

**Rabinal Achi:
A Mayan Drama of War
and Sacrifice**

DENNIS TEDLOCK

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Rabinal Achi

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Rabinal Achi

A MAYAN DRAMA
OF WAR AND SACRIFICE



Translated and interpreted by
DENNIS TEDLOCK

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Notes on Pronunciation

When words from the Mayan languages of Guatemala appear in italics they follow the 1988 spelling rules laid down by the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, except that vowels are limited to the five found in sources that predate these rules.

With the following exceptions, consonants may be pronounced as in English: *j* is like Spanish *j*, with the tongue farther back than for English *h*; *l* is like Welsh *ll*, with the tongue farther forward than for English *l*; and *q* is like Hebrew *qoph*, with the tongue farther back than for English *k*. Two other Mayan sounds are found in English but are spelled differently: *tz* is like English *ts* in “sets,” and *x* is like English *sh*. The glottal stop, which is equivalent to *tt* in the Scottish pronunciation of “bottle,” is indicated by *ʔ*; when it follows another consonant it is pronounced simultaneously with that consonant. Vowels are approximately like those of Spanish or Italian. Stress is always on the final syllable of a word.

Traditional spellings have been used for the title of the play and for names of the Mayan nations of Guatemala, such as Quiché, Cakchiquel, Pokomam, and Kekchí. For the names of Mayan languages the spellings of the Academia have been followed, as in the cases of K'iche', Kaqchikel, Poqomam, and Q'eqchi'.

Introduction

Many plays are performed in contemporary Mayan communities, but there is only one that dramatizes a time when Europeans had yet to appear over the horizon of the Mayan world. This same play is one of the few whose dialogue is entirely in a Mayan language. The town where the play is produced is Rabinal, in the highlands of Guatemala, and one of the play's two titles is *Rabinal Achi*, "Man of Rabinal." Whenever the characters are not engaged in dialogue they dance to the music of trumpets, which gives the play its other title: *Xajoj Tun*, "Dance of the Trumpets."

The character named Man of Rabinal is a warrior in the service of Lord Five Thunder, who rules the Rabinal nation from a fortress on a mountaintop. Guarding the boundaries of his court and kingdom are two characters who take their names, Eagle and Jaguar, from the sources of their spiritual power. Present within his court are his unmarried daughter, called the Mother of Quetzal Feathers; his wife, identified only as Lady; and a slave. For all these characters there is just one antagonist: Cawek of the Forest People, a renegade warrior from the ruling house of the neighboring Quiché nation. Man of Rabinal captures him and brings him before the court of Lord Five Thunder. In the end Cawek loses his head, but not before his status as a member of the nobility is given full recognition by his captors.

Considered as a dramatization of Mayan history, *Rabinal Achi* is mainly concerned with a series of events that reached a climax in the early fifteenth century. But when it is considered as a representation of Mayan culture, and the culture of Mayan royalty in particular, it reaches much deeper into the past. The ax and shield

carried by each of the main characters are symbols of royal power that go back to the court dramas of what archaeologists call the Classic period, running from the fourth through the tenth centuries. The ancient axes took the form of an image of a deity with a stone ax blade mounted in his forehead, a celestial deity capable of hurling thunderbolts and meteors. When Cawek, Man of Rabinal, and Lord Five Thunder invoke “Sky” and “Earth,” as they do almost every time they speak, they are using a shortened version of “Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth,” an ancient epithet for the god of heaven-sent fire and the patron of kings.¹

Events in the history of royal lineages provided subjects for dramas long before the Spanish arrived, but the dialogues were sung or chanted by choruses while the actors danced silently. The early missionaries intervened in Mayan theater on a massive scale, substituting Christian hymns for Mayan songs or suppressing traditional productions altogether. Meanwhile they introduced alternative dramas from the vernacular theater tradition of medieval Europe.² Despite these efforts, one of the most popular plays to emerge during the early colonial period had an all-Mayan cast of characters speaking all-Mayan dialogue, featured Mayan music played on long wooden trumpets, and dramatized the capture and sacrifice of a prisoner of war. *Rabinal Achi* is a direct descendant of this play.

As in the case of the plays that were introduced from Europe, many of which are still performed today, the dialogue in *Rabinal Achi* is scripted. The text currently in use is the latest in a series of versions that stretches back into the sixteenth century by way of manuscripts that have long since been discarded or lost. The composers of early versions lived in a time when many Mayan authors were adopting the roman alphabet as a medium for writing works in their own languages. The particular idea of using writing to create a script was a new one, coming with the introduction of European plays. Mayans had never used their own writing system to dictate, word for word, what performers would be expected to say.

The dramatists who scripted and produced ancestral versions of *Rabinal Achi* worked under the constant threat of censorship. Their solution to the problem of keeping the memory of Mayan court drama alive was to separate the words from the music and remove all but the outlines of the original religious content from public view. To this day the dialogue is spoken by actors rather than sung by a chorus, and the dance music is purely instrumental. Matters of religion are mostly the responsibility of the play’s *K’amol B’e* or “Road Guide,” a native priest-shaman who does most of his work behind the walls of houses and on mountaintops.

The most famous of the works produced by highland Mayan authors of the sixteenth century is the *Popol Vuh*, a sacred book whose story runs from the origin of the world to the second generation after the European invasion. A number of the historical events recounted in this and other writings of the same period are

also mentioned in the dialogues of *Rabinal Achi*. The difference is that the composers of the script for the play created a montage, drawing upon episodes that occur as many as six generations apart in historical accounts and assigning them all to the generation of Man of Rabinal and Cawek of the Forest People.³ But they did focus on one particular period: the tumultuous reign of Quicab, the most famous of Quiché kings. During the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, he ruled over a confederation whose oldest members, in addition to the Quiché nation itself, were the closely related Rabinal, Cakchiquel, and Tzutuhil nations. Like other Quiché kings he was a member of the house of Cawek, the same lineage that gives its name to Cawek in the play.

