



## What the Popol Vuh can teach design

Ricardo Sosa  
ricardo.sosa@monash.edu  
Monash Art, Design & Architecture  
900 Dandenong Road, Caulfield East, VIC 3145

### Abstract

This focused reflection explores how Mesoamerican worldviews can inform design activity. Design here is understood as a type of thinking or an approach that underpins acts of creative imagination across design areas, including the design of products, services, and systems. Mayan accounts of creation are examined here to discover insights and entailments that sustain ways of creating that are different from the dominant Western paradigm of design. With this, we wish to formulate deep questions about the core beliefs and views of what design creation can be in a more plural and inclusive world.

Keywords: co-creation; decolonization; global south; mayans; concientización

### Introduction

The stories about the origins of life influence how we perceive our everyday life and ourselves (Christian, 2019). For designers, these narratives play a role in our creative practice and identity as we engage in the creation of ideas that shape futures (Akama, 2017). This exploratory paper delves into ancient stories of creation from an indigenous group in

Mesoamerica, the Mayans, with the aim to formulate questions and insights about design beyond Western beliefs. This short reflection is part of an ongoing personal quest where the author investigates ancestral indigenous *cosmovisiones* to seek guidance for future design practices in times of transition.

A design-oriented inquiry of Mayan mythology is based on direct sources. The core question guiding this exploration is: "How may indigenous myths of creation contribute to the decolonization of creativity?". This has special relevance for designers in the Global South, who so far have been educated and highly influenced by beliefs from the Global North.

The first step in liquidating a people,' said Hubl, 'is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster. (Kundera, 1999) p. 159.

This work seeks a more complete understanding of design that goes beyond Western understandings. This journey calls for a commitment to creativity liberation (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Freire, 2000) that can reshape how design is conceived, practiced, and evaluated as an approach or way of thinking as it underpins service innovation (Eun & Sangiorgi, 2014).

The dominant paradigm of design education is rooted in Western views of creation that follow a lineage originating from Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions and lead to Vitruvius, Descartes, the Bauhaus, and modern-day IDEO. We recognize Western philosophy at the core of mainstream design today, and notice the influence of the Biblical genesis narrative in the dominant paradigm of the creative act. Design schools around the world tend to educate future designers under the Western paradigm, excluding local histories and philosophies. This perpetuates a program of cultural colonization that, for Mesoamerica, began in the fifteenth century and continues to this day.

The aim of this work is plurality and *mutual liberation* (Freire, 2000), as it seeks to enrich design discourse by incorporating other voices, other ways of understanding, and other ways of learning and being. Designers including those shaping the service economy are ontologically embedded in their contexts and in their ancestries, yet these influences are largely omitted from their education, professional practice, and intellectual inquiry (Akama, 2017).

2

## Creation for the *Quiché Mayas*

An ancient creation narrative is reviewed here informed by anthropology, historiography, and archaeology. Yet, its core intention is *designerly* as we seek to discover insights and ask new questions that lead to other ways of creating. The Mayan tradition examined here is one of the hundreds of original cultures from Mesoamerica that were colonized by European conquistadores starting in 1492 and extends to the present (Galeano, 1997). The *Popol Vuh*<sup>1</sup> is a compulsory text for middle school children in Mexico, and we consider it a window to our world that was obliterated in the Conquista and Colonia. In this sacred text, deities collaborate and deliberate to create the world and life:

Heart of Sky spoke with Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent. They talked together then. They thought and they pondered. They reached an accord, bringing together their words and their thoughts. Then they gave birth, heartening one another. Beneath the light, they gave birth to humanity.

This effortful and laboured process of creation is rooted in collaboration (i.e., “*bringing together; heartening one another*”) and indicates a substantially different nature from the biblical monotheistic and omnipotent power of creation. The difference is accentuated by the planting and growing of a Ceiba tree that anchors the creation process by connecting the levels of the Mayan under and upper worlds. Once the animals were created, the deities asked them to speak their names and to worship them.

However, They did not speak like people. They only squawked and chattered and roared... (they were told) You shall be replaced because you were not successful. You could not speak. We have therefore changed our word... Your calling will merely be to have your flesh eaten.

