



Ripening

At the start of my fourteenth year there was a change on the storyteller's path, K'aakik' did not tell me what I would learn for the next year but only suggested. It was the evening of O Yax 2 Manik when we had this discussion,

because Manik days are good for planting seeds. We were smoking smooth tobacco and talking about the storyteller's path.

"There are no new stories you can learn and start telling right away, this year," K'aakik' said. "All the stories that remain are about the gods and goddesses and our ancestors."

"Which ones will I learn, then?" I said. By this time I knew the names of all one hundred stories, I had heard them all told and knew the proper days of their telling.

"There are the seating stories," said K'aakik'. Those are the tales told on the first day of each month, to welcome the lord of time for that month and honor his or her path.

"Eighteen stories in one year?" I said.

"Perhaps nine this year and nine next year, so you can begin telling them when you are a man."

"Well, very good," I said. In truth I was confused by his words, I was not certain what he wanted, or if he was testing me in some way. We had never before discussed my learning in this way, it was always K'aakik' who told me what would happen, and I followed his wisdom.

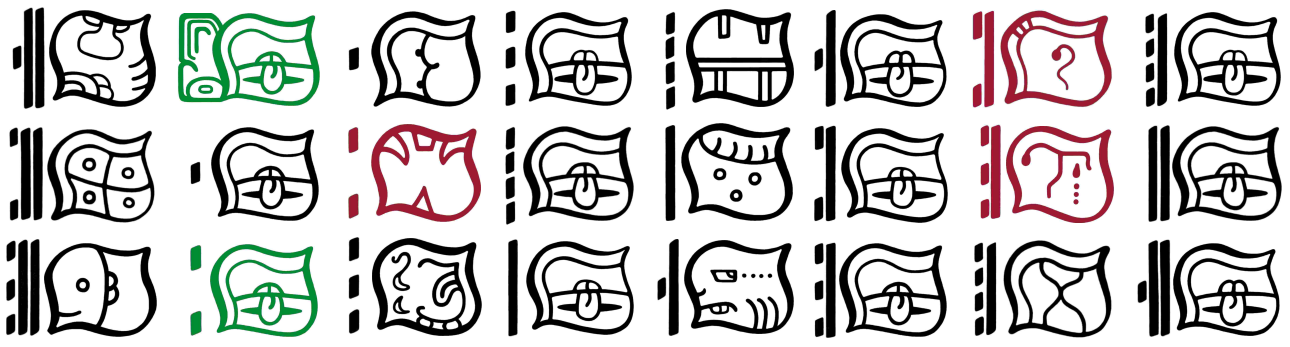
"Now, you cannot learn the seating stories like the ones you have learned already, that are told alone," he said, and he looked straight at my eyes to see that I was listening. "These are also told one at a time, but in your head you must know how they fit together. You must know which gods and goddesses are married, and how they met, and how their stories go together. You must know which stories happened at the beginning of the world and which occurred later and be able to tell them that way. These stories must live in your head like people live in the village, and you must hear them with your heart like the voices of your own family."

"Why doesn't the priest tell these stories? It is his path to know the gods and the goddesses."

He looked at me as though I was foolish, he rolled his eyes upward and said, "Telling stories is the storyteller's path."

Now I was annoyed, it was with a little heat that I said, "It isn't sensible





for the lives of the gods and the goddesses to be split up this way, the priest should be responsible for these stories.”

K'aakik' considered this. "Once the priest *was* responsible for the sacred stories, those of the hero twins and the lords of the underworld. The people took those stories away from the priests and gave them to us after the cities fell, after the priests were disgraced for turning to ah-Puch. So now we have all the stories, and people don't trust them to come from the priests. Or maybe it's because so many babies around here have the priest's face, and they don't want to see him in the story circle, too."

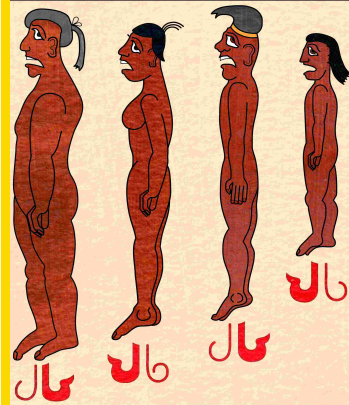
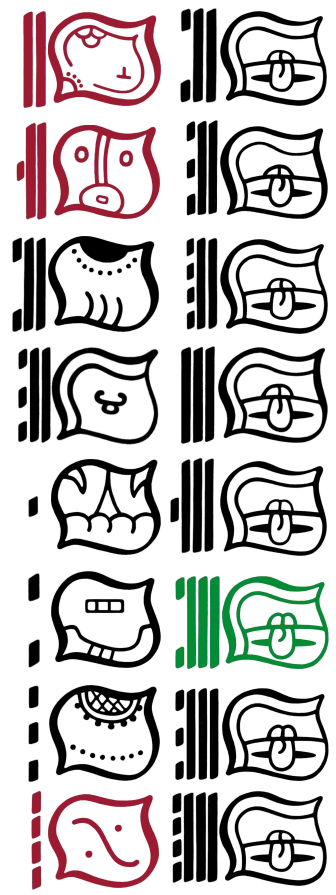
It was a smirk he wore when saying this, stupid jokes were the way of the storyteller when he had too much to smoke. But his other comments were amazing, no one had ever said anything before about the priest losing the stories. The tales of the twins are children's stories now, they are no longer sacred, and new stories have taken their place in the story circle.

"I have not heard anyone in the village speak disrespectfully of the priest," I said. "It is his strength I hear praised."

K'aakik' smiled a little. "You are young," he said. "There is much to learn, yet."

That was only further irritation, so I said nothing more. Three days later, on 3 Yax 5 Oc, he began to teach me the seating stories of the lords of time and to show me how they fitted together.

Around 16 Yax 5 Akbal four people died in our village, a family was devoured by the spirit Kazap-ik. The father grew sickly first, then his wife, and then their two children were savaged. Their skin turned yellow and broke open and leaked blood and pus, they began to vomit blood and suffered fierce pain in their heads. The Sak Um lineage-father had his herbalist daughter look after these people, for days he did not call for the priest or the wise-woman. When he finally did bring them to assist, his people were too sick, and in two more days they were all dead. The priest in his divining said that the souls of the children were in the garden of the gods, but the souls of the parents were captured by Kazap-ik and taken to ah-Puch as slaves. It was because the Sak Um lineage-father gave that spirit so many days to work that it was so successful. On 17 Yax 6 Kan the bodies were burned in their lineage-compound, and the priest performed a ceremony to drive Kazap-ik from the village. After this many lineage-fathers called upon the priest and the wise-woman to bless their families with protection, and many sacrifices were given to ah-Itzamna and ix-Chel and ah-K'awil, so there





would be no more attacks by this spirit.

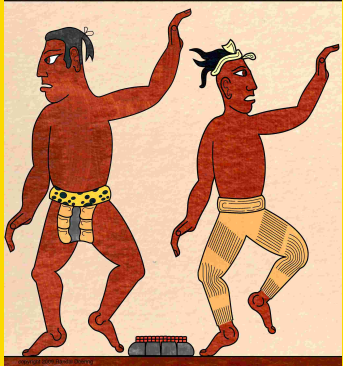
Half of my fourteenth year passed. The last mud and broken trees from the flood were cleared away, the crushed and fallen huts were rebuilt and dedicated, and the storyteller's milpa was harvested and then burned clear, and planted again. The stories I learned were lengthy and carefully made, and they were accompanied by complicated dances and many changes of masks. In addition, I was in the storyteller's circle often, there were now many stories that were my place to tell. Once my father complained about K'aak'ik' stuffing too many words into my head, but I said that he did not beat me as the storyteller's father had done to him, and my father did not go to the storyteller with his thoughts. It was in this year that I truly stepped onto the storyteller's path, my first stories of gods and goddesses demanded great attention, and K'aak'ik' wove them very carefully into my head. And between the words were his explanations of who each story person was and why they did as they did; we talked, and he taught, and we talked a little more. These were stories that could only be told by men, in teaching them to me K'aak'ik' was unravelling the boy in me and beginning the creation of the man.

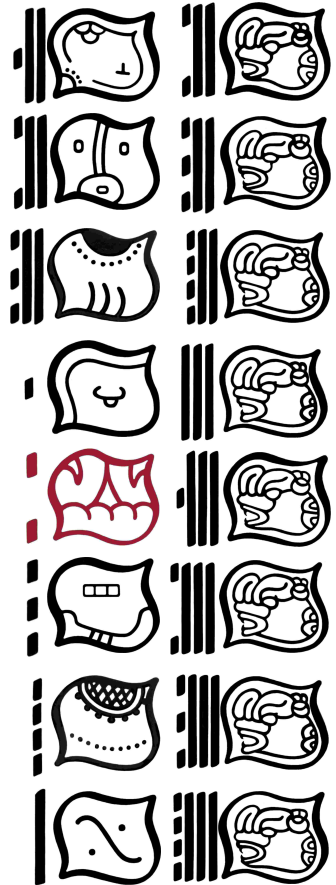
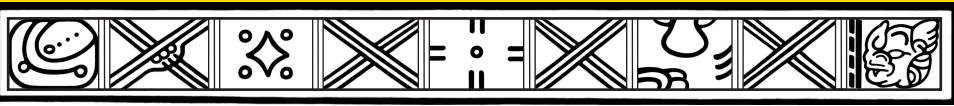
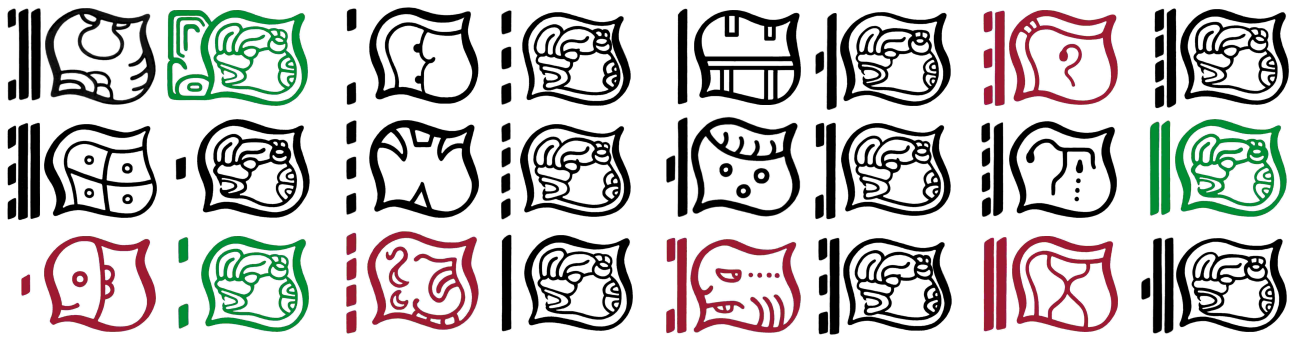
It is true that because of all the burdens that rested on me my vision became dim, and though I knew through my mother that my brother was arguing with my father and uncle about choosing a wife, I knew little of his affairs and could not be concerned for him.