Early in his reign Quicab launched a series of military expeditions that greatly expanded his domain, but while he was away on his grandest campaign a revolt broke out among his Quiché subjects at home. One of the instigators was his fifth son, who may well have served as the historical model for Cawek in the play. Against Quicab's objections, the rebels expanded the territory occupied by the Quiché nation at the expense of its Rabinal and Cakchiquel neighbors. The area affected by this invasion, as described by Quiché and Cakchiquel authors, coincides closely with the area invaded by Cawek and his army of rebels, as described in the dialogue of *Rabinal Achi*.

The play portrays Lord Five Thunder and Man of Rabinal as loyal supporters of an old order that has been disrupted by the unauthorized actions of Cawek. Rabinal territory has been invaded by members of the Quiché nation, but it was not the lords at the Quiché capital who "set them loose" but rather Cawek, acting on his own. As for ethnic rivalry between the two nations, the only substantive difference expressed in the play is the fact that Rabinal is the home of carved calabashes that serve as drinking vessels. Speaking from the Quiché side, Cawek can do no better than insist that where he comes from, the drinks are stronger and the Eagle and Jaguar dancers are fiercer. There were and still are linguistic differences between the two nations, but the script has all the characters speaking the same dialect of the same language. Some of the words and phrases they use are characteristic of Rabinal and neighboring towns, but Cawek actually uses these more often than the other characters.

By the time of the Spanish invasion, the breakup of the confederation that had once been ruled by Quicab was already a century or more in the past. The kingdom embracing the Quiché nation fell in 1524, but that did not give the invaders any territorial rights with respect to former Quiché allies. The lords of the Cakchiquel nation resisted until 1530, while the Rabinal lords held out until 1537. For early colonial audiences, a play that revived the memory of the confederation might have raised questions as to whether a united resistance to the Spanish

invasion could have produced a different result. *Rabinal Achi* does not offer a direct answer to this question, but it does suggest that help from the direction of the Quiché capital would not have been what was needed anyway. Man of Rabinal reminds Cawek that there was a time when the two of them fought on the same side, but that Cawek caused heavy Rabinal losses by underestimating the strength of the enemy. This incident might well have brought to mind the more recent Quiché failure to deal effectively with the Spanish threat, which led, thirteen years later, to the submission of Rabinal.

The task of dramatizing events that took place before the Spanish invasion did not prevent the composers of the Rabinal script from paying attention to the new plays from Europe. As in the case of other Mayan writers of the early colonial period, they neither ignored what was European nor gave it uncritical acceptance. One particular imported play that seems to have caught their interest is *Carlomagno y los doce pares de Francia* or “Charlemagne and the Twelve Knights of France,” ultimately based on the twelfth-century *Chanson de Roland*.⁴ That play opens with a speech by Fierabrás, the chief antagonist, whose challenge to Carlomagno is answered by Oliveros, a knight. In the same way, *Rabinal Achi* opens with a speech by Cawek of the Forest People, who challenges Lord Five Thunder but is answered by Man of Rabinal. There are other parallels, but there are also various ways in which the plot lines of *Carlomagno* are reversed in *Rabinal Achi*. For example, when Fierabrás is defeated he humbles himself before Carlomagno and begs to begin a new life in his service, whereas Cawek is defiant before Lord Five Thunder and proudly accepts death.

While it is true that Cawek comes to a point where he sees very clearly what his end will be, this is not because he thinks he has reached the final moment in a destiny that has always been his. Instead he declares that “my day has been turned upside down / my birth has been turned upside down,” meaning that the destiny he was given by the god who ruled the day of his birth was reversed when he was captured. This is an important point, because one of the recurrent themes running through the literature on the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica is that their attitude toward life was and still is fatalistic.⁵ They certainly have a long-standing desire to understand rhythms in the unfolding of time, but that does not require them to see the future as unalterable.

The representation of Cawek’s death at the hands of his captors requires a major revision of received notions about the role of human sacrifice in ancient Mesoamerica. The prevailing view, which is not all that different from the lurid fantasies that appear in action comics and movies, is that the peoples of this region were driven by their belief in gods with an enormous appetite for blood, and especially for torn-out human hearts. But in the play, as in ancient Mayan sculpture

and painting, the focus is not on heart extraction but on decapitation, a practice that is hardly exotic from a European point of view.⁶ More importantly, as the play reveals and as ancient Mayan inscriptions confirm, the so-called victims were the deadly enemies of those who sacrificed them. And most important of all, the play makes it clear that prisoners were put on trial before they were sacrificed. In other words, a sacrifice was also an execution. Cawek confesses to multiple offenses against his captors, offenses that took a toll in Rabinal land and lives and threatened the life of Lord Five Thunder himself.

Looking at *Rabinal Achi* from this perspective, we can better understand why similar plays enjoyed widespread popularity during colonial times. For Mayans, such productions recalled a time when the legitimate use of lethal force, which underlies the authority of all states, had yet to be usurped by foreign invaders. As for the foreigners themselves, they sought to extinguish the very memory of such a time, repeatedly issuing bans against these plays from 1593 until 1770. In stating their reasons they evaded the political and judicial issues by denigrating Mayan religion and warning that representations of human sacrifices would lead to real ones. After four centuries a shift in perspective is overdue, to put it mildly. Today we find ourselves in a doubly awkward position, ignoring the judicial dimension of ancient Mayan ceremonies while at the same time forgetting the religious roots (and continuing religious overtones) of civil executions in our own society.

Out of all the dramas that centered on the capture, trial, and execution of a prisoner of war, the one performed in Rabinal is the only surviving example. In several other towns there are plays that retain such features as axes, shields, a log drum with keys that produce different tones (sometimes accompanied by trumpets), and an all-Mayan cast of characters. But these plays lack scripts, and their story lines have drifted far away from political and historical issues. Only *Rabinal Achi*, among all the plays performed in Mayan towns today, proclaims that history did not begin with the arrival of Europeans.

