustule sickness
 To absorb the red anger of K'aak-cu
 And drown it in the dance of lady ix-Chel

The day 3 Ik' is an important holy day, it is a day for paying off debts to ah-Puch, and on the day 15 Sip 3 Ik' the village plaza was filled with steaming foods and drinks for this event. Many beautiful pieces of pottery were smashed for ah-Puch's pleasure, feather rods and cuffs were burned, skirts and tunics were hurled into the fires as sacrifices. My mother and the other clever woman from Chacwitz made little feather-tiaras, and some families offered these to ah-Puch in the place of their children. The priest set a special table for K'aak-cu and his servants, and he said prayers while the spirits ate their feast. By this day seven twenties children were sick, at the feast many babies were gasping for breath, and the wise-woman and her work-daughters gave out pastes and bundles and juices for the little ones. Every woman with a little knowledge gathered and dried and ground up herbs from their gardens. Every woman who could dance did so in the plaza, it was a great day of whirling and fan-waving.

And so for twenty days everyone prayed, for twenty days everyone chewed stems and leaves and rubbed creams onto sobbing infants, for twenty days the men of power bled themselves, until they wobbled as they walked. The priest lost his voice, he stood at the edge of the jungle and whispered his curses. The hunters hurled blessed darts into the trees and bushes, hoping to strike K'aak-cu or any servants of ah-Puch. The wise-woman led the final dances, she took the women to the very edges of the village and raised her feet and stomped down to frighten off the spirits. Then they did the swaying reed dance, to quench the burning of the infants. And the lineage-fathers





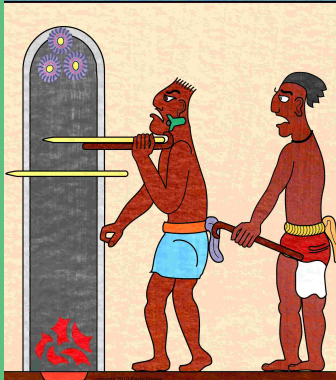
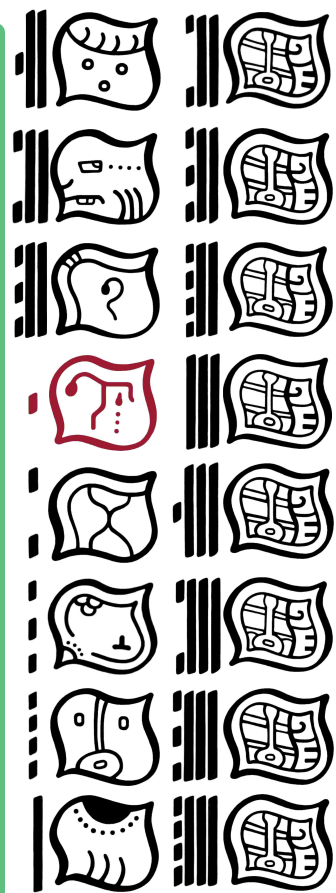
said the names of the sick children of their families into the smoke of the burning incense, so those names would rise to the mightiest gods and goddesses and move them to a little mercy.