On 8 Wo 7 Ahau Atlatla was humiliated before howler monkey clan, he was called out and caned before its members. It was my oldest uncle who informed me of this, he came on the evening of 7 Wo 6 Cauac. He said his courtesies to K'aak'ik' and then said to me,

"Something has happened, your brother misspoke to Te Ek'. Tomorrow morning he will be caned in the Chac Ceiba compound. All of howler monkey will be there. Wear your festival sandals and good tunic, and be ready to be very strong." When he said this he did not seem troubled, his voice was not regretful even though this was Atlatla we were discussing, and I looked at his face until he said, "Have you been smoking?"

"I hear," I said. And this is what I learned about my uncle, then, this was the price of his position: he could not feel pity for any one person, not even the oldest son of our lineage. When something terrible happened, he could only do what had to be done, he could only make arrangements and





awaken to the new day.

My uncle left the storyteller's hut, and I cleaned my margay sandals and made certain my good tunic was clean. There were no thoughts in my head at all, it was only my hands moving.

"Wear your cuffs, also," K'aakik' said. Those were feather cuffs my mother gave me for my fourteenth birthday, they were of hummingbird feathers and bore the sign of Cab Coh lineage.

"He didn't say to wear them."

"They will give you strength," he said. "I have been to canings."

I saw that there were things he wanted to say, but he was not of my clan and so said only those few words. I took out the cuffs and made certain they would be tight, there would be no laughter at things falling away.

That night I slept very poorly. Te Ek' is not only the lineage-father for howler monkey clan, he is a marriage-arranger as well, one who has learned the signs for bringing people together. No one had to tell me what had happened with my brother. Te Ek' had heard that Atlatla was not seeking a wife, and he came to suggest some names and some meetings, and my brother said something rude, and foolish. My uncle had to suffer my brother's ways, but Te Ek' did not.

Very early the next morning my uncle came for me, and I was ready. There was one extra thing I had done before his visit: I drove a cactus spine many times through my cuffs, so that my blood soaked the hummingbird feathers, flowing essence turned the green and yellow and blue to wet red. My uncle saw the drops sliding down my fingers and falling to the floor.

"I said I would teach you the deeper meanings of the holy days when you are a man, but I see you may be ready. Who are you nourishing?"

"ah-K'awil, lord of lineages."

"I will consult with our ancestors about your instruction," he said. He lifted up a fine woven cloth he had been carrying, it was white with orange itz-tears. "This is for your brother's back, afterward." He dropped it onto my shoulder so it would not be bloodied in my grasp; this wrap grew heavier as I followed my uncle out under the first sliver of Father Sun's gaze.

In our lineage-compound all the Cab Coh men and women were ready except for Atlatla, who was held by the Chac Ceiba lineage. This was so he would not take herbs to dull the pain, he was being starved a day, for the beating to be more felt. My little lineage lined up, women and men, and we walked to Chac Ceiba. All of us were dressed in small fineries of bright cotton and feathers, it was Atlatla alone who would be wretched in front of





everyone. My uncle was not so peaceful now, there were lines around his mouth, and he did not look well-slept. This was true also for my mother and father; the masks of their faces did not fully hide their grief for my brother.

Their pain crushed against me, I had to look at the dirt until my uncle came and lifted my chin and looked at me sternly. After that I thought of the storyteller's circle, and I dreamed of painting my face white, and when we came to Chac Ceiba I was no one, the people of howler monkey could look somewhere else for painful amusement.

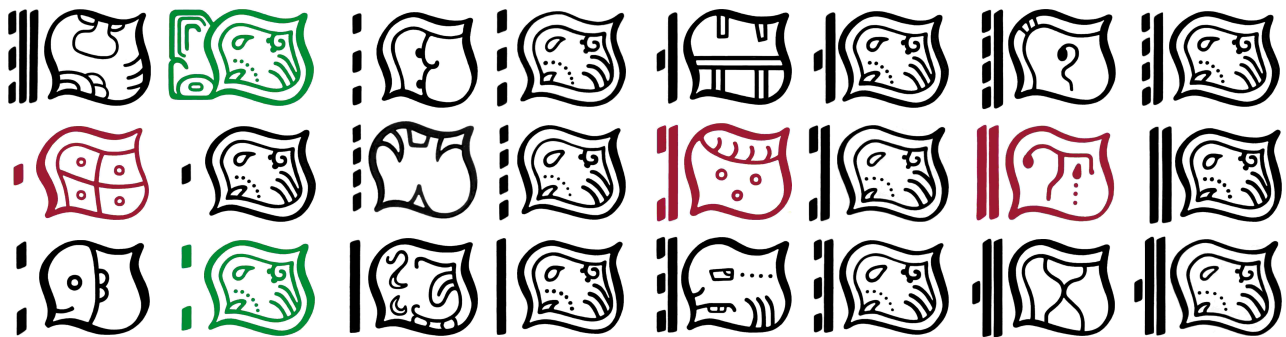
And this was what was in Chac Ceiba courtyard: one hundred and twenty-five people, standing and waiting. Their eyes were on us, the seven people of Cab Coh lineage, the weight of all those stares was like a flood, trying to knock me under. The holes in my wrists began to burn from all the looks and whispers, my father had to push me so I would walk forward. Father Sun was just risen when we arrived and stood at our places; no one sits at a caning. In Xunich people laugh during canings, I have heard, but that is not the way in the village on the river. No one laughs out loud, even though many approve of this punishment for difficult people.

Near the center of the lineage-compound, next to the large Chac Ceiba lineage-shrine, two poles came out of the ground. Ropes hung from these, and a thin cane rested against one. Black words were painted onto this stick, it was my brother's transgression that was recorded in writing, for the gods and goddesses and our ancestors to read each time the cane was raised. I was careful to look straight ahead at the poles and the cane in a way that I hoped was strong. The blood was still running from my wrists, I had made many jabs, I was not playing at prayers for my brother.

When Father Sun rose a little more, Te Ek' of Chac Ceiba came out of his hut. He stepped from the doorway and drew himself up in the way of powerful men and walked to the caning poles. The clan father for all of howler monkey was a silvered man of great heat, he had passed through his middle years and gained wisdom, and though he was not large or heavy there was weight in his walk that made everyone see him even if he said nothing. He was like my uncle but much stronger in this way, it was not possible to even glance at Te Ek' without seeing that he carried many burdens for his lineage and clan. When he spoke he looked into the eyes of people, from one to the next; unmarried women were seen, even children, all howler monkey people were given their places, in his vision.

"In the beginning," Te Ek' said, "the first people in this world were not properly respectful to the gods and the goddesses. They were not fully





ripened, they did not completely understand what was expected of them. They made mistakes. Father Sun grew angry and wished to destroy our ancestors and make new people, but the other gods and goddesses wanted only a lesson made, wanted to instruct our ancestors and allow them to try again. There was a great discussion in the palace of Father Sun, and in the end he sent the dwarf K'oxol to cane the troubled people and then show them the proper way to act."

Now two Chac Ceiba men, thirteen-generation men like Cab Coh, brought my brother out of one of the Chac Ceiba houses. They were on either side of him, but he walked on his own. This was the face of my brother: he looked very tired and did not raise his eyes to the people but only watched the ground in front of him. None of his anger was on his face, it was hidden away again, but I could see it in his chest when he put his feet down and in his belly when his feet lifted to step forward. There was only a waist-wrap of clattering reeds on him, he did not even have sandals; he was as wretched as the first people before they learned to weave cotton and prepare skins. Atlatla and the Chac Ceiba men walked across the plaza, and my brother placed his hands on top of the poles and allowed the men to tie his wrists to the timbers. Now his back was to us, this is how canings are done in howler monkey clan.

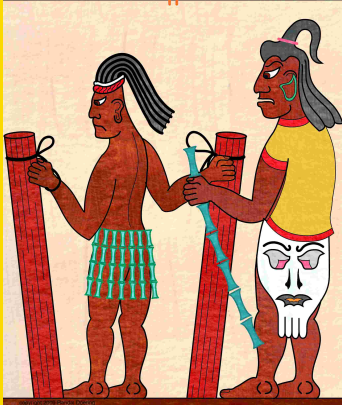
My mother made a small sound, she was trying not to weep, and my father touched his fingertips to her back. It was a great surprise when he put his other hand on my shoulder, he patted me and gave me a little comfort in this way.