With the end of the Guatemalan civil war of the early 1980s came the flowering of a Mayan cultural revival. Questions of linguistic and ethnic identity were debated between those who sought Mayan unity and those who promoted the uniqueness of their own particular districts or towns. In the case of Rabinal and two neighboring towns, there was a controversy as to whether the local language should be considered a dialect of K'iche',⁷ the most widely spoken of all Mayan languages, or whether it should be given the status of a separate language, called *Achi* after the play. In terms of linguistics as practiced in the academy, the case for a separate language is weak. People from Rabinal and people who speak even the most distant of K'iche' dialects have little difficulty in conversing with one another.⁸ But in terms of the historical events that damaged the relationship between the two

nations, as represented in the play, the choice of K'iche' as a name for the language they share is an unfortunate historical accident. It was in Quiché territory that Spanish missionary linguists first studied this language, and they followed the practice of members of the Quiché nation in calling it K'iche' or Quiché. Linguists, anthropologists, and historians have been calling it by that name ever since.

There are two extant versions of the *Rabinal Achi* script.⁹ The story of the older one begins in 1850, when Bartolo Sis of Rabinal made a copy of a previous version that has long since been lost. Five years later Rabinal received a new parish priest in the person of Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, who was an avid collector of manuscripts bearing on American antiquities. Among his many famous acquisitions was the only surviving copy of the K'iche' text of the *Popol Vuh*. In Rabinal he did not succeed in gaining direct access to the Sis manuscript or its predecessor, but he did persuade Sis to read the text aloud to him while he made his own copy. In 1857 he left Guatemala for Paris, where he turned to the task of preparing his finds for publication. His *Popol Vuh* saw print in 1861, followed by *Rabinal Achi* in 1862.¹⁰ In both books the texts were accompanied by translations into French.

Brasseur sent a copy of the *Rabinal Achi* volume to a man who had been his servant and guide during his stay in Rabinal, and at some point the play's directors began using the printed version of the text to rehearse their actors. In 1913 the owner of the book allowed the current director, Manuel Pérez, to make a handwritten copy of the text of the play. Pérez made various editorial changes, altering spellings to conform to local practice and rewording some of the lines to make them sound better. His version of the text has served as the script for subsequent directors, including the present one.

In 1994 Alain Breton published a facsimile of the Pérez manuscript, accompanied by a transcription and French translation. Breton claimed that Pérez had worked from some prior manuscript version of the text rather than from Brasseur's book, but in fact Pérez made no secret of his reliance on the printed version, reproducing details of its typographic design and copying one of its page numbers. The true value of his version of the text lies not in its supposed connection to some older manuscript but in its documentation of the editorial sensibilities of a person who had acquired his knowledge of the play not only by reading its lines but by hearing them and speaking them from memory as well.¹¹

Six Spanish versions of *Rabinal Achi* have been published, variously based on the 1862 French translation by Brasseur de Bourbourg, an unpublished French translation by Georges Raynaud that dates from the 1920s, a 1929 Spanish translation of Raynaud by Luis Cardoza y Aragón, and the 1994 French translation by Alain Breton.¹² English versions, one of them complete and the other three partial, have been based, in turn, on Brasseur's French and/or the Spanish trans-

lation of Raynaud's French.¹³ The only translators who have worked directly from the original language of the play rather than from French or Spanish are Brasseur, Raynaud, Breton, and myself.

The magnitude of the problems with previous translations may be judged by the handling of a sentence Cawek addresses to Eagle and Jaguar in his final speech: *Mata qatz jumerwachil kiniwitzmarisaj*. In Raynaud, as translated by Cardoza y Aragón, this comes out as "Que me maten en un instante," while Breton has "afin qu'en un instant vous me fassiez devenir plumage."¹⁴ The problems with these renditions begin with their failure to fit the context of the ongoing dialogue. In his previous speech Cawek described Eagle and Jaguar as toothless, clawless, and otherwise less than awe-inspiring. It therefore seems unlikely that he would now expect them to be capable of killing him swiftly, as Raynaud and Cardoza y Aragón would have it, or causing him to sprout instant feathers, as Breton would have it.

If we reconsider Cawek's sentence word by word, the first problem we have to deal with is that *mata* makes the whole thing negative, a fact ignored in both of the quoted translations.¹⁵ The second word, *qatz*, means "certainly," and the first two words together mean "certainly not." The third word, *jumerwachil*, is not just "in an instant," but more literally "in one instant of the eyes," which is to say "one blink." So whatever Eagle and Jaguar are planning to do to Cawek, he is warning them *not* to expect to get it over with quickly.

The final word in the sentence is built around the verb stem *-itzma-*, which has to do with hair, fur, or feathers and means that they either grow or stand on end. Putting the stem back together with its prefixes and affixes, it means "you are going to cause my hair, fur, or feathers to grow or stand on end."¹⁶ Among these possible meanings, the standing on end of Cawek's hair seems a more plausible choice than the growth of his feathers. Reassembling all four words and putting their meanings in English order, I come up with this sentence: "You certainly won't stand my hair on end in the blink of an eye." When I asked the current director of the play to explain what Cawek means by this statement, his response was simply, "He's saying they won't win," thus confirming that the statement is a negative one. In actuality Eagle and Jaguar do win, but not before Cawek has led them and all the other characters in a long walk, one that ends with his decapitation at stage center.

In making my own translation of *Rabinal Achi*, I have taken both the Brasseur and Pérez versions of the text into consideration. My written sources for the meanings of words and idioms include more than a dozen dictionaries, ranging from manuscripts penned by early Spanish missionaries to the printed works of contemporary Mayan linguists. I began my work in 1985, at a time when the play was not being performed in Rabinal and its future was uncertain. In the

summers of 1988 and 1989 I traveled to Rabinal to meet with José León Coloch, the man responsible for the production and direction of the play. He was able to clarify the meanings of difficult passages (including the one just discussed), and he consented to recite long excerpts from the dialogue while I made sound recordings. He delivered the words just as he would have done when coaching actors at a rehearsal, or when taking a role himself. But the fact remained that I had yet to witness a full-dress production of the play, and I was reluctant to publish my translation without doing so.

Finally, in January 1998, I returned to Rabinal on the strength of a rumor that the play would be produced for that year's fiesta. The rumor proved to be correct, and Coloch allowed Barbara Tedlock and myself to make video recordings and take photographs of two complete performances. He himself played the role of Cawek of the Forest People. After years of wondering whether I would ever get a chance to observe the play, I found myself lending a hand in its very production, transporting actors, paraphernalia, and large bowls of stew around town in a rented pickup truck.

