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**Dreams in Mayan Spirituality:  
Concepts of Dreaming  
From the Ancient Mayans to the Contemporary Mayans around Lake Atitlán**

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## **Abstract**

In contemporary Mayan religion, dreams are sacred. They are another portal and means of connecting with Ajaw and the ancestors in order to guide you, they reveal your *nawal*, your destiny, they teach you, and they are a time where your *Adiosich*, your spirit, soul or consciousness, can leave your physical body and travel.

In this essay I will look at the role of dreams in Mayan culture and spirituality around Lake Atitlan, Guatemala. I will describe the historical importance of dreams in ancient Mayan culture and show that it still is an important aspect of contemporary mayan beliefs. By focusing on the concept of the *adiosich*, as well as the curative, guiding and sacred qualities of dreams, I will relate the significance of dreams to the larger beliefs in contemporary Mayan cosmology.

## **Introduction**

I was sitting cross legged on a woven mat, with the Mayan altar on one side of me and my friend Gwen on the other side of me. I watched each nugget of *copal* and *candal* catch flame, one by one, in the growing fire, burning maybe two or three feet in front of me. The fire was large, and scared that I was too close, I kept backing up, farther and farther away, until I was sitting against the wall. Still, I felt the fire burn my exposed skin, my shins, feet, and even my legs through my jeans. I began to sweat, and every once in a while had to turn my head and face the other way to take a break from the intense heat. As the *copal* burned and smoke from the fire rose, the dark room got more and more dim, hazy, and it became harder to see across to the other side of the room, where Santiago stood, chanting in *Kaqchikel* and springling *Quetzalteca* into the fire, air and at us, making a crackling sound as it hit the flames.

It was nine o'clock in the morning on our last Tuesday in Santa Catarina Palopó. We were in the middle of a sacrificial ceremony, a cleansing for both Gwen and I for our return back to the United States. Santiago, the *Ajq'ij*, Mayan shaman, and keeper of the *cofradía* Santa Maria, was performing the ceremony, or his work, as he called it. Santiago was an old man who I had visited multiple times during my time in Santa Catarina. I was initially surprised and frustrated at how hard it was to speak to him upon my first visit. He didn't speak very much Spanish, I didn't really understand what he was saying and he didn't seem to understand much of what I was saying. I think he didn't really get who I was, what I was doing, why I was there, visiting him. But I looked past the initial frustrations and continued to visit Santiago on a regular basis, maybe once or twice a week. The more I visited him, the more comfortable we became with each other, and the easier it became to talk to him. Santiago was smiley and friendly to me. He had energy, and he loved to talk. He had just as many questions for me as I had for him, and was more than willing to spend time talking to me. We both enjoyed my visits, shared laughs, smiles and conversations about the Mayan religion. On my second to last visit, Santiago invited me to come back to do a sacrificial cleansing ceremony. He made it clear that this was necessary for me before my travel home, and so there I was that Tuesday morning, sitting before the fire, in the middle of the ceremony.

After Santiago finished chanting the dates on the Mayan calendar in Kaqchikel and spraying the room with Quetzalteca, it was time for our second, final time to speak, to talk to the fire, to beg pardon, forgiveness, and pray to *Ajaw*. But before we began, he warned us that the fire warned him of harm, that someone had bad feelings, bad dreams that they haven't spoken about. My heart dropped. I didn't even say anything and Santiago knew, he felt it. I had just been telling Gwen the day before about the series of

nightmares I have had about returning to the United States. I didn't think that these were adequate dreams to talk about during this ceremony, I didn't think they were special or meaningful, and thus I didn't mention them, but I quickly realized how wrong I was.

I told Santiago that it was me, that I have had bad dreams about my return to the states. I retold him one of my dreams. I was back at home with my friends after my trip, and I realized that I forgot many memories of my trip in Guatemala. I had no memory of the end of the trip, and could only remember midway through my time in Santa Catarina. There was no end, no finale, no closure. I told him that upon realizing this, I was scared, that I began to cry. I spoke to the fire. I am nervous to return home to my family and friends after ten weeks of traveling in Guatemala. I felt that I have changed a lot, learned a lot, and that returning will be very difficult for me. But I don't want it to be difficult, I don't want to be afraid. They are my family, friends, it is my home, and it isn't something I should be scared of. I know that I will always have my memories of my time here. I will carry them with me in my heart, in my soul, in my mind, and I have to remember that, be brave and face my fears of returning. Santiago's voice in response was firm and passionate, pressing me to continue retelling my dreams, my thoughts, my fears. He said that Ajaw is here to listen, he will make it better; he said that now is the time to speak. Speaking to the fire, I was cleansing myself of these thoughts, these fears, these dreams. I had to get it all out, right then and there.