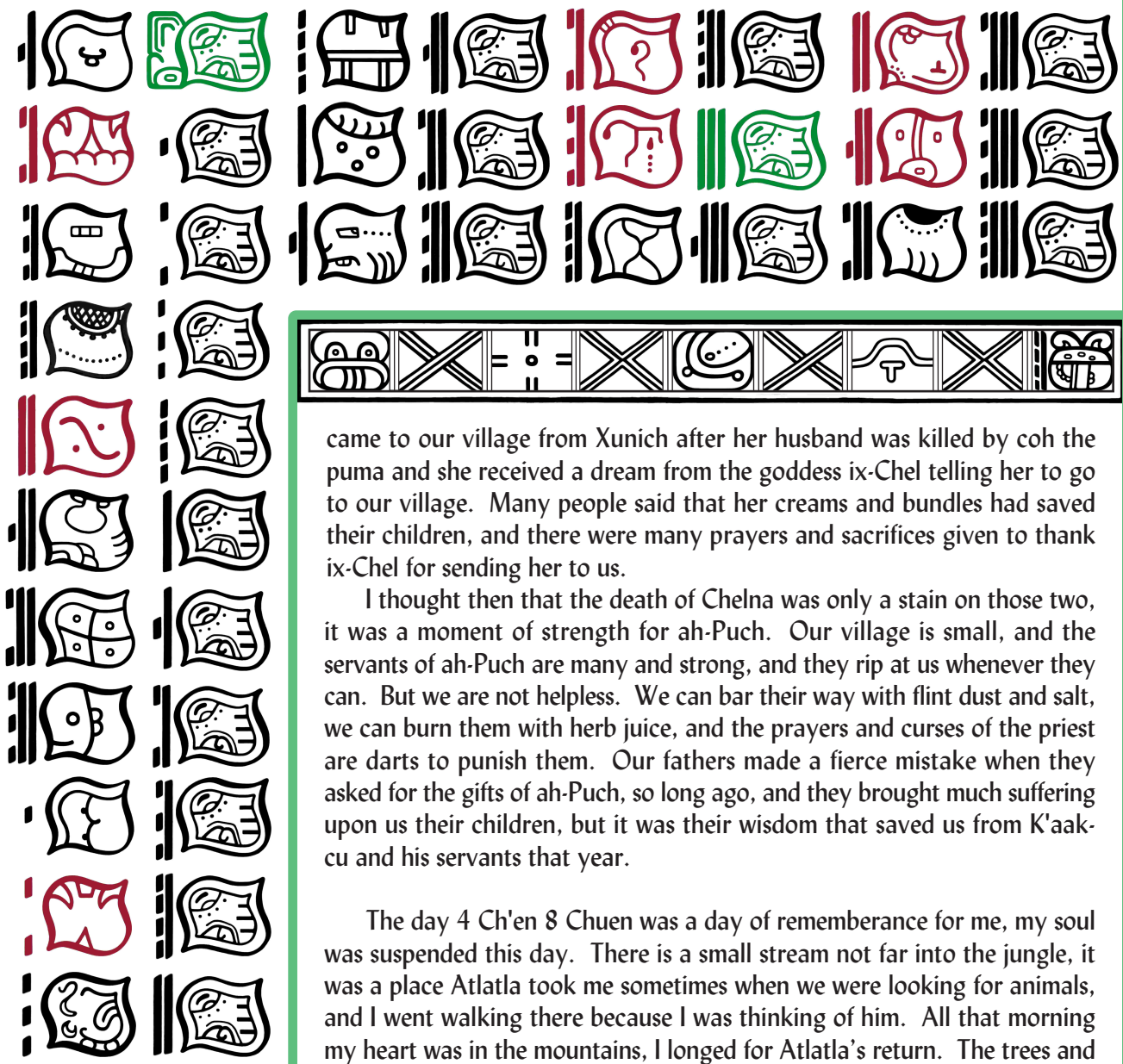
When it was ended, when the 20-day sickness was over, this is the truth that I saw with my own eyes, that I felt in my own heart: that K'aak-cu was defeated, his victory was despicable and small. In the village of Xunich at this time the same sickness struck, it was a time of strength for K'aak-cu, the traders said that two twenties infants and children died there. The traders said that the jungle around Xunich was filled with laughter at night, as K'aak-cu and his allies danced their victory dances and throttled the poor little souls they had torn away from their mothers and fathers.

In our village there were three deaths. Only three infants died, and the sacrifices of their lineages were so great that when the bodies were burned, their tiny souls were lifted above all those evil spirits straight into the garden of the gods. So said the priest, in his divining, and even though I was just a foolish boy I knew his words were true. It was our piousness that gave us victory over ah-Puch's evil servants; it was the prayers, the dancing, the curses of the priest and the endless sacrifices to the strong gods and goddesses that saved our village from more deaths. There was no boasting about our victory, no one laughed at K'aak-cu in his failure, there were no braggarts stupid enough to undo all that had been done.