What makes the present translation of *Rabinal Achi* different from all others is that it proceeds not only from words on paper but from images and sounds on tape as well. Replaying the action made it possible to produce a script with stage directions, detailing the relationship of the movements of the actors to the music and dialogue. Replaying the speeches made it possible to study the ways in which the director and actors transform the script, which follows a prose format, into poetry. They break the text into short lines with deliberate pauses and string these lines together in groups by means of intonation, creating sequences of pitch and volume that start off high, work their way down, and then rise again. It would not have been possible to reconstruct these features of oral performance from the text alone. Close *reading* reveals numerous parallel couplets, but close *listening* reveals that a couplet is often combined with an unparalleled line to form a triad.¹⁷ This creates a tension between the small-scale rhythms of couplets and the larger-scale rhythms of intonation.

Partly in the hope of drawing the reader further into the world of the play, I have translated proper names of persons and places whenever it seemed feasible. In so doing I have indulged in a habit I picked up from various speakers and writers of Mayan languages, whose attitude toward names is that they should be examined for meaning rather than allowed to remain undisturbed in their properness.

Earlier versions of the translation were read aloud and critiqued by students in my graduate seminar on ethnopoetics at the State University of New York at Buffalo. In 1996 a concert reading of the scene at the court of Lord Five Thunder was staged by members of the Institute of Maya Studies and myself at the Miami Museum of Science. In April 1998 a version of the entire play (under the title *Man of Rabinal*) was co-directed by Leandro Soto and Sally Goers Fox



1. Man of Rabinal (left) and Cawek of the Forest People as they appeared in 1998.
Around his waist Rabinal wears the rope that will later bind Cawek.

at the Katherine Cornell Theatre on the University at Buffalo campus.¹⁸ They added two new roles: a woman anthropologist who arrives at the scene of the performance with a notebook and camera but ends up being drawn into the role of the Mother of Quetzal Feathers, and a shaman-narrator who speaks the lines of all the other characters. This last role was played by Stephen M. Henderson, who sometimes found himself improvising lines that fit the poetic patterns of my script in the same way the actors of Rabinal sometimes improvise lines that fit the original script. The action unfolded in the arching mouth of a cave with a sunlit village in the distance, which put the audience in the position of looking out from the dark interior of the cave.

ON THE SCENE IN RABINAL

When the play is produced in Rabinal the first two performances take place on the Saturday evening and Sunday morning preceding St. Sebastian's day, which falls on January 20. Further performances take place on January 25, day of the conversion of St. Paul, the patron saint of Rabinal. The Sunday performance, which is the one described here, is staged in front of the cemetery chapel at the west end of town.



2. Masks of Man of Rabinal (left) and Cawek of the Forest People (right), held in the hands of Esteban Xolop, predecessor of José León Coloch as director of the play. Note the gill-like slits in the cheeks of the masks, most clearly visible in Rabinal's left cheek.

Photo by Carroll Edward Mace.

During the first half of the play, the main image that confronts the viewer is that of two masked actors armed with axes and shields, squared off on a stone terrace that serves as their stage. Instead of exchanging blows, they make speeches to one another. There is no printed program to explain who they are, but each time one of them finishes speaking he names the other. The actor who wears a helmet in the form of a coyote's head is the one in the title role, answering to the name *Rab'inal Achi*, "Man of Rabinal" (figure 1, left). He calls his counterpart, who wears the head of a jaguar, *Kaweq K'eché Winaq*, "Cawek of the Forest People" (figure 1, right). Their wooden masks are painted with human features, except that the skin is gold. Rabinal's mask is bordered in blue, while Cawek's is bordered in green. So far as the local language is concerned, blue and green are two shades of the same color, but there is a notable difference in the expressions they wear. Rabinal's brow is furrowed with anger, but Cawek, though he is doomed, has a calm expression (figure 2).

The masks have painted eyes, but hidden in the shadows cast by the brows are slits for the masker's eyes. There is no opening for the masker's mouth, but the



3. Eagle from the back (left) and Jaguar from the front (right), as they appeared in 1998.

voice, instead of sounding muffled, has a deep resonance. Behind the painted mouth is enough empty space for the real mouth to give precise form to the sounds of the local language, including the sounds of ancient words whose meaning is no longer clear and the names of places whose locations have been forgotten. The voice comes out through slits, shaped and positioned like a pair of gills in the cheeks of the mask.

Rabinal and Cawek pace up and down at the center of the stage while they talk back and forth, following short east-west paths. They move in opposite directions as often as not, staying out of range of one another's axes, and their gazes meet only by accident. Meanwhile, two veiled performers silently walk up and down longer paths that define the northern and southern boundaries of the stage (figure 3). Their identities become clear only when they happen to turn away from the viewer, revealing what they carry on their backs. In this they are like the pairs of dancers who carry burdens in Maya vase paintings of the eighth century. The one who walks the southern path turns out to be Eagle, bearing a woodcarving of a two-headed eagle on his back, while the one who walks the northern path is

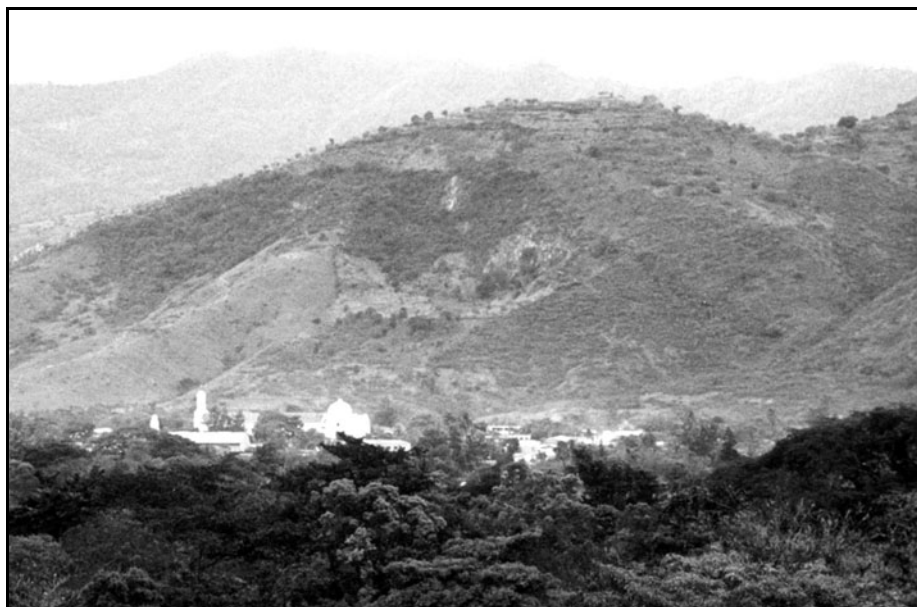


4. Lord Five Thunder (left), Mother of Quetzal Feathers (center), and Slave (right) as they appeared in 1998.

Jaguar, carrying a woodcarving of two rampant jaguars. Rising from the center of each carving is a pole topped by a basket-like structure whose ribs fan out above the head of the carrier like the branches of a tree.