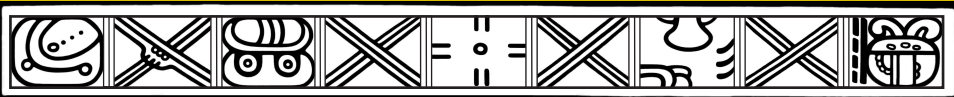
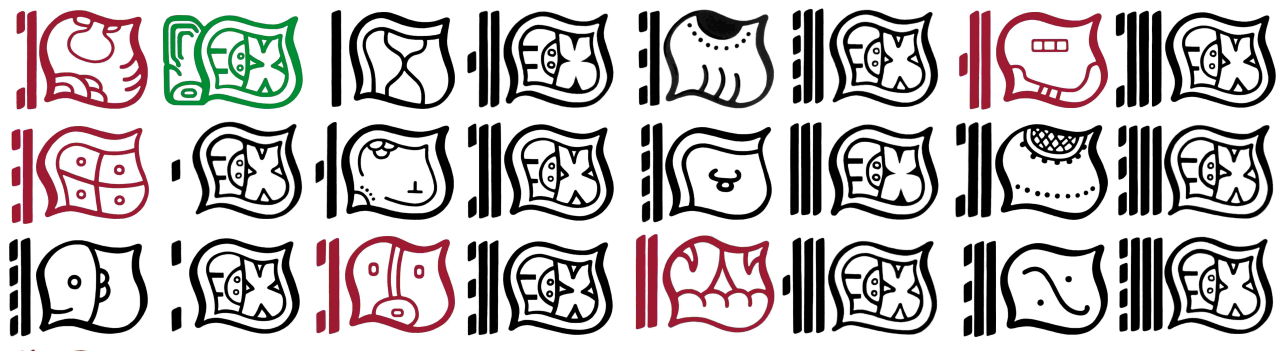
This is what I was thinking: my brother already did not enjoy his life in the village. After this he would never be seen, he would be in the jungle before Father Sun rose and would return only when night was coming. How would he find a wife now? It would be an assigned marriage, there would only be pain and tears for any young woman given to my angry brother.

Te Ek' walked to the poles and spoke again, as one of the two men picked up the cane.

"And here is what ah-K'oxol did, he came from the garden of the gods down to this world and caned the disrespectful people. He did this to ensure that they were listening, that he had their attention. For he knew Father Sun has no love for those who do not give respect where it is due, and it was better a caning than the banishment Father Sun was planning for them.

"Atlatla of Cab Coh has wandered from this very old path, he has forgotten the teachings of K'oxol and said disrespectful things to his lineage-





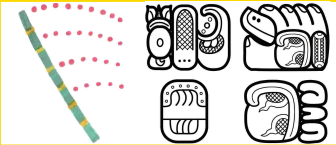
father. Today his attention will be regained, so that he may remember himself and come back to the proper path."

Then Te Ek' stepped aside, and the Chac Ceiba man raised and brought down the cane, and it made a sharp cracking sound across Atlatla's back, and the first stripe appeared. And it is true that the sound of the cane brought sorrow to my heart. My brother was not stupid, he knew he could not be disrespectful, and yet there he was bound to the poles, and the cane rose again and fell, and this time his skin broke and my brother's blood flowed. He would not speak to me of his anger toward the priest and the powerful men, he would not reveal this thorn to his family to be pulled, and so I just said prayers for him. It was to ah-K'awil and ah-K'oxol that I begged, I asked that these gods intervene for him, that they bring peace to his heart. And the cane rose and fell, and it rose and fell, and my brother's back became a mat of flowing blood. The Chac Ceiba man was not gentle with the cane, it fell hard every time. No one could say there was favor shown to Cab Coh.

Thirteen was the number of times the cane came down, thirteen stripes ran across my brother. Through all of this he stood firm, his hands clasped the poles and he did not cry out or even grunt. Then the caning was over, Te Ek' completed this matter:

"This is how it was done in the beginning, this opens the path to the embrace of howler monkey. Go home to your people, Atlatla Cab Coh, and remember who you are."

When Te Ek' was finished with this correction, my father and older uncle untied Atlatla and stood him between them. His face showed weariness and sorrow but none of the anger he held so strongly, his eyes saw only the ground. He could not walk for himself, even with help he stepped slowly and with uncertainty. It was not the fierceness of the caning that had worn him, I think, thirteen lashes are not so many; it was the misery of the shame he brought to our family with his stubbornness. My oldest uncle went to speak with Te Ek', and the Chac Ceiba men took the cane to be burned. When Atlatla was brought past me I reached up and tugged the white itz-wrap off my shoulder, my red essence smeared across the white cotton, and when I put this across my brother's back, his own blood soaked through. We of Cab Coh were the first to leave the Chac Ceiba courtyard, howler monkey clan stood where they were and judged us as we moved. And I knew the troubles were not over for Atlatla, this weeping of itz-tears would be his way so long as he carried worms in his heart.

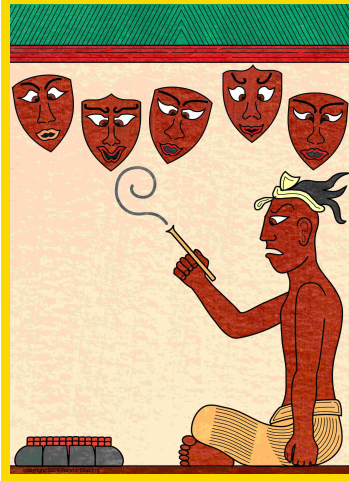
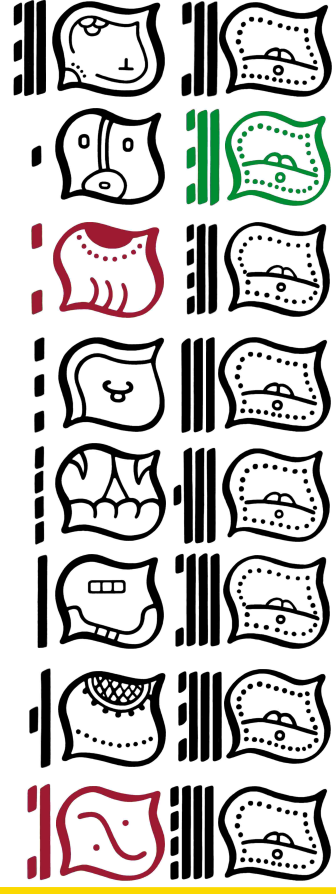




Here is how it was after Atlatla was punished: the looks of the people were disguised no longer, even men stared at me with open disgust. There were no more false smiles, no more masks, it was only narrowed eyes and disrespect on the faces. Even howler monkey people did not nod when I passed by, anymore. Cab Coh lineage stood alone. Canings are supposed to strip away anger and bring difficult people back into the village, but instead I think Atlatla's lashing sealed people against us. Fear of our lineage-curse and disgust at my brother's disrespect brought many hearts into eclipse. Walking against the contempt of hundreds of faces is the same as being cut with many small knives, it is not possible to attend one's duties and to raise one's hands against everyone, at the same time. The storyteller's hut was where I hid myself against these looks, I smoked tobacco and more tobacco from the end of the dead bird's leg. Long thin serpents of grey smoke rose from this alleviation of misery, poison came out of me and climbed the ceiling of the storyteller's hut and slithered out the smoke hole into the rain. My fingers became blackened and sticky; in the long days after Atlatla's beating I was often spin-headed and sick.

My brother was weak for several days, and after that he went into the jungle and made it his home. Much sweet fruit came into our lineage-compound, each evening was received with a great mound of ripe tree-food and sometimes dripping honey-comb. All through the year there is one fruit ripe, or another, always there is something that can be gathered for lineage or village, and so my brother did as I did and hid himself on his path. No one saw him in the mornings, even my father who always rises early never saw my brother going among the trees and vines. Atlatla and our oldest uncle spoke sometimes in the evenings, my mother said, but this was always in my uncle's hut, and she did not know what they were planning.

Since my brother was a man now, he and my father and our uncles began building a new hut for him in our lineage-compound, even though he was not yet married. The timbers were harvested under Mother Moon's full face, the wood is best when she raises its sap in this way, and I assisted in gathering thatch for the roof and weaving it into place. My hands are not clever at making things, and after a few times breaking the thatch spines or punching holes in the roof with my knees my father grew very irritable with me, and it was only carrying and handing-up that I did. Then there was mud to be mixed with reeds and built up into walls, and the doorway had to be carved and pegged together, and there were frames to be made for the windows and put into place.