After three weeks of field research on dreams in Mayan spirituality, of talking to people about various concepts and ideas about the importance of dreams, I decided to do something selfish and apart from my research. I decided to have a ceremonial cleansing. I went to Santiago's house that morning with the only intention of satisfying my spiritual needs, of cleansing myself before going home. But to my surprise, this only led me right back to my project, further reiterating the importance of dreams in Mayan

religion. Dream interpretation and the connection with your soul or spirit through dreaming is an ancient concept that although has evolved, is still alive in the Mayan world today.

In Contemporary Mayan spirituality, sleeping and dreaming are more than just that ordinary, nightly routine that everyone takes part in. Dreams aren't just those random thoughts your brain takes you while your body rests. Dreams are important, they have meaning. Dreams connect you with your *adiosich*, your soul, spirit and consciousness. It is in dreams where you hear the voice of *Ajaw* and your ancestors, who guide you, warn you of danger, teach you and look out for your health and well being. Dreams tell you your destiny, your *nawal*, your calling. The repeated dreams I had about my fears of returning home were therefore nothing to take for granted. These dreams were warning me, guiding me, helping me. They were the expression of my *adiosich*, they were exposing my inner consciousness, my inner soul, and thus that day with Santiago I had to rid myself of my bad dreams and thoughts. After the ceremony, after being fully cleansed from these bad dreams, I felt more at ease, relaxed, calm. I felt like I came to terms with my thoughts, fears, my conscience, and it was through dreams that I was able to do this. Dreams are thus sacred, they are reality, and they are taken very seriously as a means of communication in Mayan spirituality.

## **Methodology**

I lived in Santa Catarina Palopó, Sololá, for three weeks conducting research on dreams in Mayan Spirituality. At first I found it very hard to find people to talk to about Mayan religion in the town. I got a sense that not that many people still practiced, and if they did, they either weren't eager to talk about it, or they didn't consider themselves practitioners of the Mayan religion. Many people who told me they don't practice, and

don't consider themselves practicers, actually did do many things that I considered Mayan religious practices. With this said, I found that most of my information came from *Ajq'ijab* and *comadronas*, midwives, people who have been called to be spiritual healers, people who say it is their destiny, and thus were willing to talk about their work and beliefs. I also met *Ajq'ijab* from Panajachel and Santiago Atitlán, other towns around the lake. This way, I heard viewpoints from people living on all different sides of Lake Atitlán.

My research was a mix of asking questions and being a participant observer. The *Ajq'ijab* I spoke to ranged from both females and males, young and old, people who spoke mostly Kaqchikel and very little Spanish (and thus I sometimes needed someone to help translate), to people who spoke perfect Spanish; self-taught *Ajq'ijab* to trained *Ajq'ijab*. All passionate and very knowledgeable about the Mayan religion, these *Ajq'ijab* had very different ways of explaining their religion. Some spoke very eloquently and answered my questions directly, while some spoke more freely, sometimes even disregarding my questions while still saying interesting things about the Mayan religion. Thus sometimes the conversations were very much driven by my questions, while other times the people I spoke with controlled the conversation, and I was there to listen, letting the conversation go wherever they decided to take it.

Many times I started a conversation with someone by asking them about their altar, asking to look at the images of the saints, to tell me about them, and to see and hold the rocks that cover their altars. Most were eager to talk and show me all the rocks they have collected on their altars. While holding their sacred rocks and interacting with their altars, I was physically connecting with the religion, and began to ask questions, from stories about the rocks, where they found them, why they were important, and so on. I thus felt like a wide-eyed, interested child, holding rocks and crystals in my hands,

grabbing and looking at them one at a time, like it was something I had never seen before. I was amazed at all the rocks people had collected and all the stories behind them.

When talking to people, I found it easier to connect to people without a pen and pad of paper in my hand. I think talking to people while writing down what they said made people uncomfortable, and made me seem not trustworthy. So unless I needed to write down a word in Kaqchikel or and asked them first if it was okay, I didn't take down notes until afterwards. After meeting with someone, I would sit down in a quiet space alone to reflect and remember what I had just learned. Going about my research this way, I felt like a friend, like I was having a regular conversation with people. I always had my eyes and ears ready to listen, to soak everything in. I was able to make eye contact with people while they spoke, to physically show them I was intrigued with their stories and words, actively listening and not just writing down everything they said.