Three more characters sit quietly on a bench at the west side of the stage, facing east (figure 4). They can see straight down the main street of town to the white parish church at the opposite end of it. Behind their bench a stairway rises westward to the front door of a white chapel with a cemetery behind it. Today this town sits in the middle of a valley, but five hundred years ago the palaces and temples that formed its center were in a fortress on top of *Kaqyuj'* or "Red Mountain," overlooking the valley from the north (figure 5). The ruins of the fortress can be seen from down in the present town, and when people burn offerings up there the smoke can be seen by day and the flames by night.

The masker seated on the south end of the bench is costumed much like Rabinal and Cawek, complete with an ax and shield, but instead of a helmet he



5. View of the town of Rabinal from the southeast; at center left is the dome of the parish church. Between the town and the misty mountains on the far horizon is the darker mass of Red Mountain; the ruins of Lord Five Thunder's fortress cover its summit and extend beyond the saddle to the right.

wears a boat-shaped hat festooned with long plumes. Halfway through the play Rabinal will go before him, addressing him as *Ajaw Job' Toj*, "Lord Five Thunder." Seated at the opposite end of the bench is a character whose mask is like all the others in having a mustache but who is otherwise dressed as a woman, with a long brocaded robe hanging down loosely over a tight sarong. When Lord Five Thunder needs something done, he addresses him-her as "man slave, woman slave." He has Man of Rabinal in his service as well, but their relationship is that of a king and his most trusted knight.

Between the lord and the slave sits a girl in early adolescence, unmasked. Her blouse is of finely brocaded cloth, tucked into her sarong. In her hair and around her ankles she wears bunches of shiny green feathers. She never speaks and is never directly addressed, but when Lord Five Thunder mentions her he calls her *Uchuch Q'uq' / Uchuch Raxon*, "Mother of Quetzal Feathers / Mother of Glistening Green." This is his way of saying that she is his daughter, and that her marriage will one day bring him and his wife wealth in the form of quetzal feathers and jade. His wife, who is silent like the girl, would be sitting to her left but is absent from this year's production. Even so, Man of Rabinal greets this missing woman as "lady" when he comes before the bench of the royal court.

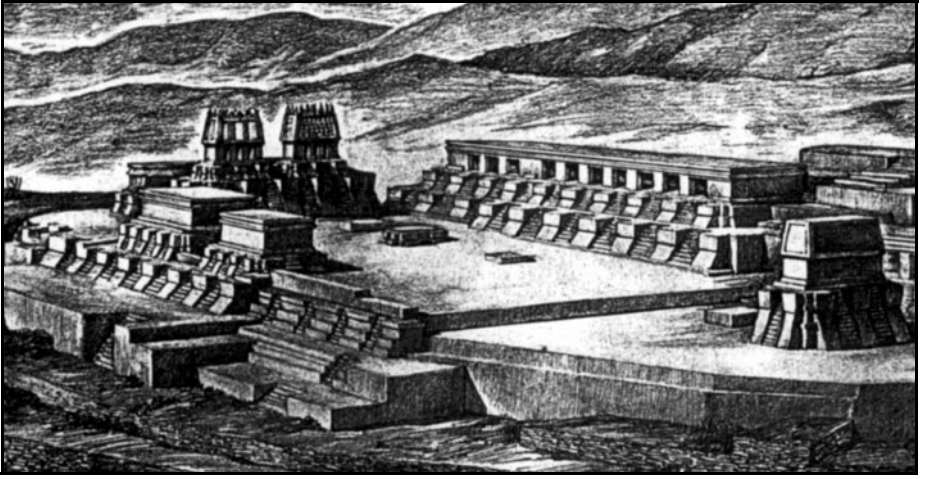
The steps behind the bench give a good view of the play. Seated there is a man wearing a red and white head scarf, white shirt, red sash, and white pants. He accompanies the performers wherever they go, serving as their Road Guide. To prepare the way for this year's production he walked to places that are named in the play, praying and burning offerings at shrines on top of hills and mountains.

Just outside the stage to the south are two trumpeters and a drummer, dressed in red and white like the Road Guide. When they play the actors dance, promenade, or strike poses instead of speaking. Today the trumpets are elongated brass bugles, but as late as the eighteenth century they were long wooden trumpets like the ones depicted in ancient Mayan paintings. The drum, made by means of an ancient craft, is a recent replacement for one that rotted. It is a horizontal hollowed log, slit open on top to make a pair of keys. Using a pair of rubber-tipped sticks, the drummer produces three different tones.

The sound of the trumpets and the slit drum, in and of itself, announces that the performers are bringing *Rabinal Achi* into the present world from another one—a prior world, yes, but also a parallel one, in the sense that it is always there. The plays that were introduced into Mayan towns by Spanish missionaries are accompanied by different instruments: winds with double reeds, hide-covered drums with double heads, or the marimba, an instrument whose two rows of keys are made of the same wood as a slit drum. The same ears that hear dissonance and discordant rhythms when they listen to the trumpets and slit drum hear harmony and synchrony in the music played on the newer instruments. It may even be that over the centuries since the Spanish invasion, the musicians who play the trumpets and slit drum have worked to sharpen the difference between their music and that of other plays.