This is what people said, after the red-pustule sickness had passed: that Puksik'al Tok was the strongest priest in seven generations, he was probably the strongest since the time of the city. It was his curses people spoke of, it was his sacrifices and his knowledge of the prayers they admired. Every generation suffers from the time of strength of K'aak-cu. Always twenty children die, or two twenties, no one could remember a mere three-infant attack. The priest's victory was more amazing because his work-son was not in the village when K'aak-cu came, Akbal Nik was visiting Chacwitz and renewing our village's mountain shrine when the red-pustule sickness came upon us.

There was also much respectful talk of the wise-woman herbalist, who



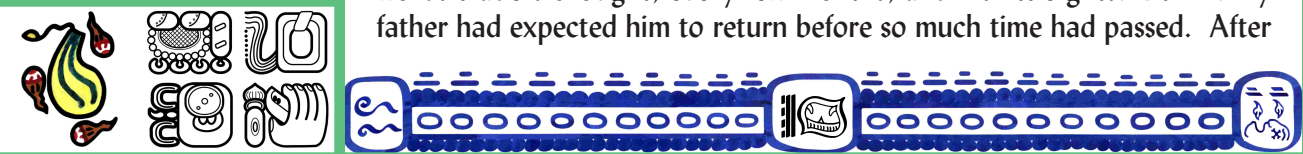
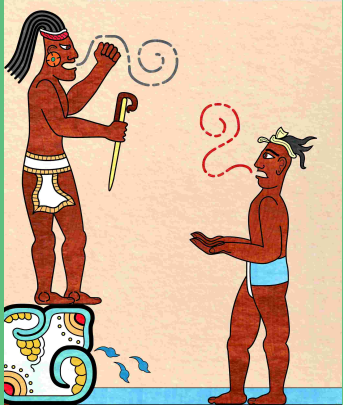


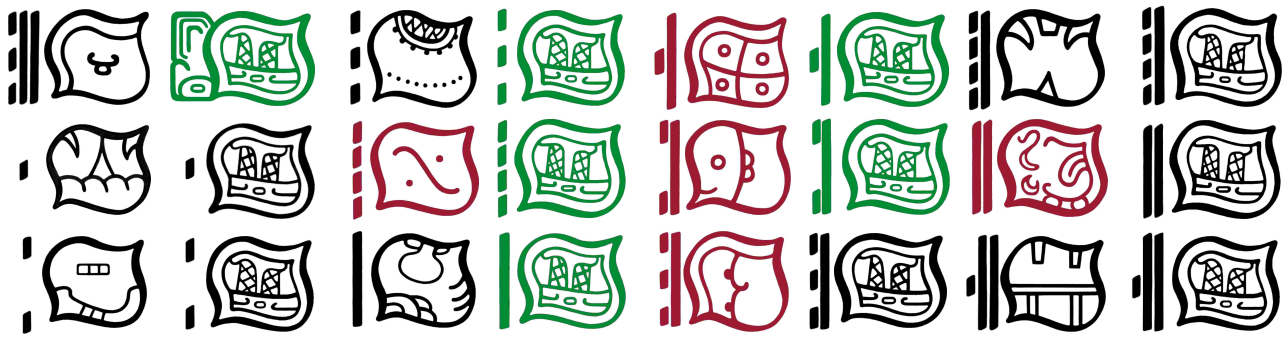
came to our village from Xunich after her husband was killed by coh the puma and she received a dream from the goddess ix-Chel telling her to go to our village. Many people said that her creams and bundles had saved their children, and there were many prayers and sacrifices given to thank ix-Chel for sending her to us.