In addition to asking questions, I made sure to experience the religious ceremonies first hand. I went with one *Ajq'ijab* to the Mayan altars at the cave in San Jorge and did a ceremony there. In addition, on my last week in Santa Catarina, I went to the *cofradía* Santa Maria for a spiritual cleansing ceremony, a sacrifice for my return home to the United States. In both these situations, I was with *Ajq'ijab* that I had already spoken to multiple times before, which made both of us more comfortable to partake in the ceremony. I watched and helped set up the *copal* incense and candles for the fire, listened to the Mayan prayers, experienced the ceremonies with them, and asked questions about what they were doing and why. Through experiential learning, what I had been hearing and reading about became a reality. Not only was I asking

questions and listening to people, but I also saw the Mayan religion in action, I felt it. I was personally affected, which made me passionate and attached to my research.

## **Discussion**

### Dreams and the *Way* in the Ancient Mayan World

Dreams have been an important aspect of Mayan religion and culture since the ancient Mayan civilization. Ancient concepts of the alter-ego and co-essence, the spirit of the individual that is active when dreaming, is seen in ancient Mayan art, referenced in Ancient Mayan Glyphs, and played a major role in the history of the ancient Mayans.

Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone explain the ancient term of the *way*, an individuals' alter-ego, spirit, co-essence, which usually took the form of a mixture of multiple animals. (Coe, 2005a: 241). This concept of the *way* existed mainly for the elite in the ancient Mayan civilization. (Coe, 2005b: 121). In lintel 14 of structure 20 at Yaxchilan (Fig. 1), for example, there is a reference to the *way* seen in the glyphs. Here we see a relief sculpture of War Chiefs wife, with the glyph for the *way* included in the writing, thus showing that it was a developed, understood concept in the ancient Mayan civilization.

Coe further explains that the word *way* also translates to “sleep” in some Mayan languages, and thus continues that “it is possible that such mystic contacts were made in dreams,” especially considering that some glyphs indicate “certain Classic buildings as “sleeping places,” where maya kings may have sought out these spirits” (Coe, 2005a: 241). These sleeping places, called *wayib*, were either the place where one went to sleep to connect with your *way*, or a place where your *way* lived. (Coe, 2005b: 133).





Figure 1

Lintel 14 on structure 20, from Yaxchilan, Mexico. Here we see War Chiefs wife and her *way* or *nawal*.



Figure 2

Polychrome pottery vase from Altar de Sacrificios, Guatemala. This vase, depicting a supernatural *way* and a large boa constrictor, is of the Tepeu culture. Probably dates around 754 AD. Ht 10 in (25.4 cm).



Figure 3

The Sarcophagus lid of Pakal's tomb, Palenque, Mexico. This image depicts Pakal at the very point of his death, his journey onwards after life. At the upper center of the relief is the sacred bird, the *Itzam-Ye, Mut-Itzamna* bird, Itzamna's *nawal*, spirit companion animal.

The concept of the *way* is seen in ancient Mayan art, illuminating its importance in ancient Mayan culture. In a Polychrome pottery vase from Altar de Sacrificios, Guatemala (Fig. 2), we see a supernatural, old, curvy man, the *way*, dancing with a large snake. On the other sides of the vase are six figures which appear to be dead, or wearing colors associated with death. Interestingly enough, the man's eyes are closed (Coe, 2005a: 149). The closed eyes could possibly signify that the man is sleeping, dreaming, and in midst of this sacred connection or dance. Or maybe the closed eyes signify the man's journey to death, which would compliment the rest of the images. The *way* could be escaping, leaving his physical body alone to die.