When the actors dance they move around the perimeter of a square, and when they promenade they move in a circle. These pathways locate them all in one world, whereas the dancers in dramas of Spanish origin typically confront one another in two parallel files. When it comes to costumes, the only thing that distinguishes Cawek from the men who capture and execute him is his particular color combinations, which are no more different from theirs than theirs are from one another. In contrast, the actors in dramas that confront Moors with Christians or Indians with Spaniards wear costumes that clearly divide them between two separate worlds. Cawek and his captors phrase their arguments in terms of a shared system of military and political values, whereas Moors and Indians face opponents who advertise themselves as seeking the victory of universal truth and good over local falsehood and evil.

A week from now, on the day of the apostle Paul, the play will be performed down by the parish church. That is when it will draw its largest audience—its largest visible audience, that is. Today, in front of the cemetery chapel, the actors are speaking to and for their ancestors as much as anyone else, including all those



6. A restored view of the main plaza at Red Mountain. The long building on the right side of the plaza is the palace with nine stairways. The twin buildings at the far end and the similar building at right are temples.

Detail from a drawing by Tatiana Proskouriakoff.

who ever acted in the play. Each time the dialogue between Rabinal and Cawek shifts from one to the other, the trumpets sound and they turn away from one another, looking toward the surrounding mountaintops while Cawek lets out a long, thin wail. It feels as though they wanted to leave this valley town in opposite directions and return to the places where their spirits dwell, one of them crossing the western mountains that separate him from his home at a faraway place called Red Earth, and the other following the path that leads to the top of Red Mountain, which is visible from here.

Acting in this play is not so much a matter of impersonating historical individuals—as if their lives could be relived in realistic detail—as it is a matter of impersonating their ghosts. All the ghosts except Cawek have their home in a cave beneath the ruins on Red Mountain, where they remember what they did when their bones wore flesh and the walls of their buildings supported roofs. Ordinarily the cave entrance is invisible, but some people have had the good fortune to dream their way to it and through it, descending into a brightly lit town where the characters of the play appear as they were in life. The Road Guide makes his visit to the ruins in the daytime, accompanied by the play's producer. Together they burn offerings for the spirits of the original characters, praying for permission to make their memories visible and audible in the waking world. Lord Five Thunder receives his offerings at the foot of the middle of the nine stairways that ascend the front of the main palace (figure 6).

In some ways *Rabinal Achi* has a greater resemblance to the Noh plays of Japan than to European forms of drama. In Noh productions, as in Rabinal, the ghosts of the characters must grant permission to proceed. Depending on one's point of view, the performers speak as if they had summoned distant ghosts into the same space with their bodies and their audience, or as if their own spirits had traveled to distant places while their bodies remained behind to tell the tale. Either way, they speak as mediums. Like the actors in *Rabinal Achi*, they seem to be living in a world where time moves more slowly than in real life and every action is deliberate.

The protagonist of *Rabinal Achi* is Man of Rabinal, in the sense that he overcomes adversity, but the main character is his antagonist. Cawek delivers more lines than anyone else, and the action centers around him. The situation is something like that of a Noh play about an encounter between two famous warriors: Kumagai, the protagonist, is confronted by the ghost of Atsumori, his defeated rival.¹⁹ In the dialogue between them it is Atsumori who does most of the talking, and the story that unfolds is mostly about him.

Cawek and Rabinal are alone in the opening scene, but the actors who speak their lines make no attempt to simulate a private and spontaneous conversation. Their speeches are worded in such a way as to make it clear that they are addressing one another, but they project their voices beyond one another and beyond the limits of the stage. This is a "presentational" drama, but with the difference that the audience is not "out front" but on all four sides.²⁰ No one is in an ideal position to catch all of the words all of the time, but everyone has moments when they come through clearly.

Even a listener who does not know the language of the dialogue can hear that the actors are speaking in parallel verse, which reverses the effect of rhymed verse. What stands out are the parts of parallel lines that do *not* sound alike, as when Rabinal asks Cawek, *Ma at on ral sutz' / ma at on ral mayul?* "Weren't you born of clouds / weren't you born of mist?" Or when Lord Five Thunder considers the prospect of giving Cawek *kab'lajuj uk'ia / kab'lajuj umatul*, "his twelve drinks / his twelve poisons."

The actors in *Rabinal Achi* memorize their lines at rehearsals by repeating them after the director, who reads them aloud from the script. In actual performances the more experienced actors make frequent departures from the script, adding, subtracting, or rearranging words or lines in ways that are consistent with the style and substance of what they have learned at rehearsals.²¹

There is no scenery to represent the place where the dialogue between Cawek and Rabinal is taking place—unless, that is, we count the royal bench as the fortress and palace of Lord Five Thunder, the lines walked by Eagle and Jaguar as the outer limits of his authority, and the square of stone pavement between those lines as the

surface of his territory. Cawek and Rabinal carry on their opening dialogue in the middle of the square, without any attention to the bench, and their statements gradually make it clear that they are indeed inside the lord's domain but outside his fortress.

Cawek declares his desire to chop through "the root, the trunk" of the ruling lineage of the Rabinal nation, as if he could terminate Lord Five Thunder's whole blood line. While he and Man of Rabinal argue back and forth, men swinging incense burners come and go just outside the limits of the stage, praying to their lineal ancestors as they enter and leave the chapel and the graveyard behind it. Their own audience is a strictly spiritual one, so they speak in low voices that can scarcely be heard under those of the actors. What Cawek desires is that when Lord Five Thunder dies, his soul will be left with no living voices to hear.

The only honorable choice for Man of Rabinal is to take Cawek prisoner and present him to Lord Five Thunder. This is a tragic turn of events, since there was a time when these two warriors fought on the same side. That was when Cawek came to Red Mountain in response to a call for Quiché military aid in a war against mutual enemies, the Uxab and Pokomam nations. But since then he has become a renegade, abandoning land he owned at a place called Red Earth, raising a rebel army, threatening the lords of his own nation, and then invading the domain of Lord Five Thunder. From the point of view of Man of Rabinal, having to treat Cawek as an enemy is "a terrible joke," since they ought to behave as brothers to one another. When Lord Five Thunder hears the news that Cawek has been captured, he imagines an alternative outcome in which the same man who is about to appear before him as a prisoner of war instead plays the role of a prospective son-in-law.