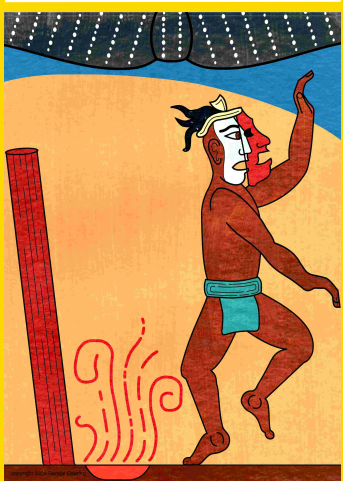


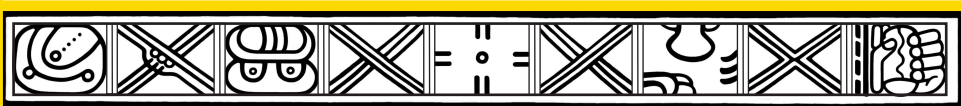
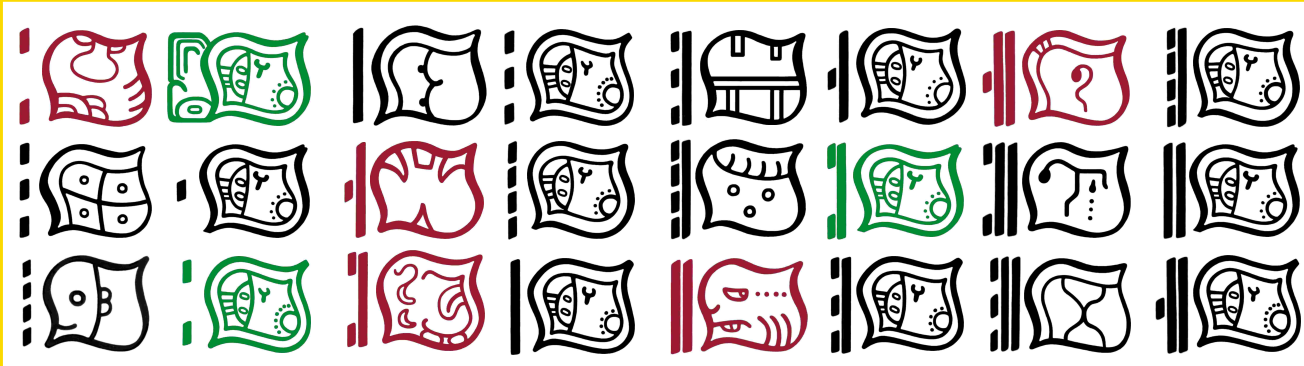
There is a great amount of work to building a hut, many afternoons burned this way, and there were blessings that my uncle had to perform that required us to stop working sometimes and wait for the proper holy day. There were sacrifices of turkeys and liquor and tobacco, tiny stone carvings and copal incense were sacrificed to bless the house and invite our ancestors into the new place. In the mornings I worked with K'aakik', weeding and tending the storyteller's milpa, and then I helped build my brother's hut, and then I learned stories. My mother came to visit more often, she worried about how much I was working, but I cannot remember even one word of what she said. Everything was lost in smoke, everything was lost in a swirl of many responsibilities. My oldest uncle said some things to me when I was mixing mud and reeds, and though I think I nodded and said pleasantries, his words too were carried away.

During these hazy days after Atlatla's caning I noticed many babies in the arms of their mothers, at the storytellings. It was their noises that made me see them, and I remembered my mother saying that there was a great sprouting after the flood. I was not happy for the poor babies, they were born into a time of hardship because the flood had destroyed many fields and storehouses. There they were in front of me, suckling and making contented sounds, but ah-Puch would strangle many of them, they would die with spirit-fingers ripping their bellies. It was my path that gave me strength, it was because I had words to say and masks to change and dances to perform that I could bear to stand in the circle and see all those little ones, when I knew what was coming for them.

On the day 4 Sip 8 Chuen traders came from the mountains. The people of my village needed food because the flood had destroyed much of ours, we prayed for plentiful fish and turtles and deer, but there was no extra bounty from river or jungle. Nor was there food from anywhere else; many raised fields in Xunich were destroyed by the same flood, and Chacwitz is a small village with no extra maize to trade. It was hides the traders brought, cacomistle and raccoon, and carved stones. Many bitter comments were made about eating stones, there is nothing to repeat except the hardness of that time. In their sympathy the traders did not bargain fiercely and were generous with gossip and amusing dances.

There was a surprise at the storyteller's hut, an unexpected gift came for me on this day when the lords of the night are strong. It was brought by the same trader who had carried gifts back and forth from my family





and my brother when he lived in the mountains, Wak Butz was his name. For a trader this man was quiet and thoughtful, he never said more than had to be said and did not linger when a thing was finished. He was coming into his years of strength, and though his eyes stayed hard on a person's face as do the eyes of all traders, his voice was very pleasant to hear.

"You are the storytellers?" Wak Butz said to us, when he came by the storyteller's hut.

"I am," said K'aakik'. "My work-son, Maxam."

Wak Butz nodded and handed me a small bundle made from the feathers of the harpy eagle, the great jungle bird that some people call the jaguar of the sky. Since I was presented as just a work-son he could not say anything to me, and so to K'aakik' he said,

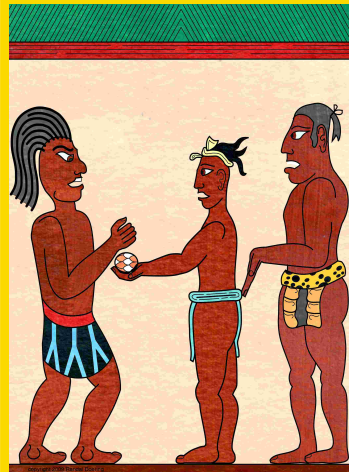
"The storyteller of our village sends this for the brother of the one who came to Chacwitz, who I guess is your work-son. Her name is Tijun. She asked me to wait until this day to hand this gift over. She says 'it is a ray of light coming over dark mountains, even black stone is made golden under Father Sun's face'. Do not ask me what that means."

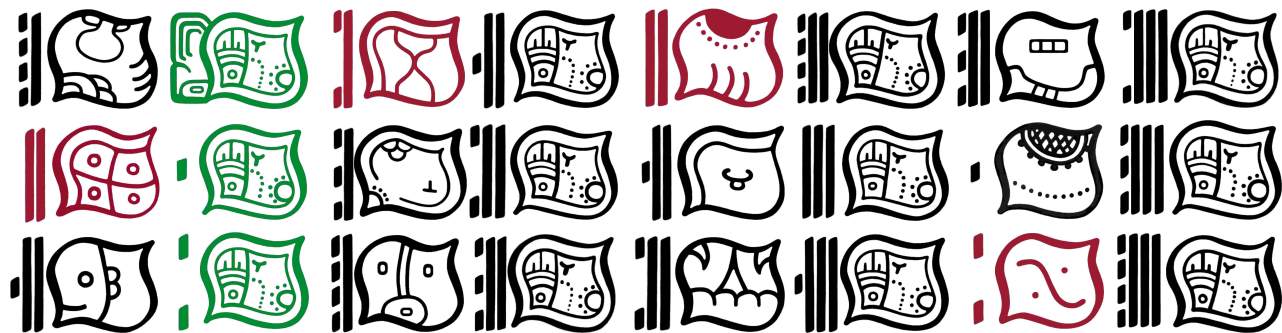
K'aakik' took two pouches of good chilis from among his things, always he had bundles of this and that for gifts, and he presented them to the trader. I had no clever words for him in return, I had never heard anything about the mountain storyteller.

Wak Butz and K'aakik' said their pleasantries, and the trader departed.

"Well, let's see what it is, that has to be given on this particular day," K'aakik' said, and I opened the feather-bundle and slid my fingers within. There was an odor on the bundle, it was the flowery scent of a young woman, more delicate than the scents of the women of my own village. I fished around until my fingers found a small, smooth thing that I drew out.

And this is what was in that bundle: a small plate from the underside of a turtle, it was the diamond-shaped plate that protects the turtle's throat. Orange was the color of this plate, red was its edges, red faded into the orange like a setting sun. It was my mother I thought of, then, her colorful featherwork and this woman-smell, it was my mother when I was a small child and did not have to stand on my own so much. Here were the two faces of that plate, it was carved on both sides: the world tree was on one side, its lines and curves were etched into the shell in thin, white lines that were very graceful; and on the other side were picture-words, it was a little bit of green magic someone had written for me:





For Maxam Cab Coh
 The fer-de-lance cannot sting you
 The crocodile cannot smash you
 The jaguar cannot tear you
 The nine lords cannot see you

Against these evils you walk unseen

The strangeness of the gift made me stupid, I mouthed these words when I slid my fingers over the pictures, and K'aakik' said with surprise, "Someone taught you the old words." It was not a good way for his voice, he was taking a secret from me and keeping it, my anger at my own foolishness made me forget the gift between my fingers.

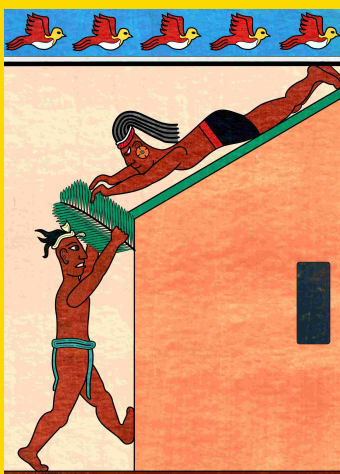
"I learned a little of the old knowledge, from my uncle," I lied, and we looked at each other over this secret, it was between us, now. I could not see if he was angry or confused, maybe he knew I had learned from my brother. I did not want things this way between K'aakik' and myself, and I looked down and opened my charm-pouch and slid this new thing into it. "I do not know why this person sent this, but it seems like a clean gift," I said. It was the beauty of the lines that made me say this, I think, it was the sureness of the etched words.

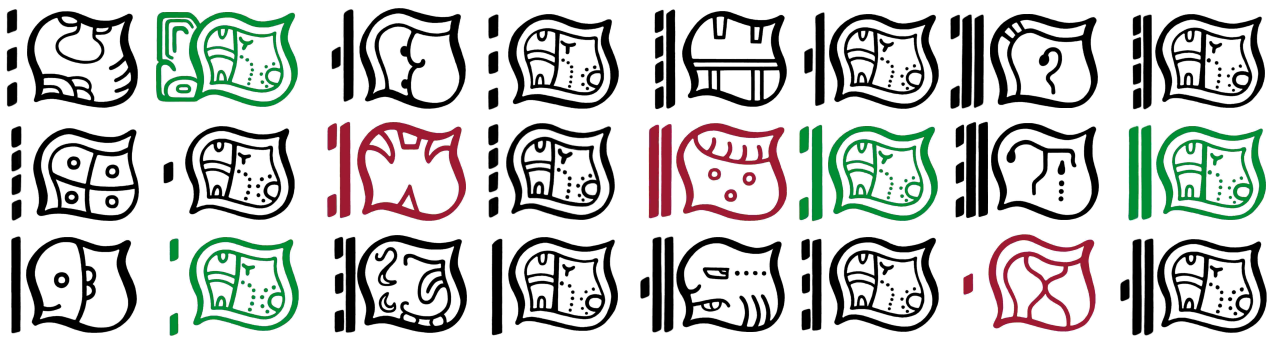
K'aakik' said nothing, and because I could not look into his face I left him and went to assist my father and brother and uncles in building Atlatla's new hut.