Pakal also references the spirit companion and animal co-essence of Itzamna, an important ancient Mayan god, on the sarcophagus lid of his tomb (Fig. 3). A very symbolic and planned out piece idealizing Pakal and his reign, the sarcophagus lid depicts a relaxed and lounging Pakal upon the moment of his death, as he leaves the

human world. The horizontal composition shows Pakal in the center, the snake, *Sak-Bak-Nakan*, portal to the underworld below, and sitting on top of the world tree, the connection to the milkyway and world above, sits *Itzam-Ye*, also known as *Itzam-Kah* and *Mut-Itzamna*, the co-essence and *nawal* of Itzamna, the “first sorcerer of this creation” (Schele, 1999: 114). The bird is carved horizontally across the top of the relief, looking down at the scene below. He has a long tail, curvy and elaborate wings, with a ribbon in his beak, a necklace around his neck and a detailed crown on his head. The *Itzam-Kah* bird symbolizes “the capacity to make magic and to engage in the shamanistic journey of the trance,” and by including this in his sarcophagus lid, Pakal chose to create a “‘Sorcery House’” (Schele, 1999: 114).

Not only was the concept of the *way* believed and practiced, but it was also constantly depicted in images, apparent in these art pieces. The fact that people and their *way* were repeatedly depicted in art, that there were clear terms used and glyphs for these terms, gives importance to this concept as a major, central aspect of ancient Mayan culture and religion.

In addition to art and ancient writings, dreams played an important role in the history of the Zinacantán people, a Mayan group in the Mexican highlands of Chiapas. Before Cortes arrived in 1519 and conquered the Aztec empire at Tenochtitlan, people of Tenochtitlan had terrible dreams foreshadowing the massacre that was to come. The king of Tenochtitlan at the time, Moctezuma, ordered to hear from anyone who had dreams regarding the end of the empire, “but finding no good in the thousands [of dreams] offered, Moctezuma killed all the offenders. It was the massacre of the dreamers” (Laughlin, 1996: 92). This historic event challenged the Aztecs’ basic belief and religion. Moctezuma feared the omens he heard in peoples’ dreams predicting

Cortes invasion, which thus illuminates the deep faith and belief in dreams as reality and truth in the Ancient world.

Beginning in the Ancient Mayan world, there was already this concept and term of dreaming as a means of connecting with your co-essence, your *way*. The *way* and *wayib* were terms commonly seen in in glyphs and art. Dreaming, too, played an important role in history, where the belief of dreams as a source of truth resulted in a massacre in Tenochtitlan. Dreams and this idea of the spirit alter-ego, co-essence are concepts that were of great importance in the ancient world, and although have evolved, are concepts that are still alive today.

#### Dreaming in the Contemporary Mayan World

Gwen and I arrived at Santiago's house for the cleansing ceremony at 8:30 AM that Tuesday morning a little drowsy, but eager for the morning ahead. We decided to wait for Santiago in the room where the altar was. Upon entering, I was surprised to find his daughter, barely visible with the dim lighting, kneeling in front of the altar and lighting candles. She told us that she had a bad dream the night before. She dreamed that she was holding a crystal in her hands, but upon looking at the crystal, it broke in half. Her father told her that the dream could be a warning for something bad that might happen in the future, and that she should ask for forgiveness and pardon to *Ajaw* for protection from this bad dream. Worried and yearning to cleanse herself of this bad dream, she followed her fathers' suggestion and asked for protection from the gods.

In contemporary Mayan spirituality, dreams are still respected, listened and responded to, as this example shows. "Sueños son real, son realidad," ("dreams are real, they are reality") Alejandro Ben Cumez, an *Ajq'ij* that lives on the outskirts of Santa Catarina Palopó, further explains. Dreams are taken seriously, and still play an active

role in Mayan cosmology. I saw this that morning when Santiago's daughter lit candles and prayed to the gods, I felt this during the cleansing ceremony later that same day, and I heard it while talking with various *comadronas* (midwives) and *Ajq'ijab* from various towns around Lake Atitlan, Guatemala.

The concept of dreams in contemporary Mayan spirituality can be broken down into three general ideas. First of all, Dreams are a special time for your spirit, soul and consciousness to leave your physical resting body and travel, kind of like the *way*, but today known as the *adiosich*. Secondly, dreams act as another means of interacting with *Ajaw* and the ancestors. This interaction occurs mainly through rocks, called *camahuilles*, which can carry the voice of *Ajaw*, various saints or the ancestors. And finally, dreams unveil an individual's *nawal*, their individual calling and destiny. Looking more specifically and breaking down these three larger themes, we can better understand the concept of dreams in the Mayan religion and culture today.

