

## THE ART OF DREAMING IN HIGHLAND GUATEMALA

By Kenneth Johnson

[NOTE: This article is based upon practices in the mountains of Guatemala; the technical terms that refer to particular aspects of the soul are written in the K'iche' Mayan language, which is the most widely spread tongue in the Highlands. But in order to be comprehensible to a wider readership, I have given the names of the day-signs in the more familiar Yucatec as well as in K'iche'.]

One may wonder why an introduction to the Mayan Art of Dreaming is relevant to a website devoted to the Sacred Calendar. But in Mayan thinking, the two topics are indeed closely connected.

According to the Maya, each human being is born with two souls. One of them is known as the *uxlab*. The Spanish word *anima* is often used to describe this aspect of soul, since it is identical to what Catholic Christians perceive as the soul. It is invested in the body and in breathing. It remains within the body until the moment of our death.

The second aspect of the soul is quite different. In the K'iche' language, it is called *uwach uk'ij*, which literally means “the face of his or her day.” In other words, this is the energy template or imprint of the Sacred Calendar day upon which we are born. My *uwach uk'ij* is Imox (Imix); I have an Imox soul because I was born upon that day, and I share a common bond with all others born upon Imox. My best friend was born upon Kame (Cimi); she has a Kame soul and is bonded in soul with all those who share the same *uwach uk'ij*. Sometimes the Maya use the word *nawal* to describe this aspect of the soul. The word is borrowed from the Nahuatl word *nagual*, though its meaning may be a bit different. Our day-sign soul is our *nawal*, our spiritual essence, our archetypal imprint. And this is the soul which dreams. The *anima* may be vested within the human body, but the *nawal* is not. It can roam freely through the astral world while we are asleep.

Though the “face of one’s day” may be described as a *nawal*, there are subtle distinctions between the *nawal* and the *uwach uk'ij*. While all living things possess a *nawal* or spiritual essence, only human beings possess the *uwach uk'ij* or day-sign soul. Though Westerners may ask an astrologer to cast a horoscope for their dog, the Maya would never do so. A dog may have a *nawal*, but it doesn’t have a day-sign soul. The day-sign soul is one of the things which distinguish human beings from other beings.

As we shall see, there is also a third type of soul – one which is innate within some people, but not all. One who is not born with it may cultivate it through shamanic training.

When we sleep, our *nawal* goes wandering. In its travels, it may meet and interact with the wandering *nawales* of others, whether humans, animals, plants or even minerals. From such interactions are our dreams fashioned and created. Though all dreams contain important messages, those which arise from the ordinary nocturnal activities of the *nawal* are regarded as

“ordinary dreams.” It is said that those which occur in the pre-dawn hours, just before waking, are the most important.

Dreams are an important topic of discussion in traditional Mayan communities. Dreams are meant to be shared with others. Unlike some traditional societies, the Maya have no fear of dreams, even though they do regard dreams as omens. One ought to give thanks even for one’s worst nightmares, for these constitute warning signals, alerting us to the fact that we need to take action and change something in our lives which is not serving our purpose. The importance of dreams is demonstrated by the way in which the Maya discuss them. They use a special terminology and syntax which is also used when telling stories or reciting ancient myths, but which is not characteristic of daily speech. In other words, even “ordinary dreams” are myths, and they are described with mythic speech.

While “ordinary dreams” have importance, they are not as significant as shamanic or archetypal dreams. These constitute an entirely different category of dreaming, and one which is not necessarily experienced by everyone.

There is a third aspect of soul, usually known as *koyopa*. In common speech, *koyopa* refers to “sheet lightning” of the type which flickers above mountains and lakes. But this phenomenon of the natural world has its correspondence within the human body; *koyopa* can also mean “the body lightning” or “the lightning in the blood.” Spiritual seekers who have spent time among the Maya have drawn attention to the close correspondence between the Mayan concept of *koyopa* and the Sanskrit *kundalini*. Both are connected with serpent imagery. Yogic texts describe the *kundalini* as the “serpent power.” Bolts of lightning are regarded by the Maya as “sky serpents.”