In the month of Sek, when the new maize plants were as high as a man's knee and did not need so much care, there were many meetings in the mat house. Several lineages wanted to move across the river and begin farming, they wanted additional fields on high ground, above flood waters. K'aakik' went to some of these meetings and said a few words to me about them. Most lineage-fathers said they did not want the village split up into this-side/that-side lineages, they convinced the caçique to say no to the lineage-fathers who wanted to go there. But the priest in his divining said that Father Sun smiled on new fields, and ah-K'awil wanted more food so that all the lineages would grow.

"All that arguing gives me a headache," K'aakik' said one evening, as we smoked.

"Why is there arguing, if the gods have already spoken for new fields?"





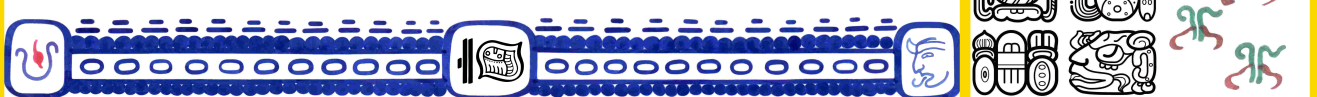
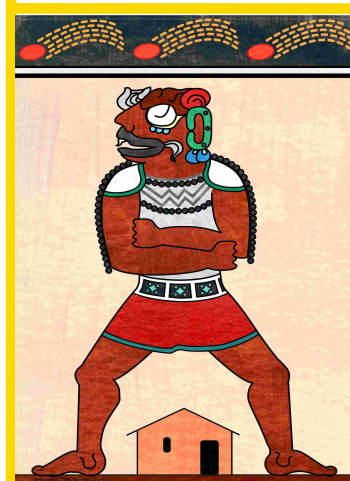
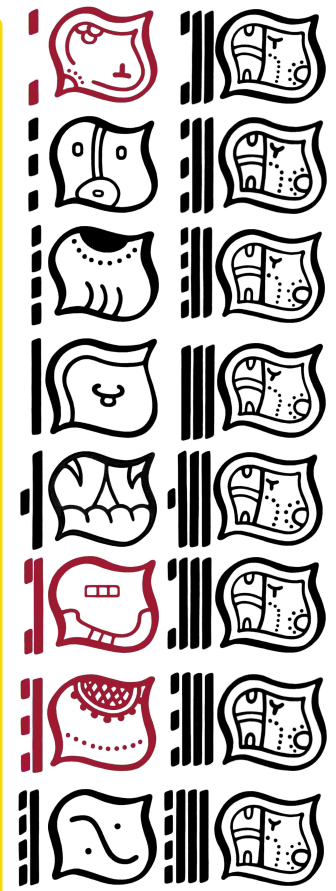
K'aakik' blew his smoke toward the hole in the ceiling. "The lands over there are rich. All the lineage-fathers want to farm across the river, but everyone knows only the most powerful lineages would receive the lands. So, the weaker lineage-fathers try to stop the stronger ones from going. That way the strongest will not get stronger."

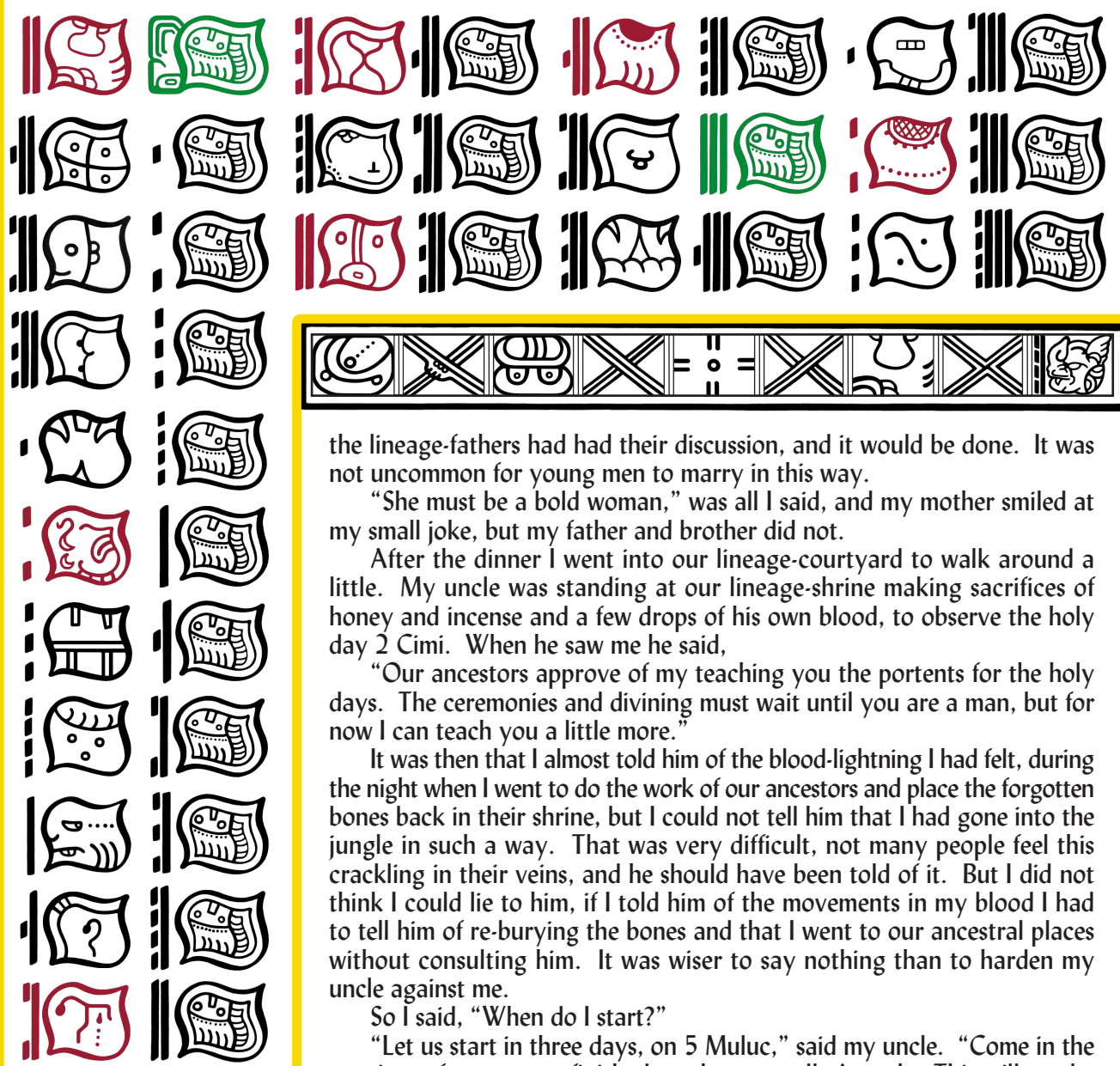
I did not ask anything more about this matter. ah-Puch could destroy a lineage with a single spirit of illness, he could destroy an entire village with a simple flood, he could destroy our ancestors in their cities with a few spells. There was no way for any lineage to become 'too strong'. It was their own little fears that made some lineage-fathers curl up and become small, even as ah-Puch stood over all of us in his might.

As a result of the mat house meetings, it was decided that many lineages would begin to make milpas on the western side of the river, but no one would move there, no new lineage-compounds would be made. It was the words of the priest that created this decision, the gods spoke through him and said what they wanted, and the caçique and the powerful men decided how to best carry out their will. This was the path that Father Sun laid before our ancestors in the beginning days, it was the way of our fathers in the days of jade and cacao, only cooperation between powerful men would drive back ah-Puch and keep our village in the light.

On the evening of 14 Xul 2 Cimi I ate dinner with my brother and parents, this was the first time since the caning that I sat down with my family and not the storyteller. Atlatla and my father were not speaking, this had become their way, it was only when I asked my brother questions about treeclimbing or when my mother said that my father was carving a set of drinking cups for this-or-that family that there was anything said. My brother did not look strong. His eyes were reddened, and he was thin. He had cut his long hair to be very short; this is a sign of disgust, but when I asked him about it, he said he did it because his hair tangled in twigs as he climbed trees. My father grunted, and Atlatla stopped looking his way at all, as we ate.

"Your brother and father are going to the Chac Ceiba compound in a few days, to discuss a young woman Te Ek' knows," my mother said. My brother became still for a moment, and then he continued eating. He showed no anger, he showed no fear from his caning. Probably Te Ek' would simply assign a young woman to my brother, someone who wanted to marry a thirteen-generation lineage and have cacao to drink and jade for her neck;





the lineage-fathers had had their discussion, and it would be done. It was not uncommon for young men to marry in this way.

“She must be a bold woman,” was all I said, and my mother smiled at my small joke, but my father and brother did not.

After the dinner I went into our lineage-courtyard to walk around a little. My uncle was standing at our lineage-shrine making sacrifices of honey and incense and a few drops of his own blood, to observe the holy day 2 Cimi. When he saw me he said,

“Our ancestors approve of my teaching you the portents for the holy days. The ceremonies and divining must wait until you are a man, but for now I can teach you a little more.”