I thought then that the death of Chelna was only a stain on those two, it was a moment of strength for ah-Puch. Our village is small, and the servants of ah-Puch are many and strong, and they rip at us whenever they can. But we are not helpless. We can bar their way with flint dust and salt, we can burn them with herb juice, and the prayers and curses of the priest are darts to punish them. Our fathers made a fierce mistake when they asked for the gifts of ah-Puch, so long ago, and they brought much suffering upon us their children, but it was their wisdom that saved us from K'aaku and his servants that year.

The day 4 Ch'en 8 Chuen was a day of remembrance for me, my soul was suspended this day. There is a small stream not far into the jungle, it was a place Atlatla took me sometimes when we were looking for animals, and I went walking there because I was thinking of him. All that morning my heart was in the mountains, I longed for Atlatla's return. The trees and sand and fallen branches and stones of the stream were not as they should have been, the suffering of my heart made those things seem to move around, made them disappear for a while. After I had been there for most of the morning I found six jeweled beetle shells under a rotting leaf. These are valuable to trade to young women, for flowers and other things, and so I said thanks to Lady Insect for the skins of her children, and returned to my home.

My father began drinking much cactus liquor after the red pustule sickness was defeated. It was because of missing Atlatla that he did that, he said this in a few small comments to my mother. Atlatla had been gone two years, in that time we had not seen him even once. We had only the words traders brought, every few months, and his little gifts. I think my father had expected him to return before so much time had passed. After



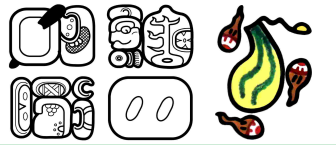
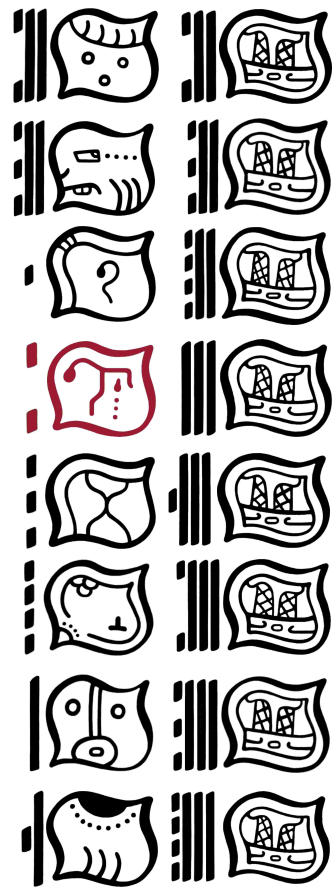


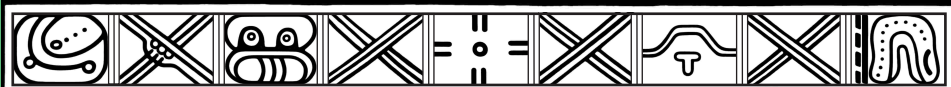
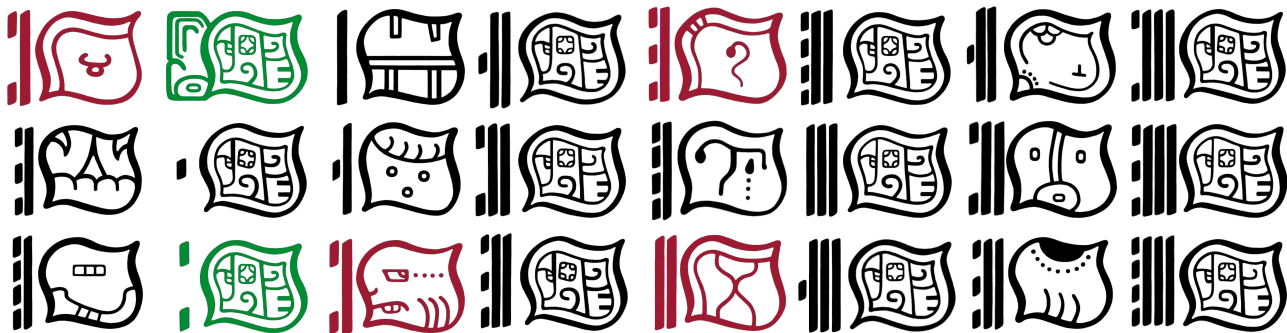
the red-pustule days the face of my father was often miserable, and he would sit on his stump and stare at the ground and drink. At times there was much work for him as a woodcutter, and he would disappear into the jungle with his work-sons, and I would not hear him again until I was nearly asleep. Because I was nine years old he should have been taking me into the jungle to show me his fields and teach me to make milpa, but this did not happen. My brother's shadow hid me even though he was far away. Once, very late at night, I heard angry words spoken between my father and his oldest brother, about the drinking and about my father's failure to take me out to his fields and teach me to plant and harvest. I do not recall what day that was. My father's comment was, "He's his mother's son, let her take him out to the fields." This is what I heard and remember, but it was said sideways and without heat, what my father meant was that his real son was elsewhere and already knew how to farm. After this argument my father did not visit my uncle often just to talk, things were no longer so good between them.