The Zinacanteco's of Chiapas have a developed concept of the soul that incorporates ideas of the ancient Mayan *way* as well as the idea of the spirit or soul that travels while one dreams. Zinacanteco souls are composed of two parts, the *ch'ulel* and *chanul*. The *ch'ulel*, the part of the soul that leaves the body when you sleep, is composed of thirteen little parts, all of which need to be present for a person to be healthy. This part of the soul is eternal and indestructible; when a person dies, the *ch'ulel* leaves the physical body of the person to be reincarnated into another being, another life. The other part of the soul, the *chanul*, is like the ancient concept of the *way*. It is the spirit alter ego, animal companion. These spirit animals are found in crystals located in the center of a sacred volcano, *bankilal muk'ta*. A person and their *chanul* share the same *ch'ulel*, thus creating this connection between the *chanul* and the person. (Vogt, 1965: 33-34).

In Robert M. Laughlins article on Zinacantán dreams, he explains that “dreams are the means by which we “see with our souls”” (Laughlin, 1996:93), namely, seeing with the *ch’ulel* and *chanul*. Similarly, the same idea of dreaming with the soul, the *adiosich*, is seen in Mayan communities around Lake Atitlan. Although people around the lake had very different descriptions and understandings of the *adiosich*, and there wasn’t one clear concept as there is for the Zinacanteco’s of Mexico, everyone agreed that the *adiosich* actively travels when dreaming, that it is the source of guidance, destiny, and meaning in life.

Some people believe that the *adiosich* is located in the heart, while others say that it is located in the head, either by your temples or in the back of the head. Some believe that it is one entity, while others say it’s made up of two parts, the part that can leave and travel at night, and the heart that doesn’t leave your physical body until you die. Many people agree that the *adiosich* leaves your body at night through your ear and/or nose, and will fly away “como una paloma” (“like a dove”), Santiago poetically illustrates. Sometimes you can even hear the *adiosich* leave your physical body as you drift off to sleep, or return back to you during the day, a sensation described as a gust of wind or buzzing in your ear. When you feel this, you are supposed to blow in a cupped hand and put your hand beside your ear four times, as a way of saying “thank you” to your *adiosich*.

Ana, a *comadrona* (midwife) from Santa Catarina, has a cup of water on her Mayan altar, next to her rocks and saint images, something I have commonly seen on other altars, as well. She explained to me that the cup of water is for the *adiosich*. While you sleep at night, the *adiosich*, your soul, heart, spirit or consciousness, leaves your body and travels in dreams. Many times after a long night of traveling, the *adiosich* gets tired and thirsty, and thus wants some water upon its return. The *adiosich* can travel to

different places, towns, sometimes even different worlds; it can interact with the *adiosich* of other people, as well as the ancestors and *Ajaw*. While the *adiosich* stays with your physical body all day, it can finally leave your body at night to go on *camino* (walking, journey), traveling the world, only to return at the end of the night, reenter your body, and allow you to wake up and start the cycle all over. Some agreed that if the *adiosich* doesn't return, or if a person gets woken up while in the middle of sleep, a person will be sick, act crazy or be nervous; other people can see and notice the person behaving strangely, and the person will feel the absence of his or her *adiosich*. Having lost your *adiosich*, a person must go to an *Ajq'ijab* to perform a ceremony in order to get it back.

Others, on the other hand, believe that without the *adiosich*, a person is dead. Santiago elaborated this idea, and described the *adiosich* as your conscience. It decides what you do on a daily basis, it makes decisions. He said that while humans can do good and bad in life, the *adiosich* wants you to do well, to live a good life, to work hard, to find success and happiness. The *adiosich* also physically gives you life, allowing you to breathe, which Santiago demonstrated by taking deep breaths in and out, using his hands to exaggerate the motion of breathing. Alejandro explained this same concept of the *adiosich* giving a person life, describing the pulse in the human body as the active work of the *adiosich*. Thus it is the *adiosich* that makes us human, allows us to think, to be individual, to breathe and to pump blood through our veins. Without the *adiosich*, you are not human, not living. Therefore according to this theory, the *adiosich* always returns to your body until the moment you die, and so when you get sick, it is your *adiosich* that helps you recover. The *adiosich* works with the body to make the bad leave, to cleanse the body of what is making it sick. More specifically, Alejandro

explained that when you are sick, the *adiosich* cries, and you can physically feel something hurt in your heart until you recover.