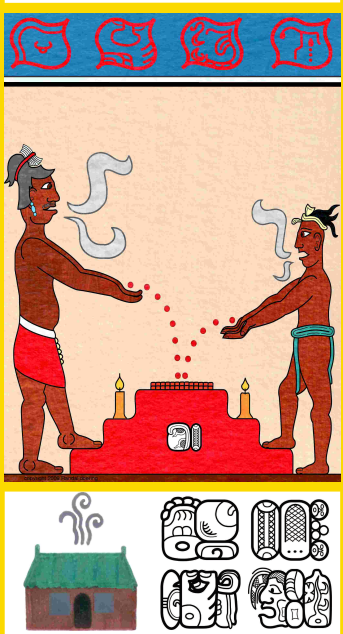
It was then that I almost told him of the blood-lightning I had felt, during the night when I went to do the work of our ancestors and place the forgotten bones back in their shrine, but I could not tell him that I had gone into the jungle in such a way. That was very difficult, not many people feel this crackling in their veins, and he should have been told of it. But I did not think I could lie to him, if I told him of the movements in my blood I had to tell him of re-burying the bones and that I went to our ancestral places without consulting him. It was wiser to say nothing than to harden my uncle against me.

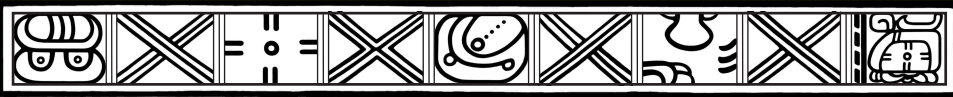
So I said, “When do I start?”

“Let us start in three days, on 5 Muluc,” said my uncle. “Come in the evening, after you are finished on the storyteller’s path. This will not be difficult for you, I think.”

“I will remember,” I said, and three evenings later I went to my uncle’s hut and ate with him and his wife. There was a little vanilla-cacao; though the village suffered from the flood my aunt still had a small amount of this saved, and there was a cup for me and a tall vase for my uncle. After our dinner my uncle and I went into our lineage-courtyard, and in front of our ancestors’ shrine he taught me the first of the holy day portents. As my brother had done, as K’aakik’ did, he taught me and then had me repeat what I learned. So it was that over the next twenty days I learned a little more knowledge of the holy days and became a more valuable person to my family and my lineage and my clan.

The building of my brother’s hut took much longer than most huts are allowed to take, because my uncle insisted on performing all the ceremonies properly and very carefully. Nothing weak was allowed, no crossed thatch





was put into place but only straight, no curved beams were set even if they were strong, mud with too much reed was combed out and made proper. For most lineages building a new hut is exciting, it means marriage and growth, but for my brother these things were not certain. Atlatla and my father and uncle met with Te Ek' concerning a young woman to marry, but when the men returned from the meeting their faces were ugly and set. My brother had found some way to be respectful to Te Ek' but not marry, he had said something that allowed him to complete his hut with no wife in sight. On this matter my uncle and father said nothing, even my mother did not know what my brother had said, and Atlatla of course did not tell me anything. It was another form of insult to our clan-father; even if my brother's words were sweet, the empty hut being raised was not good for howler monkey clan. I was very thankful that I had the storyteller's path, there was no other path where I could stay so well hidden in full sight of everyone, the evil eyes and spiteful words of people would have made me crazed if I did not have such a position.

On the evening of 6 Mol 8 Etz'nab I was working with my brother on his hut, we were fitting frames for the windows when he said a few words to me about another matter. No one else was there, he asked me earlier that day to come back and work alone with him, and because this was unusual I agreed to set aside my learning stories with K'aakik' and work on the hut. For a long time we worked, until Father Sun had descended from this world to harass ah-Puch in the underworld. I was outside his hut and Atlatla was within, scraping the edges of a frame to fit it in perfectly. With his face hidden this way he said,

"Our mother is often unhappy. You see this."

For many beats of my heart I was still. Only his blade made sounds, as he shaved away bits of wood. Finally he said,

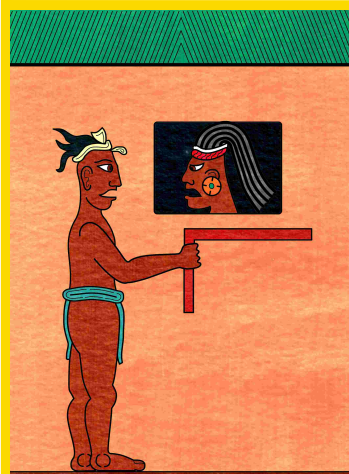
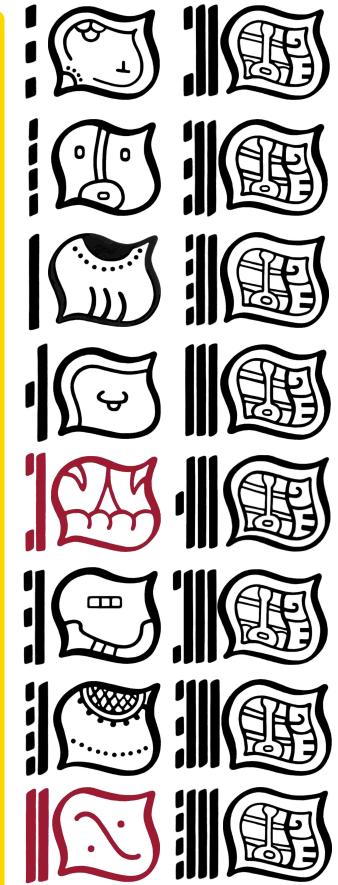
"Are you asleep, or stupid?"

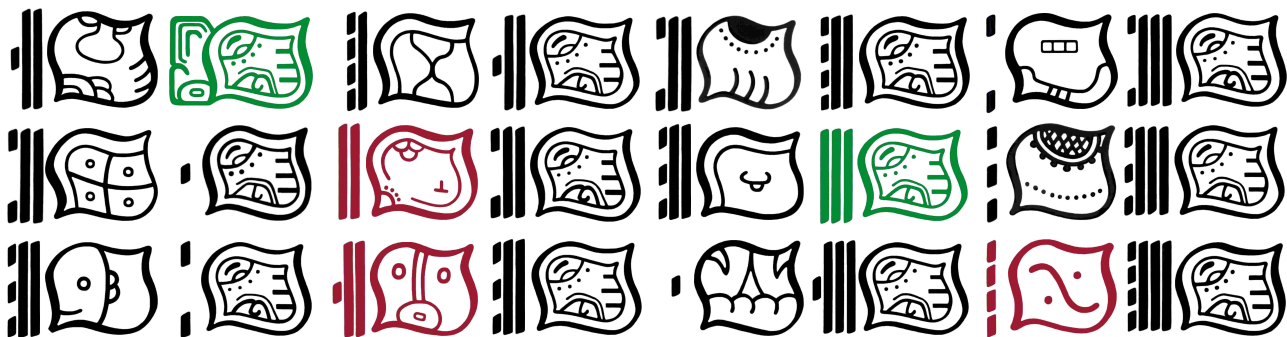
"I hear you. You know the words I sent you, when you lived in Chacwitz."

His knife scraped the frame for a while, and he pulled it into place, and then he pulled it out again to whittle on it.

"In the mountains, our mother's lineage is not powerful. Their voice is not strong, but they are bitter. They raise words with the powerful women of Chacwitz sometimes, about their stolen daughter. Their lineage suffers for losing such a fine feather-worker."

"She had to marry someone, they would have lost her anyway," I said. His words made me suddenly weary. Here was only more of my brother's





bitterness towards powerful people, there was nothing new to say.

“Listen!” he said, and he thrust the wood so that it whacked me. “Our father brought our mother here with lies. He did not ask permission for her, he ran away with her. He did this for himself. He did it for Cab Coh. Our lineage tricked her when he got her here, they were very good to her and blew smoke in her eyes. This was our grandparents. When she realized that her life here would be so difficult, she was already pregnant. Do you see?”

“No,” I said. And I did not understand him, he was too strange, this had all happened before I was even born.

“You are like talking to a stone! I know they sent you something. The powerful women sent a gift, through the traders.”

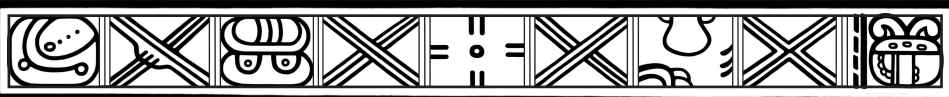
I said nothing.

“Whatever it was, burn it. Make the hottest fire you can, and burn it. The gift will be pretty; I spoke about you in Chacwitz, they know what to send. A charm, or a talisman. Burn it to ash and give it to the winds. It is cursed, it is a kind of poison. There is a game being played between our priest and certain lineages, here and in Xunich and in Chacwitz. You do not have to play, little sprout. Cab Coh does not need you to play this game. Burn their gift and take flowers to our mother. Keep her heart with us, if you still care about anything but words.” He pushed the edge of the frame with great force so that it cracked me hard and knocked me down, and I fled that place. His words spun in my head, I must have looked crazed as I stumbled back to the storyteller’s hut.

My brother had planned well, K’aakik’ was already asleep when I went inside. There was no one to see me that way, no one to make me slip foolish words. I took the Chacwitz charm from the pouch around my neck and held it close to the coals of the dying fire. It was cool in my fingers, and its fine white lines were beautiful, as my brother had said, and it was his comment about poisoned gifts that went into me, then. I still had the feather-bundle the charm had come to me in, it still smelled faintly of some young woman from the mountains.

Atlata’s miserable words wrapped around themselves, what was he saying about our mother and her unhappiness? Were my brother and I just a trick played on her by my father and my grandparents? Was this why she was so sorrowful sometimes, even when Atlata and I were there with her? She wanted to fly away, she wanted her spirit to depart her body and return to the mountains and leave us? All this caused by our dying lineage, everything for the dying lineage and the hungers of powerful men.