This is what we heard of my brother, that he was walking the path of the treeclimber and could go up even the highest trees to retrieve their plump fruits and nuts. He was quarrelling with my mother's father, but the traders did not know why, and he himself sent no word about this. My father was pleased by this sort of news and always asked for more of it whenever the traders came. My brother was said to be often hunting, mostly shooting birds with his blowgun but also darting upon the rabbit and sometimes haleu the paca. It was because he had learned proper rituals from my mother's family that he was allowed to hunt and bring meat to the table like a man.

Atlata continued to send gifts with the traders: bundles of obsidian blades for my father and feathers for my mother and strangely-shaped stones or bits of twisted wood for me. The wood bits were interesting for my father because he had not seen their kind before, and so these gifts of mine ended up near my father's wood-cutting tools. Atlata sent one other thing for me, a tiny pebble of jade which was darkest green and gleaming. It was shaped like a small iik'-cross, this was its shape: T. My mother was surprised at this gift, because dark jade is rare and valuable.

"It turns away evil sorcery," my mother said. "He worked hard for this."





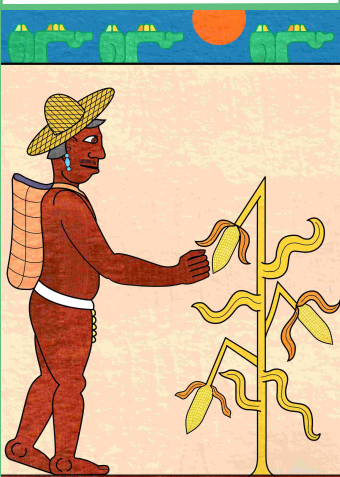
My father examined this gift and said, "Very good. Next time I'll ask him for five blades, instead of three," and we laughed. I placed the pebble in my charm-pouch, to gain its protection.