Like the characters in Noh plays, Cawek, Man of Rabinal, and Lord Five Thunder narrate many more past events than they reenact. Cawek's misdeeds catch up with him, but they are represented only in his words and in those of his captors. It is only the consequences of his deeds that are acted out in the play. Again as in Noh there is no attempt at realism, and time moves as slowly as it does for the dialogue. Rabinal speaks of roping Cawek, but he does not twirl an actual lasso and throw it over the head of his opponent. Instead, while the two of them hold still, a stage hand comes out and carefully ties the loose end of the rope carried by Rabinal around Cawek's upper arms. At the end of the play, when Cawek kneels to have his head cut off, all the characters dance around him, and those who have axes bring them down toward the back of his neck with unhurried movements, never quite touching his flesh.

Before Man of Rabinal takes Cawek in front of the royal bench, he accuses him of a whole series of hostile actions against the Rabinal nation and its lord. In

each case Cawek admits his guilt without hesitation. When Rabinal presses him to explain his behavior he brings up the fact that he was never given the reward of land he was promised when he came to Red Mountain as an ally. Rabinal replies that the land was withheld for good reason: When Cawek was sent out on a spy mission among the Uxab and Pokomam he failed to observe that they were strong and already on the move, which resulted in a Rabinal defeat. Cawek has no real answer to this charge. All he can do is express the sorrow he felt and still feels at never having planted crops “in the bright mountains / bright valleys” of Rabinal.

Toward the end of the opening dialogue, Cawek reveals something he did in secret. When he headed home without his reward, he walked from hilltop to hilltop along the southern boundary of fertile land that had been given to Man of Rabinal. He stopped on top of each hill and lamented his fate, which had the effect of laying a curse on the land. The curse is in effect to this day, and each performance of the play brings it to mind. But thanks to the fact that Cawek confessed what he did before he was put to death and continues to reveal it each time his ghost is given voice by an actor, the curse can be counteracted. This is the duty of the man who serves as Road Guide for the performers of the play. Over a five-day period, he says prayers and burns offerings at each of the stopping places named by Cawek.

With the play more than half over, Rabinal brings Cawek before Lord Five Thunder. Again there are accusations, and again Cawek admits to his offenses. Clear about his fate, he makes his last requests. It is his desire to perform a series of acts that are the prerogative of persons of lordly rank like himself—“if only,” he says, “to mark the greatness / of my death / my disappearance.” For each performance he must “borrow” something or someone that belongs to Lord Five Thunder. So long as he has these borrowings in his possession it is as if he had become an adopted member of the society of his captors, but he has to give all of them back before his beheading.

The first of Cawek’s last requests is for a drink called Quick Hummingbird, which is served to him in a type of vessel Rabinal artisans have long been famous for: a carved and painted calabash. The drink is said to bring dreams, and though Cawek is not portrayed as having a dream or a vision, he does raise the ongoing conversation to a mythic level. He begins to speak as if he were a character in the Mayan epic that accounts for the origin of the calabash tree, as told in the Popol Vuh. There was a time when this tree was barren, but when the lords of the underworld placed the severed head of a divine hero in its branches, it bore fruit that looked like skulls. Cawek wonders aloud whether the very calabash he now holds in his hand might be the skull of his own father or grandfather, thus placing himself in the lineage of the hero. Then, knowing that the twin sons of this hero avenged their father’s death, he speaks of a future time when his own sons or

grandsons might come into the possession of a carved calabash from Rabinal and remember what happened to him. In this way he casts his captors in the roles of lords of the underworld and, at the same time, implies that his death will be avenged.

The story of the calabash tree also implicates Lord Five Thunder's daughter, since one of the underworld lords had an unmarried daughter. She went to look at the tree, and when the skull of the hero spit in the palm of her hand she became pregnant with the twins who would later avenge him. Whatever this may imply about the future of Cawek's skull, all he can do for now is to ask for a dance with Lord Five Thunder's daughter. They dance facing each other but without touching, and she never opens her hands.

Cawek's next request is to "play a game" with Eagle and Jaguar. He dances with them, and as he does so they stare at him, click their teeth and claws, and scream—according to what he says about them after the dance, that is. During the dance Eagle and Jaguar remain silent, and the only visible evidence of their ferocity is the eagle and jaguar carvings they continue to carry on their backs. If there was a time when this dance involved the miming of combat, the only remaining trace is in the words spoken by Cawek.

In the last of his last requests, Cawek asks Lord Five Thunder to grant him thirteen score days to go to the mountains and valleys of his home and say farewell, but he gets no answer. What he does then, so far as his actions are outwardly visible, is to go out on the terrace, followed by all the other actors, and dance the perimeter of the same square that has been danced before, marking each corner by turning in a small circle. Spiritually, the space and time of his captors have now become the same as those of his homeland. The square has an invisible mountain at each corner and measures 65 days on each side, a quarter of the 260 days that make a full run of the Mayan divinatory calendar. When he is done with his journey through space and time he returns to the same date on which he started. He faces the other characters and says, with a touch of condescension, "Just now you were saying, 'He left!' / But I didn't leave. / I merely said farewell from here."

After his final speech Cawek leads all the other characters to center stage, where he kneels facing west while they dance around him making motions with their axes. The moment when his head comes off is represented only by the moment when they stop their motions. He then rises and joins the others in a final dance. Now it is as if he and all the other characters were ghosts again, on their way back to the parallel world where they lead lives that are visible only to dreamers. Shoulder to shoulder, they dance westward until they reach the foot of the steps that lead to the door of the cemetery chapel. There the actors hidden inside the costumes all kneel, and the Road Guide leads them in a prayer to their ancestors.