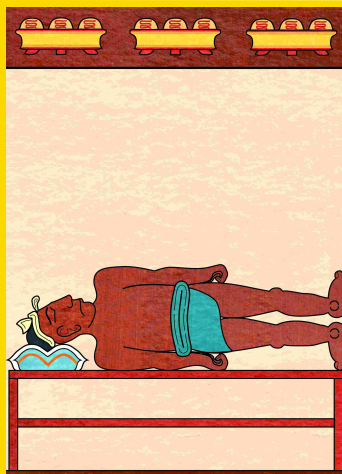
I did not burn the charm. I kept it, it was mine now, the words were pure even if the gift-givers were mere tricksters.

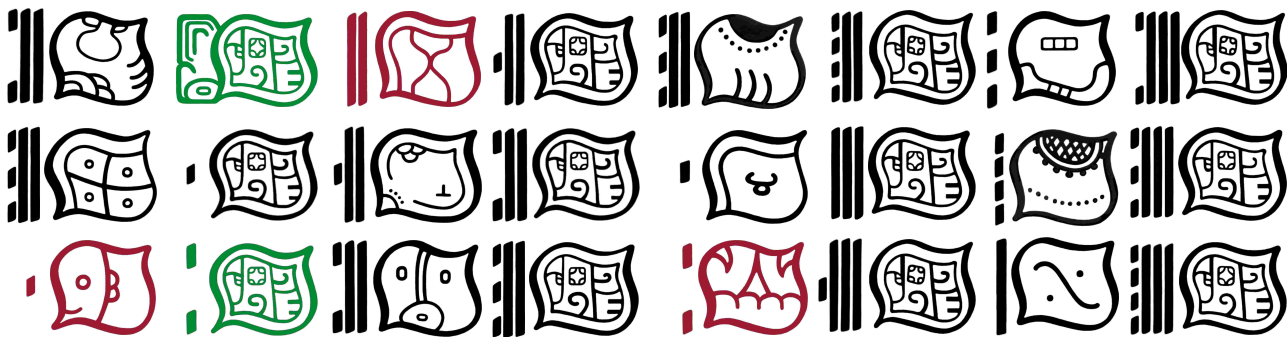
That night I could not sleep, I squatted next to the fire-pit and fed in sticks and chunks of wood. My brother's words had torn at the edges of many tender stories, and I had to stay awake and re-weave them. I was learning the seating stories for the lords and ladies of time, as I have said, and these are complicated, and their dances are long, and the changes of masks are many. And all of these things were becoming unclear, only the lines of the charm seemed perfect and true, the path of Cab Coh lineage was being revealed while the path of the storyteller became tangled.

As Father Sun was about to rise I finished reweaving the storyteller's works, my feet were again firmly on my path. Because my brother's words still clung to me, I went out into the village to seek a little gift for my mother. There were men everywhere because there is much work to be done in Mol, just before harvest begins. So I kept my face down and went to the river and picked scented flowers, three handfuls of purple and golden and white flowers, and a little green for the quetzal-birds my mother longed for. I took these to my father's hut, he was already gone to his milpa, and I put them in a vase for my sleeping mother. It was their scent that greeted her that day, and later she thanked me for this gift, though she was surprised I put them there. In truth I did not know if she still suffered from her soul leaving her body, since I was no longer often there to watch her, but after my brother's comments I was ashamed that I had stopped bringing gifts for her and decided that a son could do this even if he was fourteen, even if he was no longer a child.

It was fortunate that my father was not in his hut that morning, only bitterness could have occurred between us, for his lying to my mother and imprisoning her in our dying lineage, so long ago. I would have said nothing, but my face was not white that morning, I was very weak from knitting stories together and could not hide myself. So perhaps my ancestors were guiding the twisting paths of Cab Coh, there was some assistance through that difficult time, for the youngest sprout.

When I returned to the storyteller's hut I must have looked fearful, K'aakik' told me to lay down and turn toward the wall and eat nothing when his wife came. I did all this, and he told his wife I was not well, which was true. She left seven very hot breakfast-tamales for me, there were turkey-eggs in those and gentle chilis, I devoured everything once she went





on her way. K'aakik' watched me, and then he began saying bits of stories I knew, and when he paused I said the words that were missing. We did this until Father Sun was well up; he broke the stories on his tongue and I re-wove them and ate tamales. His eyes were narrowed but not angry, it was his teachings he was protecting, within me. When I was finished eating I said some bits of stories myself, these were ones that were not re-weaving in my head, and he would cut off my words and go somewhere else in the story and break the words there for me to re-weave. Sometimes he nodded, and when we were finished, late that day, the stories were truly whole and proper again, and the dances fell into their places, and I remembered the ways of the masks without difficulty. So it was that my work-father caught me when I was falling, he did not allow me to dishonor our path with fumbled words and broken dancing.

K'aakik' did not ask me what had happened, he knew the troubles that tormented my lineage. When he was satisfied with our word-mending, we went to our milpa and bent the stalks of the maize so the ears began drying, and we turned the squashes and the pumpkins so they would ripen fully.

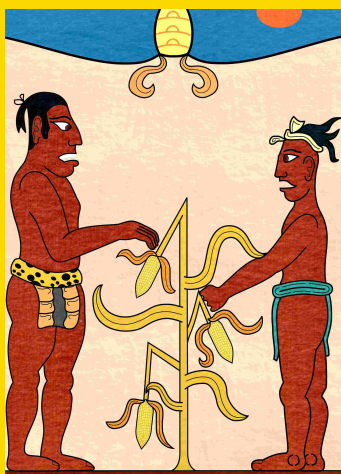
On 8 Ch'en 4 Ahau K'aakik' and I were speaking after his wife came with our dinner; our bellies were full and we were eating field-fresh guavas and resting. There had been a little excitement with ain the crocodile the day before, a large crocodile had struck a fisherman's canoe and almost tipped it, but the fisherman struck ain with his paddle and drove it away. Several hunters went to kill that crocodile, but it was clever and went into the reeds somewhere, it hid itself from their spears.

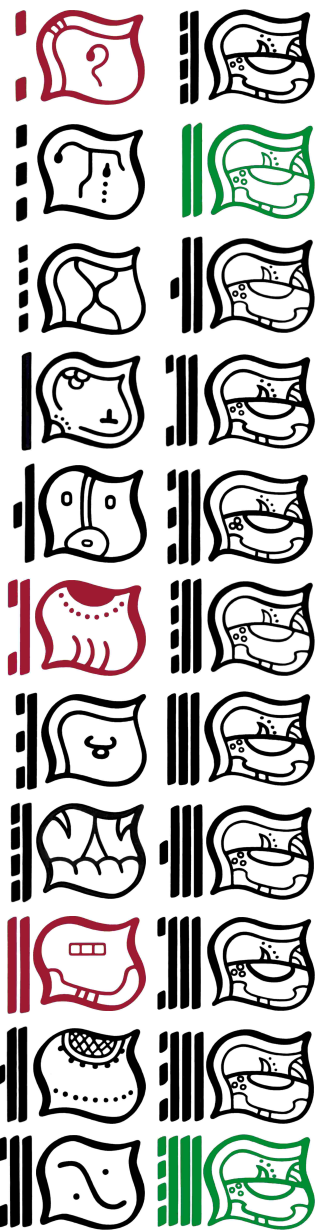
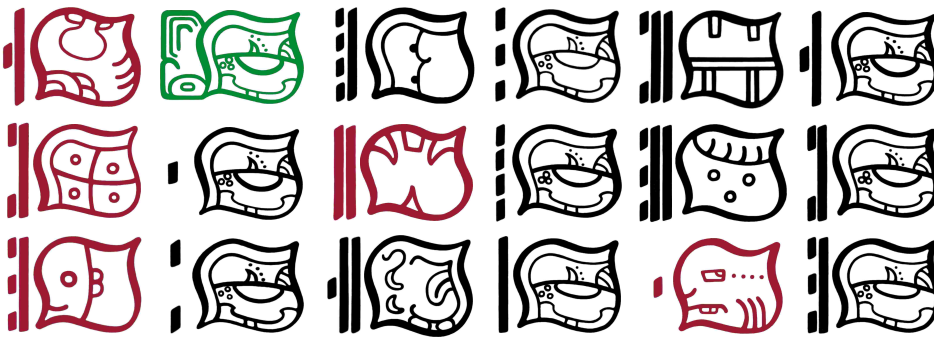
"I was going to be a crocodile hunter," said K'aak'ik'. He almost never spoke of himself, so I only said, "Yes?" and listened carefully. He looked into the fire, and then he said,

"When I was your age, I went with my brothers down to the river and learned the ways of ain. It is dangerous to be a crocodile hunter. You have to know the prayers, and you have to always pay attention. This is not deer hunting, deer cannot smash or rip, and eat you."

I laughed a little at this, because of the way he said it, as if he was instructing me in this obvious thing.

"But my father grew sick, and the priest said he did not have long to live, and I was selected among my brothers to bear these stories for the village." My father had already told me of the beatings K'aakik' received to make him learn faster, so I just nodded to encourage him, since he seemed





pained by these thoughts.

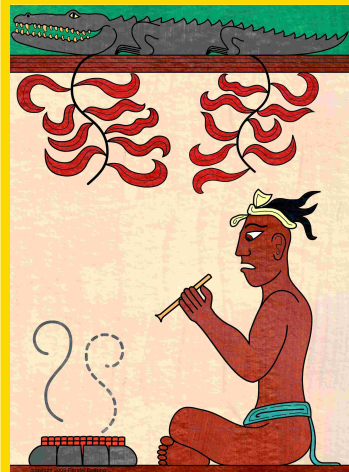
“It is very different when you learn something because you have to, instead of something you want to. I learned the ways of crocodiles in my heart, the spear in my hand became one of my own bones, not something outside myself.” He sucked the rest of the pulp from his guava and threw the rind into the fire to release a sweet odor.