Some people are born with the *koyopa* or lightning soul fully activated; other people either develop it or have it awakened through powerful spiritual experiences. Some people never experience it at all. But those whose *koyopa* is awakened dream differently than other people. Here again, the Sacred Calendar is of importance. Half of the day-signs contain “natural” *koyopa*; those born upon such days are born with the “body lightning” already awakened, and thus have a greater capacity to experience archetypal dreams. While a list of such day-signs may vary from one community to another, the day-signs as collected by Barbara Tedlock is highly traditional Momostenago are: Aq’ab’al (Akbal), Kan (Chicchan), Kame (Cimi), Kej (Manik), Q’anil (Lamat), E (Eb), Aj (Ben), I’x (Ix), Tz’ikin (Men) and No’j (Caban). The day-signs I most often heard mentioned in regards to an innate talent for dreamwork were Tz’ikin and No’j, both listed above, but also Imox, which is not mentioned by the Tedlocks.

Other people may experience an awakening of the *koyopa* due to unusual spiritual experiences or because of formal shamanic training. If the *koyopa* is awake, the gods themselves may contact us directly through our dreams, using the *koyopa* energy as a communicative medium between their world and ours. The gods may give us messages – or at least, they try to. The Maya believe that dreams are tricky things, always trying to outwit us by making such messages difficult to remember or decipher. Many people, in our own Western society, have reported dreams wherein a “wise old man” or “wise old woman” appears to us and gives us a powerful message. In most cases, the actual words of that message are lost to us, unremembered. The Maya believe that this is part and parcel of the Art of Dreaming. We must learn to dream with clarity and lucidity, so

that the messages imparted to us by the gods will remain in our memory and be accessible to our conscious minds after we awake. To take action against the dream's inherent longing for forgetfulness is a struggle. An archetypal dreamer is a spiritual warrior.

In order to learn how to remember our archetypal dreams and therefore make use of them, the guidance of a shamanic teacher is often necessary. Anyone who undertakes the path of becoming a Mayan priestess or priest will of course have such a teacher, a "road guide." Part of the training for such a sacred office consists of the awakening of the *koyopa* or lightning soul. Therefore the shamanic teacher or road guide is also an expert dream interpreter, one who can guide the student in learning how to access the archetypal dreams in which the gods speak to us through the awakened body lightning. The road guide uses dreams as an important tool in the training of Calendar diviners and Mayan priests.

It is interesting to note that Mayan dream interpretation is highly individuated. Mayan shamans do not interpret according to a set list of symbols of the type which might be found in any "gypsy witch dream book" here in the United States. Dream symbolism is, by and large, unique to the individual dreamer and her or his outlook on life. There are a few commonly accepted symbols, however. For example, a Mayan priest's *vara* or "sacred bundle" which contains her or his divining seeds, crystals, and other ritual objects is regarded as the initiate's "spiritual spouse." Therefore, if a mysterious man appears in a woman's dream, or a mysterious woman in a man's dream, it is usually said that the shaman-in-training has been visited by her or his "spiritual spouse," the spirit of the sacred bundle which will someday become the shaman's true and eternal partner. Those familiar with Jungian dream analysis will not fail to note the similarities between this Mayan concept and the Jungian doctrine of anima and animus.

If a dream remains "incomplete," in the sense that the words of the god are not remembered by the dreamer, or the recollection of the dream seems tentative and without a clear message, the road guide may ask the apprentice shaman to re-create the dream by entering back into it and finishing it. This is, of course, a technique closely related to what we might call "lucid dreaming," in the sense that the dreamer is an active participant rather than a passive one. Here again, the Sacred Calendar is of great importance. Let us say that such an "incomplete" archetypal dream or divine communication took place on 4 B'atz' (Chuen). The next recurrence of a B'atz' day will take place twenty days later; this will be 11 B'atz'. During those twenty days, the novice shaman may meditate upon the dream and its meaning in preparation to attempting to re-enter the dream and bring it to a conclusion. The attempt to re-enter the dream will take place on 11 B'atz'.

It is clear, from the above, that archetypal dreams may be sought out. To use the Western term, they may be "incubated." While Mayan dream incubation is not as complex or ritualistic as the classical dream incubation once practiced in the Greek temples of Asklepios, there are techniques for inducing archetypal dreams. I shall conclude with one of them.

Drink a glass of warm water mixed with a tablespoon of lemon juice. Do this about an hour after dinner in order to give yourself time to digest first, as well as giving yourself time to make a few trips to the bathroom before retiring. While falling asleep, practice deep and regular breathing. Clear your mind of all thoughts and worries relating to the day just past, the day ahead, or

mundane life in general. Instead, imagine the wings of a bird, moving slowly and rhythmically, the wings of the *nawal* carrying you into the dream world. Let the serene motion of the *nawal*'s flight guide you to the magic of an archetypal dream.

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