The *adiosich* is also generally believed to be indestructible. When you die, your *adiosich* leaves your body and travels. First it travels around the physical world we live in. It may travel to the cemetery, for example. Eventually the *adiosich* makes its way to *Ajaw*, where it stays for good, whether within a few hours or days of traveling. Thus when you interact with and contact your ancestors while dreaming, it is their *adiosich* that you are interacting with. The *adiosich* is the soul of the person that lives on after the person dies, the spirit of the person, and can still be contacted by the living in dreams.

Every night when the *adiosich* travels, there is this potential for sacred contact with the ancestors, *Ajaw* and the saints. These voices guide you, warn you of danger and help you in dreams. Through *camahuilles* (sacred rocks, also called *ach bach* in Kaqchikel), these voices are heard and translated to the person dreaming. Some people referred to *camahuilles* as *destinos* (destinies), *huesos* (bones) of the person whose talking to them, or referred to them as the particular saint or person who speaks to them through that rock. For example, Santiago, showing me his rocks, pointed to one, named Saint Simon, and another, named Don Diego Martin, the names of the saints who speak through those specific rocks. In a dream, the rocks will say who they are, whether a particular saint, Maximon, or *Ajaw*, and tell the person dreaming to go find them. And while some people say that the voice gives a clear location of where the *camahuilles* can be found, other people say that they find the rocks while on a walk. Either way, when stumbling upon one of these sacred rocks, only you, the person who heard the voice of the rock in your dream, can feel the rocks energy and power, and know it is the rock you were looking for.



Most people have collected many rocks over the years, all assembled and composed on their altar. After coming across the *camahuille* and bringing it home to your altar, the rock continues to communicate and guide you in your dreams, translating the voice of *Ajaw*, saints or ancestors. Sometimes these rocks even communicate with each other during the day, and when put in a box and hidden from site, you can hear them hitting against each other and making noise. Ana, the *comadrona*, was eager to share with me her collection of rocks on her altar. She has two large *camahuilles* and a basket full of smaller ones. One is a large rock with the face of Maximon, which she found near her house outside. It sat at the center of her altar and was clearly the centerpiece. The rock was oval with naturally carved eye slits and an indent that resembled a mouth. The carving was simple and subtle but clearly the face of Maximon. Ana also showed me a large hammer head, which she said is from the ancient Mayans. She picked up the rock and started doing the motion of using a hammer to show me how it was used. She then went through all the rocks in her basket, showing me them one by one. I took each one from her hands into mine, held them in my palms, grasped them tightly, looked at them and felt the different surfaces. They were all different sizes, shapes, textures and colors, but many had a face, or resembled another body part of the persons' voice they carry. Ana was adamant about showing me the faces on each rock, illuminating why they are different, how they are special.

Each of these *camahuilles* has energy, they are powerful, they carry sacred messages that they are only able to communicate to the individual while they are sleeping in dreams. These rocks talk to people, help people, guide people, warn people and reveal the future. Dreams are thus like an altar in the sense that they are another portal and means of connection to *Ajaw*, they make the connection to *Ajaw* possible.

The last characteristic of dreams is illuminated in the myth and legend of El Kanil: Man of Lightning from Jacaltenango, by Victor Montejo. In this story, the invasion of a strange group of people is announced, and the need to put together an army is addressed to the people. Xuan, a small but passionate boy who is eager to sacrifice himself to help his people, makes a deal with K'anil that K'anil will give Xuan all his powers with the agreement that Xuan will abandon all he has and never return to his people. As Xuan and his friend Juan Mendez prepare for battle, a brother from Chiapas arrives and tells them, "I dreamed of your mission and like a dream I've come" (Molesky-Poz, 1996: 87, Montejo: 53). Together they defeated the enemy, and Xuan completes his pact with K'anil. As explained by Molesky-Poz in The Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways Are Not Lost, this story illuminates the "importance of visionary phenomena among the Maya. The dream revealed a work he was to accomplish. Upon understanding the dream, the Chiapan travels days and night across the mountains to join Xuan and Juan Mendez....Xuan and Juan Mendez recognize the sacred manifestation of his dream; they accept him as their ally" (Molesky-Poz, 1996: 87). The man from Chiapas had a dream which revealed to him his calling, his destiny, his fate, and thus was something he had to fulfill, regardless of how hard of a journey it was, or whether or not he wanted to fulfill it. This story thus illustrates another important aspect of dreams in Mayan spirituality: revealing a person's destiny and fate in dreams.

