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Shpuch and Shtaj

Shpuch and Shtaj

by
Joe R. Christopher

The elders of the pueblo wished to gain gifts from the gods. They knew where a river broadened out for a brief distance and that often three gods came there to bathe. The place was called Tohil's Bath. One said: Let us choose three beautiful maidens and send them to Tohil's Bath. Another said: They can take off their clothes and pretend to be washing laundry. A third said: Surely the gods will reward them for their sexual surrender. So they chose the three most beautiful maidens in the pueblo, told them to go to Tohil's Bath and to bring back gifts from the gods, and threatened them and their families if they failed the elders' purposes. These three maidens were named Shpuch, Shtaj, and Kibatsunja.

*Where are my children? Where have they vanished?
Where are their bodies? Where are their corpses?
Drowned in the river, lost in the waters,
carried by the currents, eaten by catfish.
Where have I lost them? Where are their bodies?*

The three maidens were in the river's edge when the gods came. The gods' names were Tohil, Aulish, and Hacauts. Aulish said: We are coming after you. And Shtaj said: Yes. But Tohil said: Where do you come from? Whose daughters are you? Shpuch said: We are the daughters of importance in the pueblo, so give us gifts to return with afterwards. Then Hacauts said: Why are you here, where you have not done washing before? And Kibatsunja said: The elders told us to come here.

*Where are the siblings? Where have they vanished?
Bloated and swollen, why aren't they rising?
On the deep currents, why aren't they floating?
Why can't I see them, vanished forever?
Where are the babies? Where are their bodies?*

After the sexual surrenders, the gods gave the women their cloaks. That of Tohil had a figure of a mountain lion on it, and that of Aulish had the figure of an owl on it. Both of these were well received by the elders when they were brought back to the pueblo. But the cloak of Hacauts had the figures of bees and hornets inside it. Hacauts said to Kibatsunja, who alone of the three women had knelt down and kissed her lover's feet afterwards: Can you take this cloak to your village without pausing to put it on on the way? She said: I will not try it on. He said: See to it, then. And when she brought it to the pueblo, the elder who tried it on was stung by the bees and the hornets, and could not remove the cloak.

*Where are the twosome, brother and sister?
Where can I find them, whither locate them?
Lost in the river, lost in the waters,*

*lost in the currents, lost in the darkness—
deep in the river, tangled in coldness.*



The elders of the pueblo said: Shpuch and Shtaj have done well, and we will honor them. But Kibatsunja brought death to an elder, so we will have her killed. But one elder said: No, for she may have the protection of Hacauts and we would not bring more disaster to the pueblo. After much discussion, they agreed she would have a small adobe house on the edge of the village and some land on which to raise her food. They also agreed: Her name shall be anathema, no more to be spoken in the pueblo—we can say it is because she has been set aside by being the lover of a god.

*Where are the corpses? When can I find them?
Twins at their birthing, less than a year old,
lost in the currents, lost in the river:
Bones on the bottom, lost in the mosses—
skeletons broken, tiny the fragments.*

Kibatsunja found herself pregnant and in due time gave birth to a boy. Some women of the village quietly helped her, despite the interdiction. And Kibatsunja worked her ground and cared for her baby. Hacauts visited her when the boy was three lunar months old to see his son. He also lay with her and, in deference to the god, she afterwards knelt and kissed his feet. Soon thereafter she found herself pregnant again. And so it went. She had seven children, four boys and three girls. She turned down all advances from men of the pueblo who thought her lonely in her house. Hacauts visited her to see his children and to lie with her even after she no longer became pregnant. And her children, the demigods, grew up to be important in the pueblo. The boys became handsome men who were good warriors and hunters. Three of them survived warfare and recovered from their wounds. They had many children and did not die until they were in their nineties. The girls became beautiful women. None died in childbirth, and they did not die until they were in their eighties. But the name of Kibatsunja was forgotten in the village although handed down secretly among some of her descendants to the fifth generation.