Upon realising this outcome, the deities experiment again:

It must simply be tried again. The time for the planting and dawning is nearing... So then comes the building and working with earth and mud. But they saw that it was still not good. It merely came undone and crumbled. It merely fell apart and dissolved... At first it spoke, but without knowledge... “We have made a mistake; thus let this be

---

<sup>1</sup> Popol Vuh: <http://www.mesoweb.com/publications/Christenson/PopolVuh.pdf>

merely a mistake. It cannot walk, neither can it multiply.” So then they dismantled, again they brought down their work and design.

This indicates a purpose guiding the creation process, reinforces its difficulty, and it also shows the capacity to acknowledge and learn from misconceptions. This iterative process is different from the biblical accounts rooted in *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian account of creation (Regalado, 2002). Here, creation is a journey of trying out and figuring out alternatives, including in consultation with experts:

We shall merely tell Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, Hunahpu Possum and Hunahpu Coyote: ‘Try again a divination, a shaping,’” And when they had spoken, straightaway the effigies of carved wood were made. They had the appearance of people and spoke like people as well. The effigies of carved wood began to multiply, bearing daughters and sons. Nevertheless, they still did not possess their hearts nor their minds. They were merely an experiment, an attempt at people... then came the end of the effigies carved of wood, for they were ruined, crushed, and killed... So this is why monkeys look like people: they are a sign of a previous human work, human design—mere woodcarvings.

Mayan creation centres on the physical properties of materials and their transformation (“woodcarving”). Iteration and collaboration efforts lead to improvements in the fulfilment of the intended outcome (wood found to be more appropriate than mud). Failed attempts lead to learning and to contingent outcomes, as explained by the resemblance between primates. A final attempt is carried under pressure once the Sun and Moon were in place by the complementary forces of the twin deities *Hunahpu* and *Xbalanque*:

Then spoke they: “The dawn approaches, and our work is not successfully completed. Thus they gathered together and joined their thoughts in the darkness, in the night. They searched and they sifted. Here they thought and they pondered. Their thoughts came forth bright and clear. They discovered and established that which would become the flesh of humanity... Thus was found the food that would become the flesh of the newly framed and shaped people. Water was their blood. It became the blood of humanity... Their flesh was merely yellow ears of maize and white ears of maize.

Though an arduous effort, the creation of the people of maize is completed before dawn. However, this outcome was *too good* and required some adjustments:

Instantly they were able to behold everything... Their knowledge became full. Their vision passed beyond the trees and the rocks, beyond the lakes and the seas... But this did not sound good to the Framer and the Shaper. Thus their knowledge was taken back: "What can be done to them so that their vision reaches only nearby, so that only a little of the face of the earth can be seen by them? It is a mistake that they have become like gods... Thus their eyes were blinded. They could see only nearby; things were clear to them only where they were.

Mayan creation concludes with the regulation of god-like capacities thus explaining the human limits of reasoning and comprehension. The story contains several key characteristics of creation regarding the *what*, *who*, *how*, and *why* which are significantly different from the biblical account. Mayan creation differs from the central idea in the biblical genesis that creation is completed. Consistent with Mesoamerican beliefs, creation for the Mayan is ongoing and hence the current version of human form is unfinished and a phase in a process of change.

## Learning from the Popol Vuh

Firstly, Mayan creation - consistent with other Mesoamerican accounts - is far from *ex nihilo*, it does not happen from scratch. There is a marked absence in these indigenous beliefs of anything like *creatio ex nihilo* ("creation out of nothing") from the biblical genesis (Waltke, 1991). Mayan creation acknowledges what exists and uses it to form the new. Mesoamerican creators act in unison with others, commanded by others, or in response to existing conditions and purposes not set unilaterally by them. This transcends hierarchies, as we understand that even deities need each other and need the help of animals.

Secondly, Mesoamerican creation is not a well-defined and orderly, linear sequence of incremental steps or stages, such as the six-day genesis. This type of creation is opportunistic and situational, and it is more accurately viewed as *re-creation*. This becomes evident in the cyclical journey of creation and destruction. Therefore, these indigenous worldviews call for collaboration, resourcefulness, emergence, situated practice, and iteratively building upon previous approximations - rather than episodic design projects that proclaim to solve problems.