Everyone is born with a *nawal*, a calling, a *destino* (destiny), *don* (gift) and fate. Some people have callings to be *Ajq'ijab* or *comadróna*, for example, while the Chiapan in the tale from Jacaltenango had a calling to help Xuan and Juan Mendez in their battle. The fate and destiny of people are not always these important members of a community, or to succeed such large feats as the Chiapan man was called to do. They are sometimes

much more simple. But regardless of what your calling is, the fate and destiny of people are not self determined. They are determined and revealed to people in dreams at some point in life, when the time is right, usually through symbolic dreams that humans must interpret. A persons' fate is not something they can escape. Someone who is chosen to be an *Ajq'ij* cannot decide that he doesn't want this to be his destiny and change it. It is set in stone, determined at birth, a calling that must be fulfilled. If not, people usually get very sick until they learn to accept their fate, a common story for many *Ajq'ijab*.

Dreams are very important when becoming an *Ajq'ij* and spiritual healers, in particular, because it exposes the dreamer to the "powerful world of cosmic forces" (Molesky-Poz, 1996: 72) associated with Mayan spirituality, forces that they will soon learn to understand and interpret. Not only is a person exposed to their calling and *destino* through dreams, but also learns ritual knowledge and is trained through dreams. Barbara Tedlock explains the process of receiving your calling through dreams for spiritual healers in Santiago Atitlán:

Among the Tzutujil Maya of Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, shamans are also taught proper curing techniques and ritual procedures through dream revelation. Generally, the first indication a person has that he or she is destined to become a shaman is that a powerful figure appears in a dream announcing that the individual should begin to learn this occupation. The dreamer frequently disregards the message, but dreams of the same type reappear. If the person is truly destined to become a healer she will also unintentionally find special objects, such as unusual rocks, shells, marbles, or broken fragments of archaeological figurines in the path. If these objects...were actually intended for the person, then she will begin to receive prayers, herbal cures, and other remedies in dreams (Tedlock, 1992: 456).

Similarly to the spiritual healers in Santiago Atitlán, Juana, another *comadrona* in Santa Catarina, had multiple dreams that revealed her *destino*. She once dreamt that Jesus was giving her a baby, and another time, dreamt that someone put money in her hand. These two dreams told her that she will be a *comadrona*, and that as a *comadrona* she will

make her money, her living. After having these dreams and training, she became a *comadrona* at age 39.

Even after your *destino* is revealed, dreams continue to help you perform your *destino* and job well. Esteban, an *Ajq'ij* in Santiago Atitlán, described to me the two dreams he has that encourage him to continue to fulfill his *destino*. He dreams that he is in heaven, where there are beautiful houses and amazingly clean floors. His *adiosich* is welcomed into God's house, where he hears the voice of God telling him that he has to continue to do a good job and help others, to continue his work as a spiritual healer. Similarly, sometimes Esteban dreams that he is flying on top of an ocean, where the ocean water gives him power to fly higher and higher above the water. The higher he gets above the water, the better of a job he is doing as a healer.

Dreams are thus also revealers of your fate, your *nawal*, your *destino*, your *don*; they teach you and help you in the process of fulfilling this destiny, and continue to teach and guide you as you continue your life with this new destiny, whether your calling be a profession or task.

## **Conclusion**

Dreams have been an important aspect of Mayan culture since the ancient Mayan civilization, and they are still an important concept in Mayan religion for the Mayan people around Lake Atitlán, today. Although the terms have changed over the years, the general concepts are more or less the same. Consistent is the idea of the connection to the individual spirit through dreaming, the soul or essence of the human. A person can only really connect with this soul through dreaming, and it is at this time that the soul is set free from the physical being. Also consistent is the belief that dreams

are reality, and that dreams should thus be taken seriously. Dreams are thus still interpreted and responded to as insights into the future.

In contemporary Mayan spirituality around Lake Atitlán, dreams are cherished as sacred. People remember their dreams, they talk about their dreams when they wake up in the morning, they are affected when they have a bad dream and thus respond accordingly. But remember one's dreams the night before is not an easy task. I personally, was very frustrated that I could never remember my dreams while living in Santa Catarina Palopó. But as Barbara Tedlock explains about the group of Quiché Mayans she worked with, "children are encouraged to dream, to remember their dreams, and to tell them in the morning" (Tedlock, 1981: 324). This skill is thus passed down from generation to generation, and in doing so, the importance of dreams are being learned by younger generations, and traditions of dream interpretation will continue on for years to come.

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