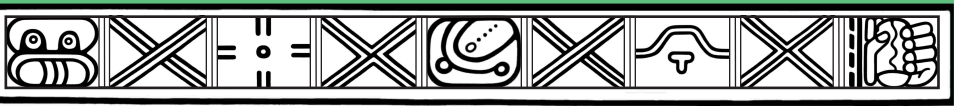
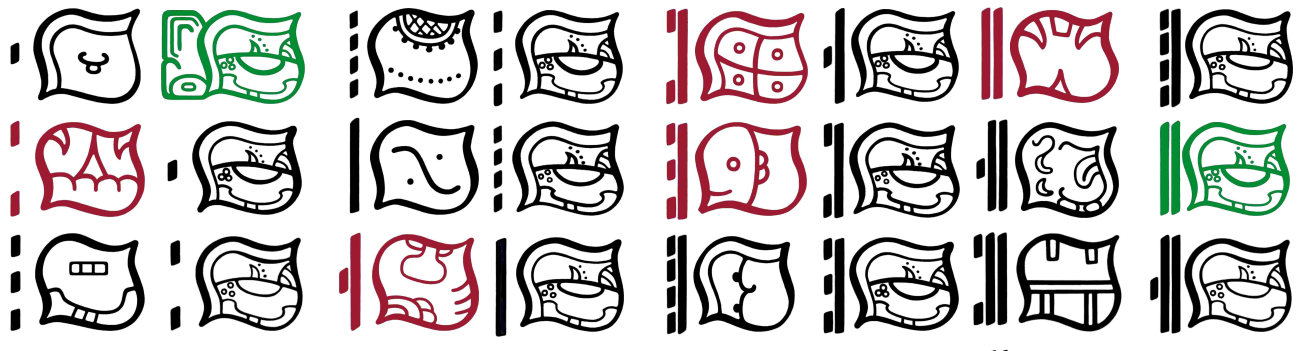
Because my father was so much in the jungle and was so frequently drinking, I went more often to the house of his oldest brother, who tolerated my visits. My oldest uncle was a man of many responsibilities. Like all men he grew maize, but he worked more land than many men did and accepted several work-sons from Tzak Ha' lineage to assist him. He had three raised fields next to the river, and these rich plots gave generously to his family and provided the many food sacrifices and feasts that were required of him as lineage-father. He raised a field of chilis as well, red and green and yellow and white chilis all grew there. This was in the jungle, where it was chopped up and burned.

My uncle's path as lineage-father brought him duties of many kinds. He was responsible for keeping the holy days for our lineage and for making the proper sacrifices. He performed divinations for those of us in his own lineage, and he divined for people in howler monkey clan as well. This is what I learned of divinations: that my uncle could not turn anyone away when they came for a divining, but sometimes he had them return on a day that was better for talking with the gods and the goddesses. Then the questioner paid him a small fee, and he sought answers for their concerns.

In addition to these duties my uncle had to maintain our lineage-shrines in the fields, and near the river, and in the village. He also had to train people who were sent to him through dreams, so that they could perform divinations and keep the holy days. And he sometimes was obliged to sing the song of our ancestors, back to nine or thirteen generations, for certain festivals and celebrations. In truth my oldest uncle bore many more burdens than my father, but he was different in that he always returned to his hut when he could, to speak with his wife and his daughters and sometimes me. And he did not drink liquor and beat children to ease his burdens.

Here was my oldest uncle: a tall, thin man who did not often laugh. When he walked or spoke he always went straight to where he was going, he did not wander for pleasure. Perhaps he laughed with the other lineage-

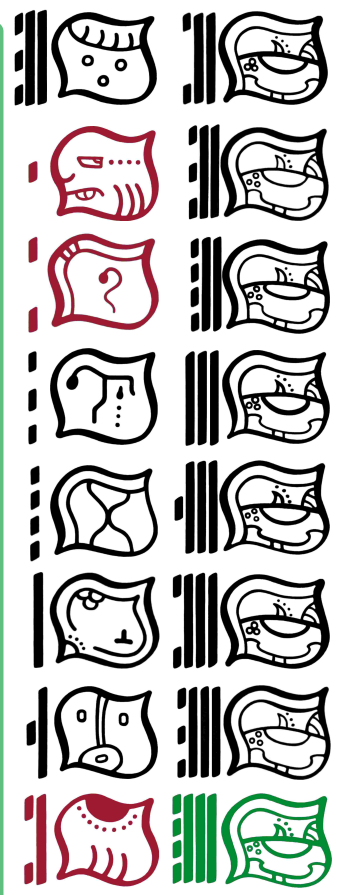





fathers, when he met with them in the mat house, but I cannot speak for what I have not seen or heard of. On his right forearm he has a large, dark scar, where he was bitten by polpoch the jumping viper. The snake was on a log and struck him one day as he passed, and its poison nearly killed him. Because he is dutiful to the gods and the goddesses he was allowed to stumble back to our village, and the priest saved him from death. Now it is a scar he bears, from the damage of the poison, and he sometimes told of this event as a way to warn boys to watch carefully when they are in the jungle.


