The narration and interpretation of dreams and visions has long validated Mayan traditional religion and worldview. Beginning in the 1950s, Protestant evangelicals and a sect within the Roman Catholic church made direct attacks on Mayan dreaming and dream interpretation as a form of pernicious paganism. This resulted in political factionalism within many Mayan communities as ambitious young men reported and acted upon radically new dream imagery. More recently, following a massive civil war and a counterinsurgency attack on Mayan communities by the Guatemalan military, the narration and interpretation of dreams and visions has facilitated an innovative reinterpretation of Mayan traditional religion and worldview.

More than six million Mayan Indians, speaking 24 different Mayan languages, are living today in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras in the area where the majority of the archaeological remains assigned to ancient Mayan civilization are located. However, at the height of the recent Guatemalan civil war (1979–1985), between 50,000 and 70,000 individuals were killed—the majority of whom were Mayans—another 500,000 became internal refugees, 300,000 fled to Mexico, and more than 200,000 escaped to other...
countries, mostly Canada and the United States (Manz 1988; Earle 1988). Recently, the refugees who fled to Mexico in the early 1980s formed "permanent commissions" to present their demands as preparation for their collective repatriation, a National Council of the Displaced (CNDEG) was formed in Guatemala, and members of "popular resistance communities" (CPRs) came out of hiding in the mountains demanding the return of their lands and the demilitarization of rural communities (Edwards 1991).

This violent process of uprooting and dispersion, as in the earlier Jewish and Armenian diasporas, appears now to be leading to ethnogenesis, a cultural and political regrouping into an ethnic nation within and even transcending the boundaries of established nation-states (Varese 1988; Töloöyan 1991; Wilson 1991; Smith 1992; Warren 1993). Guatemalan Mayan intellectuals have argued that Mayans constitute a nation in the sense that they have an ethnic consciousness of themselves, they have proposed a confederate state in which Mayan people could enjoy self-determination without paternalistic intermediaries, and they have set up an autonomous government ministry known as the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (Sam 1983; Cojti 1987, 1991; Otzoy and Sam 1988; ALMG 1990). The goal of this governmental ministry is for Mayans to control foreign and domestic development projects and to promote and revive Mayan culture and worldview.¹

In the neighboring nation-state of Belize, during the early 1980s, Mayan intellectuals set up an ethnic-awareness group called the Toledo Maya Cultural Council, which acts on behalf of the resident Mopán and Kekchi Maya populations.² This organization is involved in many cultural and ecological projects, perhaps the most important of which was their formal petition, in 1988, to the Belizean government requesting that 500,000 acres of land, almost the entire Toledo District, be set aside for the establishment of a Mayan Homeland.³

A key symbol of pan-Mayan ethnic identity is the sacred earth. In several Mayan languages the earth is known by a term that literally translates into English as "Mountain-Valley."⁴ The earth appears frequently within Mayan myths, dreams, and visions referring to both the physical features of the landscape, including mountains, hills, volcanoes, valleys, caves, lakes, and springs, as well as spiritual beings who inhabit this sacred geography, guarding the forest
and controlling the weather. These guardians, or Earth Lords, who are both male and female (Laughlin 1969:177), appear in dreams, visions, and oral narratives as givers of material wealth, yearbearers of the solar calendar, dwarf gamekeepers, and the owners of mountains or volcanoes. They are described variously as dark in complexion or else light, like ladinos or gringos, with long blond, or even white, hair and white skin, riding on a white deer or horse, carrying a snake as a whip. Since they can suddenly appear anywhere, in almost any guise, they are simultaneously numinous and fearful figures who can help or hurt humans at will.5

There is an Ixil oral narrative, collected in Cotzal, about a fearful encounter with an Earth Lord. One day a young man decided to go with his buddies to rent a costume for a dance drama. The night before they were to leave he got drunk, and the next morning he couldn’t keep up with his friends. Soon he fell asleep beside the trail, and when he awoke, at noon, he realized that he was all alone and lost. Suddenly, a large man appeared and asked him where he was going. He explained that since he was to play the role of the hummingbird in an upcoming dance drama, he was on his way to rent his costume. The giant told him that he would give him his costume on the condition that he never tell anyone where he got it. After the man agreed, the giant told him to close his eyes. Moments later, when he was instructed to open them, he found that he was inside a mountain in a huge house filled with costumes and masks. After he chose his costume, and again closed his eyes, he was transported back outside the mountain onto the path.

The giant warned him that he must not recite all of his lines and he must never tell where his costume came from. Unfortunately, the man got drunk and recited all of his lines and told his buddies about the mansion in the mountain filled with costumes. No sooner did he tell his friends than his costume lifted him up in the air and deposited him on top of the mountain. The people who saw what happened to him named the mountain Hummingbird Mountain Peak (Townsend and Met 1980:107–123).