The Mayan genesis suggests creative dispositions that are discerning of unintended consequences and of secondary outcomes (monkeys and

dogs as originating from failed humans). In the biblical genesis, creation is puzzle-like, a sequence of distinct segments that fit onto each other indicating a logical sequence. This could not be further from how ancient Mayans understood creation: a purposeful but intractable (wicked) journey full of emotions and serendipity. These ideas suggest a design process that is not fully amenable to planning and cannot be reduced to toolkits or methods. These ideas call for designers to continuously engage in *messy* situations (Law, 2004) and they also question the Western tendency to divide design into areas of specialization like Graphic, Industrial, and Spatial.

Individual and omnipotent dominance is antithetical to Mayan thinking. Creation is not an act of all-powerful control and conquest of order. Instead, it refers to epic explorations where creators face challenges, accept mistakes, and work in collaboration with or against others. These stories depict unfinished creations, a journey that is ongoing, opportunistic, and situational. The biblical genesis tells of a single, unitary formation process where the world was shaped, whilst the Mayans speak of a complex process of formation of the (current) world. This way of seeing and doing design starts from the underlying belief that creators do not own full agency over their creation process and over their creations. This leads to a type of design that acknowledges the agency of materials, instruments, collaborators, and more importantly, of that which is designed and those who are targeted by the design (Ihde, 2006).

Mayan deities and their partners are resourceful and imaginative. This is markedly different from a “black box” explanation of effortless commanding (“*And God said, ‘Let there be light’: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good*”, Genesis 1:3). Instead, Mayan creation takes place through diligent work, learning, trying out, defying the odds, working with others, and luck - far from an easy privilege. Moreover, humans are not seen as created in God’s image and in charge over Nature (“*replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth*”, Genesis 1:28). The Mayan deities explicitly made humans *unlike* themselves.

This way of creation calls for shared agency and giving up control and authorship. Western views on individual talent are built upon ideals from all-knowing, all-powerful monotheistic roots of creation. These foreign ideals are at odds with Mayan creativity which is hard to reduce to individual cognition, but takes place and is fundamentally grounded in experience and interaction with the world and with others. Neoliberal

agendas of control over others and over natural “resources” are well-aligned with the commandeering purpose given to humans by God but are unequivocally incompatible with Mesoamerican creation. Equally inappropriate are Western beliefs that exalt individual ownership and personal talent and celebrity status.

## Discussion

Humans seem to be constantly asking where we come from (Christian, 2019) - and where the ideas that shape our world come from (Johnson, 2010). Designers from the colonized Global South are taught to repress, ignore, or denigrate their cultural heritage and their identities in their process of being *educated* as designers following models imposed from outside their realities. To liberate design, a decolonializing agenda is essential (de Sousa Santos, 2014). This work is but a step in paying attention to the voices of ancient civilizations as a way to derive insights that help enrich education, practice, and research for a more inclusive and richer version of design. This enquiry is relevant for people from cultures that have been colonized, since recognizing our own origins is often impeded by the imposition of the colonizer’s system of values and beliefs, the systematic annihilation of our original culture, and the legacies of oppression that obfuscate our lineage (Galeano, 1997). More voices are formulating deep questions about the core beliefs and views of what design can be (Ansari, 2019). This exploratory paper seeks to contribute to this global conversation.

So far, the designers who create more products, product-services, or infrastructures for behaviour have been instrumental in the neoliberal agenda, applying their creativity to grow the profits for an elite. A commercial version of design “turns everything into merchandise, it makes merchandise of people, of nature, of culture, of history, of conscience” (EZLN, 2005). It also hides the true costs and consequences of artefacts to prioritize a lifestyle of endless consumption and mindless disposal. But even in the social design realm, the core beliefs of how people design are seldom critically examined. A more plural and inclusive version of design is needed for designers and the public to participate in design, especially

in the Global South. *Ya Basta!*<sup>2</sup> of reinforcing a paradigm of creativity that silences diversity. *Ya Basta!* of aspiring to a Global North version of design that sustains a lifestyle for a few and becomes an aspiration for most. Acknowledging ancient indigenous knowledge can inform other ways of designing, other ways of creating, and other ways of being. Indigenous people and indigenous knowledge continue to resist the dominance of a Western agenda which denigrates and subdues those considered inferior, as is the case with extreme violence in Bolivia at present (García Linera, 2019).