The wife of my father's oldest brother is a wise woman who knows many useful plants and cures for aches and wounds. She is a small person with sharp eyes, such that even if she was resting quietly in a dark room when I came to visit, I could feel her watching and would greet her. This was the way of my oldest uncle's wife: boys did not bring filth into her hut. Every bit of leaf-litter on one's waist-cloth was seen, every smudge on one's face was immediately wiped away, mud on one's sandals did not pass her mat. The priest's hut has a red symbol over the door to keep evil spirits from entering that place, and the golden-yellow eyes of my aunt were their own sign to all people: keep dirt in its place, outside. For her family my aunt made beautiful woven clothing, every day she made cloth on her backstrap loom. She is a better weaver than my mother, here was something that made my mother weep with frustration sometimes, and anyone who received something she made was always pleased. For boys she sometimes made frothing vanilla-cacao drink which was cool on hot days and hot on the cool nights of the rainy season, and perhaps because of this thoughtfulness I was always clean when I entered that hut.

As a result of the many burdens I saw my uncle carrying, without complaint, I came to understand a little of what it means to be responsible. Though I am the youngest son of a youngest son, I resolved to seek what wisdom my uncle would teach me and to listen when he spoke, so that I would have more understanding and patience.





It was Atlalta's going away that forced me to see and respect the passing of time. Here are the eighteen lords of the year, they oversee 360 days in all, and here too, are their signs and portents:

 ah-Pohp is the first month-lord. He is a quiet god in his middle years, only he has strength enough to hack away the remains of the old year and sow the new one. As the oldest son, Pohp is the keeper of the mat in the house of his mother, ix/ah-Xp'enkin, Lady Time. Therefore the mat is his symbol. A honey bee is his spirit companion, and his month is the time for planting.


 ix-Wo is the wife of Pohp and lady of the second month. She was born in the water and is reed-slender. It is said that on certain days her eyes are river green. Her voice is beautiful, she won her husband by singing to him. Lily pad flowers are her symbol, a rain frog is her spirit companion, and her month is the time for seeds to sprout.




 ah-Sip is lord of the third month. At the beginning of time he was just a deer, but when our first ancestors killed too many animals Father Sun gave him intelligence. ah-Sip kicked the hunters and made them respectful, and now they offer him sacrifices before hunting. Deer horns are his symbol, a wasp is his spirit companion, his month is a time of growth in the fields.


 ix-Sotz' is lady of the fourth month. She was once wife to evil camazotz', the death bat, but he beat her so often that she sought refuge with ix/ah-Xp'enkin. Now she bears the burden of days in the time of growing plants and lights the hearth for ah-Sip, who protects her from her once-husband. Three hearth stones are her symbol, the leaf-nosed bat is her spirit companion.




 ah-Sek is the fierce lord of the fifth month. He always goes forth with a spear in hand and the teeth of great lizards around his neck, looking for enemies of the fields. His heat is so great that it is he who ripens the growing plants and prepares them for bearing fruit. The spear point is his symbol, the black iguana is his spirit companion.


 ix-Xul is lady six month, she came alone from the north. Poise is her way; ah-Sek mistook her elegance for mockery and tried to drive her from the garden of the gods. Now they are married, and storms with light rains are the sign of their passion. Light-stones are ix-Xul's symbol, the agouti is her spirit companion, and rain is her contribution to the fields.



 ah-Yaxkin is the seventh month lord. He is the teller of jokes and riddles, the toastmaster, the storyteller and the idle talker. His bad singing frightens the animals out of the ripening fields. The new dawn is his symbol, the green parrot is his spirit companion, and weeding is done during his time as burden-bearer.