“You are learning well, Maxam. You remember everything so quickly, there may be no better place for you in the village. If you decide to stay on this path, when you teach your own work-son, remember this: it is better to grow the stories a little each day than to force them in quickly.”

“This is my thought, as well,” I said.

K’aakik’ stopped speaking then and smoked a great deal of tobacco, into his pipe he stuffed more and more harsh wads, and his eyes glazed from the old pain of being denied this other path. The hut choked with smoke, I had to sleep on a mat on the floor so I did not become spin-headed and again lose the edges of my stories. There was nothing for me to do to pull this thorn from my work-father, anyone who has lived a few years in this world is filled with hurts that can only be smothered, when they open again.

A few days after this discussion I was fifteen years old and growing restless to become a man.



Many times now I have spoken of the lineages and clans in the village on the river. There are six clans made from the twenty-seven lineages, there are eight hundred people in all, it is said. Here are the names and signs of the clans and lineages, as they are seen marking orchards and huts in the village on the river:



Ain Te' is the largest lineage in

oppossum clan and the entire village. There are sixteen families, seventy people in all. This is a very old lineage, they can sing their lineage-song back to their thirteenth generation roots. The lineage-father is Mo' Tun, who is always hungry for new orchards and fields, and the lineage-shaman is very old Yax Cutz.

Oppossum is the largest clan in Oppossums marry foxes and this clan is Mo' Tun, the lineage-six lineages here, forty-four families in all. Here are the opossum lineages:



our village on the river. Our lineage-father for shaman is Yax Cutz. There are

Butz Ich is seven families, thirty-five



people. The Butz Ich lineage sings a song of nine generations and stands on its own in oppossum clan. Butz ich men are clever at trading with Xunich and enjoy much cacao and chocolate; endless canoes are theirs. The lineage-father is sharp-eyed K'in Balam, their lineage-shaman is named Waklahun



Ox Tun is a middle-sized lineage. There are nine families, forty living people.

The Ox Tuns remember five generations, they are the wood-gatherers and roof-menders for Oppossum. Their lineage-father and shaman is the wise-woman Nik' Na.

Bolon Xul is a middle-sized lineage of five families and twenty-one people. Their lineage-song is seven generations, they serve Oppossum as skilled weavers, potters, and stone shapers. Yoatt Coh is their lineage-father and lineage-shaman, both.



Caan Ha' is a small lineage of three families and ten people. They remember only three generations and serve Oppossum as sweepers and carriers. The lineage-father is Yax Xiv, there is



not a lineage-shaman.

Uch'ab is a small lineage of four families and fifteen people. They sing only five generations, and so they serve Oppossum by building and rowing canoes. Their lineage-father is K'ak' Can, there is no lineage-shaman.



Ektun Sotz' is the root curassow lineage, eleven families and fifty people belong. The lineage-father, Akot K'uk', sings an eleven generation song of mothers as well as fathers, here is an old and strong bloodline. Their lineage-shaman is Ox C'utun, a fierce caller of helpful spirits and fighter of all the evil winds.

Curassow is the second-largest howler monkeys and foxes, all The lineage-father for the clan Sak Ik'. There are five lineages made of



clan. Curassow people can marry others are forbidden to them. is old Akot K'uk', the shaman is thirty-two families in this clan.



Keh Ha' is a middle-sized lineage, there are nine families and thirty people. Because their song is only seven generations, they serve Curassow as keepers of bees and turkeys and fishes. Nikte Kin is the lineage-father and carver of tiny bones, Muluc Ai is the lineage-shaman.

Yax Tun is a small lineage, four families and twenty people. Their song is five generations, they serve Curassow as growers of tobacco. Am Tun is lineage-father and cactus-liquor maker, there is no lineage-shaman for these families.



Ma'kech is a small lineage with just three small families, fifteen people. Their lineage-song is only three generations, they draw water, weed milpas and gather wood for Curassow. Their lineage-father and lineage-shaman is Bak Pacal.



Wax Xinan lineage is five families and twenty-five people, this is a midling lineage. Their song is nine generations, these respected families stand alongside Ektun Sotz'. Caban Caan people are traders to the mountains, jade and obsidian are their way. Their lineage-father and lineage-shaman is Butz' K'in.



Can Caan has ten families with forty members. They sing thirteen generations and stand tall under Father Sun. Can Caan women weave the finest festival cloth. Butz' Nen is the lineage-father, his wife K'an Um Na is lineage-shaman.

Spotted Dog is a small clan, monkeys and turkeys. The Pakal, the lineage-shaman is lineages in Spotted Dog clan, twenty-three families belong at this time.



spotted dogs marry howler lineage-father for this clan is Te' named Chac K'in. There are four

Kan Nik is a small lineage, three families and fifteen people are all there are. The song of this lineage is seven generations, so Kan Nik people serve Spotted Dog in the fields and orchards and in gathering festival flowers. The lineage-father is K'ak Ain, there is no lineage-shaman.



Yax Ceiba is a small lineage of three families and fifteen people. Their song is five generations, here are the water-drawers and sweepers and hut menders to Spotted Dog. Mol Chapat is lineage-father and lineage-shaman, spirit breaking is his way of gaining knowledge.



Na Com is a midling lineage, seven families have thirty people. This lineage sings a song of nine generations, they stand beside Can Caan. Na Com people are clever furriers. Te' Pakal is lineage-father, Chac K'in is the lineage-shaman.





Chac Ceiba is a mid-sized lineage, there are eight families with fifty people. This lineage can sing mothers as well as fathers, they remember thirteen generations. Many shamans come from this lineage. Te Ek' is the lineage-father who marries many skilled people into his clan, his lineage-shaman wife is Oxwitz Na.

Howler Monkey is not large but Howler monkeys marry serving lineage-father is Te Ek', lineages and twenty-four families



has three of the oldest lineages. curassows and spotted dogs. The the shaman is Oxwitz Na. Five are howler monkey people.

K'u Ix is only four families and twenty people. Their song is seven generations, they serve Howler Monkey with strong herb magic, K'u Ix wives are said to know much. The men are fruit farmers. The lineage-father is Chac K'awil, the lineage-



shaman is his wife Une Cacao.



the lineage-shaman and midwife.

Tzak Ha' is a small lineage of five families, thirty people. Their lineage-song is only five generations, they care for the huts and canoes of Howler Monkey and draw water and care for gardens. Yax Tan is lineage-father, his wife Ha' Akot is both

Cab Coh is my own lineage, three families with just eight people. Our lineage song is one of thirteen generations, we stand beside Chac Ceiba. Cab Coh families farm tobacco and chilis and fruit trees; there is one feather worker, as you know. The lineage-



father and shaman is my uncle, Sak NaI.



Akbal K'in is a small lineage of four families and fifteen members, but their lineage-song is eleven generations, and they stand beside Chac Ceiba in blood. Akbal K'in men are master carvers of shell and bone, the women are weavers and mask-makers. Their lineage-father and lineage-shaman is Hun Witz of the magnificent voice.



Caban Can is the largest fox lineage, here are fourteen families and seventy people singing a song of eleven generations. Caban Can men are raised-field farmers. Hun Nai is the lineage-father of this lineage, Yax Can is the lineage-shaman.

The Fox clan is as large as Foxes can marry curassows lineage, the shaman is Yax



Can. Fox

howler monkey clan, but its lineages are not so old. and opossums. Hun Nai is the *u kuch cab* of this clan has three lineages, twenty-five families in all.

K'ak' Nen is six families and thirty people. This lineage sings seven generations, because of their poor memories they serve Fox clan on the rivers and the roads. K'aak' Nen men are traders of fruits and vegetables and pelts, the mountain path is well-known to them. Yoat Coh is the lineage-father and lineage-shaman who dances better than any other shaman.



Sak Um is a middle-sized lineage, seven families have twenty-five people. Their lineage-song is a short five generations, they serve Fox clan in the fields and by mending roofs and drawing water. Three wise Sak Um women make all the ceremonial vases and plates for our village; painting the ancient words and brushing the sacred pictures are all done within this lineage. Ch'ok K'uk' is the lineage-father who knows every name in our village, there is no lineage-shaman.



Wax Bah is the largest lineage in Turkey clan, these six families have thirty people. They sing eleven generations, and their place is in the jungle milpas and flowering fruit orchards. Singing is the gift of this lineage, all festival songs and prayers start with them. K'an K'in is lineage-father to Wax Uban, Yax Nai is lineage-shaman.

Turkey is the sixth clan and soon its families may be Turkeys can marry spotted lineage-father is K'an K'in, the clan shaman is Yax Nai. Four lineages are part of Turkey clan, there are sixteen families in all.



Tok Balam is a small lineage of three families, fifteen people. They sing seven generations and serve Turkey as craftsmen of furniture and huts and all things wooden. Tok Balam men are exceptional hunters, it is said, even very small birds fall to their darts. Their lineage-father is Hun K'awil, there is no lineage-shaman.



the smallest, my uncle says that absorbed into other clans. dogs and opossums. Their lineage-father is sad-faced Witz Ak with many dead sons, there is no lineage-shaman for Bak Na.

Bak Na is a small lineage of three families and fifteen members, here are people who came from Xunich after some floods a few generations ago. They sing a song of three generations, they serve Turkey clan as workers in fields and drawers of water. Their lineage-father is sad-faced Witz Ak with many dead sons, there is no lineage-shaman for Bak Na.



Nik Nab is a small lineage with four families and twenty people, but their song is one of nine generations, they sing their fathers and mothers and take their place beside beside Wax Uban. Bee-keeping is the way of Nik Nab men, herb-growing for Nik Nab women. Their lineage-father is K'ak' Atlatla, the bonesetting lineage-shaman is Tok Lom.



The clans are always growing a little, always withering a little. What I have said here is what I learned over many days as a child in the hut of my oldest uncle, as I waited for my aunt to make frothing vanilla-cacao or atole.