*Wailing by marshes, crying by streamlets,
searching the rivers, fountains to deltas,
hunting for corpses, bodies long vanished—
where can I find them? Where are the fragments?
Were the remainders eaten by turtles?*

When they met the first time, before she left with the cloak, Shtaj asked of Auilish: When do you return here? When can I meet you again? He named a time, half a lunar month away. And she met him then, waiting naked, and lay with him again. Again she asked: When can I meet with you again? He named a time, a lunar month away. And she said: No sooner than that? He said: No sooner—for I have other obligations. So they met again and again, sometimes in a month, sometimes in half a month, once in three months. During the colder months, she wore a bear skin for warmth until he came. She turned down a gift at the second meeting: All I want is you as a lover. But she did not become pregnant, and she became bolder in asking for new sexual practices. After three years and some months, he replied to her request for a new meeting: I think not. He grasped her by her shoulders, as she stood naked before him, and said: I give you a final gift—and a curse. I give you immortality, but any man you touch with your cold, cold touch shall die. In later years, she haunted the pools and streams where men bathe, showing herself naked, calling to the men to come to her, to enjoy her. And those that did, died in her embrace.

*Silent the babies, silent their cryings;
long is their silence, quiet unbroken.
Noisy my callings, noisy my weepings.
Where are my babies? Where are their bodies?
Why can't I find them, fruitlessly searching?*

Before Shpuch left with Tohil's cloak, she asked the god: Will I see you again? He said: I will visit you three lunar months after you give birth to my twins. Nine months and some days later she did give birth to twins, a boy and a girl. And two months after that, she took her twins and went with some relatives to a near-by pueblo with which their pueblo was, at the time, at peace. A major festival was being held with drums and rattles and flutes and some costumed dancers in the central plaza. As Shpuch watched and nursed a baby, she saw a dancer in a skin like a mountain lion and a head dress like a mountain lion's head above his own. She was certain it was Tohil and cried out to him, but he did not seem to hear her. When the dance was finished, he was across the dancing area from her, and he put his hand on the shoulder of a young woman—perhaps a maiden—and she left with him. Shpuch wept, and, carrying her babies, she fled from her relatives. Crying and screaming she fled, and her babies, disturbed by the jolting and the noise, cried also. She came to a river not far from the pueblo she had been visiting, and there she drowned her babies. She left their bodies in the river. A lunar month later, Tohil came to her in her village. He asked: Where are my twins? She said: They are lost. He did not ask her where or when or under what happenchance. Tohil said: Then you will seek them—seek until you find them. Go forth crying out for them. Search the river sides. Only when you have found them and brought them to me to admire, may you rest.

*Where are his children? Where are the siblings?
Where have they wandered? Where are they straying?
Lost in the river, buried in waters,
where are the bodies? Where have they washed to?
Why can't I find them, endlessly hidden?*

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A NOTE BY THE AUTHOR. ““Shpuch and Shtaj” is an adaptation of an episode told in the fourth section of the *Popol Vuh*. Four examples will illustrate some of the changes. (1) In the original the two titular maidens are named Xpuch' (the apostrophe is for a glottal stop) and Xtaj and one of the gods is named Aulix. Since in the transcription of Mayan, *x* is used for the *sh* sound, and since in English *x* is pronounced *ks* or *eks* (as in *extra* and *X-ray*) or *z* (as in *xenophobe*), an adaptation for English speakers was to spell the names Shpuch, Shtaj, and Aulish. Likewise, the *tz* in the names of Hacauitz and Kibatzunja becomes *ts*. (2) For the author's own reasons, the setting was shifted from Central America to a vaguely described New Mexico (cf. *pueblo*, *adobe*, *plaza*); in connection with this, the animal on the first cloak was changed from a jaguar to a mountain lion. (The animal on the second cloak was changed from an eagle to an owl, but that was because Jaguar Night decorated the cloak in the original version.) (3) Only two maidens appear in the *Popol Vuh*. The third maiden—K'ib'atz'unja (more glottal stops)—is named in *The Title of the Lords of Totonicapán*. (4) The refrains and the last two prose passages are shaped to tie to the later Hispanic legend of *La Llorona*, since some scholars believe this

episode was the origin of that legend. The author has two translations of the *Popol Vuh* on his shelves: That by Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley, based on the Spanish version of Adrián Recinos (1950), and that by Dennis Tedlock (rev., 1996). No substantial differences appear in their versions of the episode, but the introduction and notes of Tedlock have been influential in some details of this adaptation. (The references to the two maidens—with and without the third—may be traced through his index, checking under the listing for “Lust Woman,” his translation of *Xtaj*.)