 ix-Mol is lady long memory and loud corrector of mistaken words, and because she often annoys her husband ah-Yaxkin and the other gods and goddesses, she bears the burden of days to escape their irritation. Honeycomb is her symbol, the armadillo is her spirit companion, and during her time she helps the farmers keep animals out of their ripening fields.



 ah-Ch'en bears the ninth month. He is a pale god who came from a cave, born it is said from a hair of his mother's that fell out when she bathed in an underground pool. Contemplation is his way, to think clearly and well is his strength. The mouth of the cave is his symbol, the white bat is his spirit companion, and harvest begins during his month.





ix-Yax is the soft singer and white flower bearer. It was her young woman's scent, and her teasing, that drew ah-Ch'en to her. For ix-Yax the burden of days is a heavy one, and her husband often accompanies her during her walking of her path. The blossom of the ceiba is her symbol, the green katydid is her spirit companion. In the time of ix-Yax, farmers finish their harvest.



ah-Zac is the dancing lord of the eleventh month. His heat when pursuing his lover, ix-Keh, set alight the old maize stalks in the fields of the gods, and it was among the ashes that he and ix-Keh stamped out their wedding dance. A sprout of flame is the symbol of this god, the white heron is his spirit companion, and during his month the farmers burn clear their old fields.



ix-Keh bears the twelfth month burden. It was her fleet footing that amazed her husband, she knew well all the young women's dances and the marriage dances. She travels the path of time after her husband and kicks aside the debris from his feet-pounding. Her symbol is the rattle, her spirit companion is the red brocket deer, and endless rain is her gift to the fields.



ah-Mac is lord thirteenth month, he who caught his wife's tail in his mouth to gain her attention. He is the steady walker and mud-plower, his time is filled with rain and rising silt. Floods are his gift to the farmers, he brings muck to the raised fields on the river flats. His symbol is the turtle shell, and the snapping turtle is his spirit companion.



ix-K'ank'in is the lady of sinkhole and waterfall pools. Her symbol is mirrored water, and her spirit companion is a small dog. Once when she was swimming in the form of her spirit companion, ah-Mac called to her, but she did not hear. Irritated, he caught her by the tail in his beak, and their thrashing led to marriage. Soft rain is ix-K'ank'in's useful gift to the farmers.



ah-Muwan takes up the bundle of time for the fifteenth month. Pointless words and hollow stories are this god's way. It was his many amusing lies that won him his wife, ix-Pax, but now that he has her he has nothing to say to her, and all their talk is bitter. ah-Muwan ends the rains. His symbol is the wide-brimmed hat, and the muwan bird is his spirit companion.



ix-Pax is the sixteenth month bearer, lady wild hair she is sometimes called. The ugly riddle is what is hers, mysterious words with injurious answers are what she has for others. The flinty heat between her and ah-Muwan dries the fields and jungle during her burden days. Her sign is the tall drum, her spirit companion is the centipede. She always bears her burden alone.



ah-K'ayab is lord singer with a deep voice, lord howler who brings order when there is shouting. This strong lord keeps back the rains so the world dries out. It was his lusty whistling that called ix-Kumk'u to be his wife. His symbol is the split dawn, his spirit companion is the howler monkey, strong singing on the holy days is his most of all.



ix-Kumk'u is patroness of the eighteenth month. The movements of the heavens are in her step, blood lightning crackles in her veins, she alone speaks with dead gods and goddesses through seeds and bits of bone. The symbol of this goddess is the black portal, the orb spider is her spirit companion, and clear skies for the renewal dances are her gift to the farmers.



Wayeb is the broken month, without a lord or lady. There were going to be twenty months, like twenty holy days, our ancestors tell us, but Lady Time grew tired after creating eighteen months and just dropped five days at the end. It is only the renewal ceremonies and the vigilance of ix/ah-Xp'enkin that see the world through these ending days so the new year may begin.

