

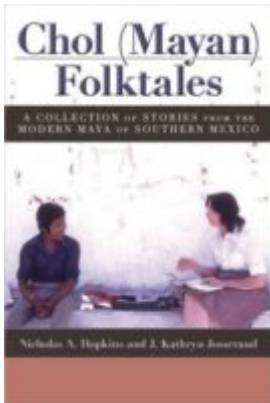
Anthropology News

Anthropology Book Forum
OPEN ACCESS BOOK REVIEWS ~ ISSN: 2380-7725

CATEGORIES

Storytelling that Links the Present to the Past

Review by [Megan D. Parker](#)



Chol (Mayan) Folktales: a Collection of Stories from the Modern Maya of Southern Mexico
by [Nicholas A. Hopkins and J. Kathryn Josserand, 2016](#)
Published July 1, 2016

Buy at Amazon

Storytelling has long been a form of entertainment among people, but folktales do more than provide amusement. Tradition. Often passed along through generations, usually from elders to youth, stories provide an oral link to our past. Folktales and offer insights into their narrative structure and history. The Chol Maya live today in rural areas of the Chiapas region. The stories in this volume were collected in the 1980s by Hopkins and Josserand, who were linguists working on the Ch'ol language, rhythm, dynamics, and linguistics of Chol folktales. The book also provides an account of the contemporary Maya through the distant past. It's a valuable contribution for a diverse audience, including linguists, ethnographers, folklorists, archaeologists, and anthropologists.

The authors divide their book into several sections. Chapter 1 provides some background, being an introduction to the field. At the start, they distinguish between what they call the Great and Little traditions of the Maya (p. 4). The Great traditions are those found at the household level. Hopkins and Josserand seem to be distinguishing between the kind of stories that the Great traditions would have told stories on a larger scale, to public audiences and inspired by ideology and philosophical activity, told at home by elders around the hearth fire. In this sense, Hopkins and Josserand's dichotomy between Great and Little traditions is based on the scale, intent, origins, and forms that stories can take.

The Chol folktales related in this volume are those originating from the Little traditions of the southern Maya, though they likely reflect values regarding "morality and worldview" found among Classic Maya commoners in the past (p. 7). He discusses storytelling among the Chol today, such as the appropriate time for telling stories and aspects of gender that are significant in the appropriate scene for a story: evening, firelight flickering in a hut, insect sounds in the tropical air (p. 13). Chapter 2 discusses how storytelling takes a specific traditional form established by the best storytellers in the community. Such individuals use the reactions of the audience" (p. 17) and share the same general features (p. 17-31). Chapter 3 introduces the folktales that seem to date back to at least the Classic period, such as certain deities and supernatural beings present in ancient Maya mythology.

The stories are divided into three parts: Myths and Fables, Tales of the Earth Lord, and Things that Come out of the Earth. The first part takes the reader back to the ancient Maya and others that reflect the modern. The English translations are written by Hopkins and Josserand are linguists, and it shows in their attention to detail in terms of both language and structure of the stories. Members of the Chol communities they were gathered from.

Stories from Part 1, Myths and Fables, include *Older Brother Sun and Younger Brother Sun*, *the Celestial Bird*, and *the Earth Lord*. The first story, *Older Brother Sun and Younger Brother Sun*, from symbolic color imagery to pre-Columbian figures (p. 53-58). It also appears to encode important cultural knowledge through an effective means of passing along such knowledge (p. 54). *The Celestial Bird* also utilizes pre-Columbian imagery in its narrative. The third story, however, appears to be a Mayan version of the Western tale about the tortoise and the hare, offering a perspective on how the steady wins the race" (p. 61-66).

Africa
aging
aid

career
childhood
Christianity
climate change
colonialism
conflict
conservation
death
development
diaspora
ecology
economic anthropology
ethnohistory
event
Ewenki
fertility
fishing
Folklore
food
gender
genocide
Georgia
Ghana
globalization

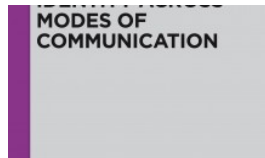
Stories from Part 2, Tales of the Earth Lord, recount those that deal with a principle deity of the Classic Maya, Chajk *Grandfather*, uses Chajk to explain the origins of archaeological artifacts, such as polished axes and obsidian blade *Cave of Don Juan* (p. 77-90) and *A Visit to Don Juan* (p. 91-112) both tell of the deity's capacity to provide resources. Both stories relate visiting caves to contact Don Juan (another name for Chajk). The act of making ritual offerings in continues to this day, now incorporated within the dominant Catholic faith.

Part 3, Things that Come Out of the Woods, relates stories about supernaturals of various forms. *The Messengers* records techniques and items for repelling or escaping such creatures. *The Jaguar Man* (p. 129-138), *The Blackma* stories of creatures that take human form to prey on people but are ultimately outsmarted by humans. The final chapter examines each individually in terms of the narrative structure put forth in chapter 2. It maps out their forms and poin

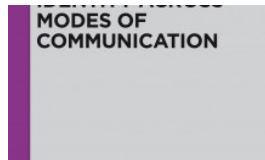
There is no concluding chapter to the book, which leaves the reader feeling a little as if it is incomplete. However, *C* contemporary stories that provide insights into Chol mythology, morality, and lifeways. It is notable in its relevance to a valuable resource for linguists and folklorists. It is also strengthened by the authors' decades of work studying Maya communities in the region. People are drawn to stories, which reflect shared cultural identity, morality, and values. *S* community and can teach us a lot about other groups of people. In this way, the book offers to transport the reader from the hum of insects with corn hanging from the ceiling to dry.

Megan D. Parker is a PhD student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kentucky. Her research in Mesoamerica.

Related Reviews



[Communication and Articulating Identity: A Cultural Approach](#)



[Communication and Articulating Identity: A Cultural Approach](#)



Milpa, Forest, Garden: Maya Agri

[Previous Article](#)

[Back to Top](#)

Related Categories +

[Folklore](#)
[language](#)
[Maya](#)
[Mesoamerica](#)
[Storytelling](#)

Commenting Disclaimer +

[governmentality](#)
[Guatemala](#)
[heritage](#)
[history](#)
[history of anthropology](#)
[Holocaust](#)
[household](#)
[identity](#)
[imagination](#)
[immigration](#)
[India](#)
[Inequality](#)
[Islam](#)
[Italy](#)
[Japan](#)
[Jewish studies](#)
[kinship](#)
[landscapes](#)
[language](#)
[Latin America](#)
[linguistic anthropology](#)
[literature](#)
[materiality](#)
[mathematics](#)
[Maya](#)
[medical anthropology](#)
[Mesoamerica](#)
[migration](#)
[mining](#)
[neoliberalism](#)
[NGOs](#)
[objects](#)
[Pacific](#)
[Papua New Guinea](#)
[pedagogy](#)
[Peru](#)
[philosophy](#)
[pilgrimage](#)
[post-colonialism](#)
[post-socialism](#)
[poverty](#)

prisons
psychological anthropology
public health
race
refugees
religion
rhetoric
ritual
Sarajevo
science
secrecy
sexuality
slavery
social change
sociolinguistics
state
Storytelling
theory
tobacco
tourism
Venezuela
violence
water
Yanomami
Zapotec