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PART ONE

Rabinal Achi

or

Dance of the Trumpets



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CHARACTERS

Cawek of the Forest People, *a warrior in the service of the lord of Quiché Mountain, Quiché Valley. Masked, carrying an ax in his right hand and a small round shield in his left.*

Man of Rabinal, *also called Man of Glory, a warrior in the service of Lord Five Thunder. Masked, carrying an ax and shield, and with a rope coiled around his waist.*

Lord Five Thunder, *ruler of the Cawuks and Rabinals. Masked, with an ax and shield.*

Lady, *wife of Lord Five Thunder. May be veiled. This role sometimes goes unfilled.*

Mother of Quetzal Feathers, Mother of Glistening Green, *unmarried daughter of Lord Five Thunder and Lady, about twelve years old. May be veiled, with an ax in her right hand and a calabash in her left.*

Slave, *masked as a man but dressed as a woman. Carries an ax in the right hand and a calabash drinking vessel in the left.*

Eagle and Jaguar, *priests in the service of Lord Five Thunder. Veiled, carrying tall backpacks, one with the image of a pair of jaguars at its center and the other with a pair of eagles.*

Trumpeters, *two in number. Dressed in white with red head scarf and sash, each with a long trumpet.*

Drummer, *assisted by a drum carrier. Dressed like the trumpeters, plays a three-tone slit drum with a pair of rubber-tipped sticks.*

Road Guide, *dressed like the musicians, carrying a shoulder bag.*

The scene is a plaza or courtyard in a town surrounded by mountains.

Note on recitation: Each of the lines in a speech should be followed by a pause. When a line is indented it should be intoned in a somewhat lower voice than the preceding line, with a return to a higher voice when a new line begins at the left-hand margin.



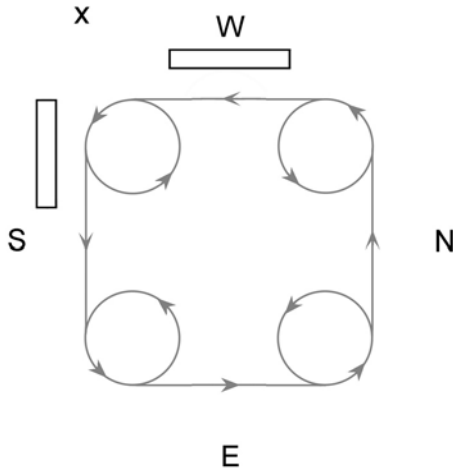
7. The Mother of Quetzal Feathers, flanked by Eagle (right) and Jaguar (left) and followed by the rest of the cast, approaches the house of the Confraternity of St. Sebastian.

The performers walk toward the stage by whatever public street or road leads directly to it. In the case of the terrace in front of the cemetery chapel they enter from the east. On the west side of the stage is a bench that seats four, facing east; on the south side is a bench for three, facing north. ROAD GUIDE goes to a position offstage to the west (marked X in the diagram on the next page) and observes the action from there. The musicians stand in front of the south bench facing north, with DRUMMER and his drum carrier (with the drum loaded on his back) between the two TRUMPETERS.

The next to enter are (in order) EAGLE, CAWEK, RABINAL, LORD, QUETZAL, LADY, SLAVE, and JAGUAR; they form a north-south line along the west side of the stage, with CAWEK and RABINAL in front of the west bench. All face south except for CAWEK and RABINAL, who turn and face away from one another, one facing north and the other south.

The musicians play a fanfare, for which all the characters stand still, and follow with music, for which they all dance. They move around the stage as four separate parties, with EAGLE, who dances alone, in the lead. In second place come CAWEK and RABINAL, who dance as partners. Next come LORD, QUETZAL, LADY (if present), and SLAVE, all of whom dance together. In last place comes JAGUAR. In general they all follow a counterclockwise square path around the stage, but they begin by turning in small counterclockwise circles. EAGLE and JAGUAR turn their first cir-

cles at the southwest and northwest corners of the square, while the two groups turn theirs in front of the bench. After that they make circles whenever they reach a corner of the square:



There are further fanfares when CAWEK and RABINAL make their southeast and northwest turns. At these times all the dancers stand still while CAWEK and RABINAL face away from each other, raising their faces toward the surrounding mountains and lifting their axes as high as their heads while CAWEK lets out a long, high, fading cry: "Eeeeeiiiiiiiiii."

After the second standstill, and when CAWEK and RABINAL have danced the complete square and come back to the west side again, there comes one last fanfare, only this time all the dancers break into a walk. Now they follow a circular path around the stage, and when they have all completed it the music ends. When CAWEK and RABINAL reach the west bench they switch positions, so that CAWEK ends up north of RABINAL; the others stand wherever they were when the music ended.

CAWEK OF THE FOREST PEOPLE speaks for the first time. He paces slowly back and forth along a short east-west path, gesturing with his ax or rattling his shield to emphasize a point or mark a transition. On a parallel path to the south RABINAL paces independently. Whenever one of them reverses direction, he turns his back toward the exterior of the stage. Their gazes meet only occasionally, and they stay out of one another's reach.



8. Cawek (at right), followed by Rabinal and Lord Five Thunder, dances around the perimeter of the stage.

Come on out, lord who's been pierced
 lord who's been fitted with gems
 however that may be
 let me take the lead
 since I'm not finished
 chopping through
 the root
 the trunk
 of that Lord of Walkers
 Lord of Workers
 Cawuks and Rabinals
 so say my words
 before Sky
 before Earth
 since I haven't many words
 to say to you, sir.
 May Sky and Earth be with you, sir
 Man of Glory
 Man of Rabinal.

Fanfare, with CAWEK and RABINAL turning to face away from one another, then music, for which they move into place behind EAGLE. Everyone dances around the square as before, interrupted by two fanfares with standstills and ending with a fanfare for a walk around the stage. Again, RABINAL and CAWEK end up in front of the west bench.

MAN OF RABINAL speaks for the first time. *He paces while gesturing with his ax or shield; CAWEK paces independently.*

Listen!

Brave man

Cawek of the Forest People:

Is this what your words say

before Sky

before Earth?

“Come on out, lord who’s been pierced

lord who’s been fitted with gems

however that may be

let me take the lead

since I’m not finished

chopping through

the root

the trunk

of that Lord of Walkers

Lord of Workers

Cawuks and Rabinals.”

Is that what your words say

in the hearing of Sky

in the hearing of Earth?

You delivered them

in range of my weapon

in range of my shield

and my upraised ax blade

and my snail-shell bracelet

my armband

my white paint

my gourd of tobacco

and my strength

my manhood