The ancestral ideas examined here are so profound that it is impossible to do them justice (Akama, 2017), but they do suggest a distinctiveness worth exploring to enrich our understanding of design by acknowledging different world views of creation. Indigenous beliefs “get in the way” of a homogeneous world (EZLN, 2005) and they can enrich how we teach, practice, and study design. Tentative reformulations of questions emerging from this work that can be of interest to service and all designers include:

1. How do we acknowledge and adapt to the ways in which local cultures create?
2. How do we include other voices without boxing them as “exotic” - which only leads to totemic understandings and exploitation (Kovach, 2009, p. 79)?
3. How do we identify our privilege, biases, and acculturation of Western worldviews?
4. In a plural world of design, how may we aspire to mutual liberation based on respect, celebrate differences, and emphasize dialogue and learning?
5. How do we teach, study, and practice design without preconceived ideas of what “product design problems” or “service design problems” are?
6. How do we teach more inclusive versions of design including a Design History that includes many histories to inform design in the XXI century?
7. How do we transcend a version of design that “turns everything into merchandise, it makes merchandise of people, of nature, of culture, of history, of conscience” (EZLN, 2005)?

---

<sup>2</sup> “Ya Basta” roughly translates to “No more” but the original is used to capture the Zapatista ethos

8. How do we transform a global culture of design that fosters celebrity, the cult of individuals, and awards?
9. How may we challenge creation as a property, as conceived in the Western paradigm of individual ownership of ideas, and replace it with suitable alternatives to protect collective creativity, such as the “Marcas Colectivas” example that recognises community rights (Jara, 2015)?
10. How do we de-centre design? Centring design activity around humans who are created in God’s own image is antithetical to many indigenous cultures. After all, “Why one centre?” (whether human, more-than-human, etc.) when many, or shifting centres can sustain other ways of creating and shaping the *imagined/built* environment.

## References

- Akama, Y. (2017). Kokoro of design: Embracing heterogeneity in design research. *Design and Culture*, 9(1), 79-85.
- Ansari, A. (2019). Decolonising Design [Design Studies || Carnegie Mellon University || Design from the Global South || Modernity\Coloniality, South Asian Technics, Power]. 14 October 2019. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@aansari86/>
- Christian, D. (2019). *Origin Story: A Big History of Everything*. London, UK: Penguin Press.
- de Sousa Santos, B. (2014). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. London: Paradigm Publishers.
- Eun, Y., & Sangiorgi, D. (2014). Service Design as an Approach to New Service Development: Reflections and Future Studies. *Service Futures ServDes 2014*. 9-11 April 2014. Lancaster, UK. Linköping University Electronic Press. 194-204. Retrieved from <http://www.servdes.org/>
- EZLN (2005). Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona. Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Chiapas, México. Retrieved from <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/sdsl-en>
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

- Galeano, E. (1997). *Open veins of Latin America: Five centuries of the pillage of a continent*. New York: NYU Press.
- García Linera, Á. (2019). *El Odio al Indio*. *La Jornada*. 17/11/2019. Retrieved from <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2019/11/17/mundo/026a1mun>
- Ihde, D. (2006). The designer fallacy and technological imagination. In J. Dakers (Ed.), *Defining Technological Literacy: Towards an Epistemological Framework* (pp. 121-131) New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jara, S. (2005). *Ley de Fomento y Desarrollo Artesanal del Estado de Michoacán de Ocampo* (2015). Retrieved from: <http://leyes.michoacan.gob.mx/destino/O10369fue.pdf>
- Johnson, S. (2010). *Where Good Ideas Come from: The Natural History of Innovation*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Kundera, M. (1999). *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. New York: Harper.
- Law, J. (2004). *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. London: Routledge.
- Regalado, F. O. (2002). The Creation Account in Genesis 1: Our World Only or the Universe? *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 13(2), 108-120.
- Waltke, B. K. (1991). *Literary Genre of Genesis, Chapter One*. *Crux*, 27(4), 2-10.