MAYAN SHAMANISM

Throughout the Mayan area, shamans, who practice as healers and dream interpreters, are selected for these roles by giants, dwarfs, and other tellurian deities who meet them when they are out
walking in the hills and forests, visiting caves, or else while they are dreaming. Among the Tzotzil Maya, living in the village of Zinacantán in Chiapas, Mexico, shamans receive their calling from these deities, who summon them to their mountain homes. There they are told that they have been chosen to become healers and are given patients to cure. In a series of dreams the candidate receives elaborate instructions concerning prayers, diagnostic information, and ritual procedure (Fabrega and Silver 1973:31–33; Laughlin 1988:65–68). A shaman begins his or her practice informally by treating family members and neighbors. If he falls ill, or if social pressure builds for him to assume the public duties required of the role, he seeks out a senior shaman and tells him his dreams. Afterward, he will travel to the lowlands, where he searches for and finds a bamboo staff, and then returns home to accompany a senior shaman on a ceremonial circuit of local churches, mountains, and water holes (Laughlin 1976:122). During the 1970s there was a significant increase in the number of practicing shamans in Zinacantán, which outstripped the rate of population growth (Vogt 1976:196–197).

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, which are said to ‘speak for the spirits’ (Douglas 1969:134–141), were actually intended for the person, then she will begin to receive prayers, herbal cures, and other remedies in dreams. Unlike in the Tzotzil case, Tzutujil shamans are never presented publicly and they do not have any community-wide ritual functions.

In the neighboring Tzutujil community of San Pedro la Laguna, shamans—both bonesetters and midwives—are called to their roles by finding special objects and experiencing repetitive dream summons to visit mountains, where they encounter supernatural beings from whom they learn all of their healing and ritual knowledge. A man by the name of Ventura had a series of dreams in which a bone
was hopping about but he was too frightened to pick it up. One night a dwarf came to him in his dream and asked him why he never picked up the bone and warned him that if he kept refusing he would die. The next time the man dreamed of a bone he picked it up, and a series of instructional dreams concerning the details of bonesetting followed (B. Paul 1976). In another case, a man destined to be a bonesetter was visited by a dwarf dressed like a doctor, all in white with a suitcase. The dream visitor may also appear as a ladino clad in white (Rodríguez 1969).

A woman from San Pedro, by the name of Rosa, was walking to a neighboring village when she suddenly found herself miraculously transported into a large, carpeted chamber inside a hill. There, on a dais, sat a group of deceased midwives dressed in white, from head to toe, who pointed to a huge table laden with corn, beans, eggs, greens, tomatoes, and coffee. They said to her: “These are the things that people will bring as gifts when you are a midwife. Some may give you only a bit of this or that because that is all they have. You must accept whatever they give you with goodness in your heart. Never criticize a woman, even if she gives you only a handful of beans” (Paul and Paul 1975:712).

Later Rosa encountered a conch shell in her path, but she was afraid to touch it. That night, in a dream, the spirits of dead midwives appeared to her again, rebuking her for rejecting the shell, and instructing her to go back and pick it up. She did so. On another occasion she saw a penknife, with a fish and child carved on its handle. This time she picked it up immediately and went to a shaman to divine the meaning of these curious articles. He told her that the shell was her power object and that the knife was to be used to cut the umbilical cord at birth. Then he burned candles and incense for her before the image of Saint Ann, the guardian of midwives, and also in the hills, asking the spiritual guardians of childbirth to assist her in her work. The spirits revisited her in her dreams many times after that, instructing her how to massage a pregnant woman, how to feel for the position of the fetus, how to know when a woman was ready to deliver, how to cut the umbilical cord and foretell the child’s future by its markings, and how to pray. She continued to dream throughout her career and learned that whenever she saw white doves flying, one of her clients was about to deliver.
Another woman from the same village, by the name of Juana, received her call to become a midwife when she was quite young, near the time of her puberty. One night, in her dreams, she saw an old man, dressed in white, with white hair and a white beard.

He tucked me under his arm like a bundle. He held me tight and we flew far, far away just like birds, over many towns and strange places. I wasn’t afraid. It was very beautiful. I looked down from the sky and saw the houses like tiny toys down below. Everything looked so pretty. After flying a long time, he brought me back. [L. Paul 1975:456–457]

Later she had a dream in which she saw a woman with her legs spread apart, her skirt up, and a bloody baby coming out of her. Then a woman dressed in pure white from head to toe handed her a white cloth and showed her how to receive the baby.

Among the Ixil Maya of highland Guatemala, men are called to become a type of shaman known as a “daykeeper,” by dreaming repeatedly of the 20 day names of the sacred Mayan calendar. Since the call comes from the earth gods as well as from the departed souls of previous daykeepers, offerings of prayers, incense, and candles are made at both the mountain shrines and in the cemetery. Afterward, many more dreams present themselves to the dreamer. An Ixil man by the name of Shas Ko’w dreamt that he was flying; he rose into the sky and soared up and down the way black vultures do, making airplane-like turns while looking below. Then he lost his desire to fly and descended into a valley surrounded by mountains, where he met an old man who was a calendar priest. The old man asked him how he got to his home, and when he replied that he had flown, the old man said, “Very good. Your ways are good indeed, because you will become knowledgeable. You will not become worthless. There will be certain knowledge with you” (Colby and Colby 1981:63).

In another dream he saw a metal cable hanging down from the sky and grabbed hold of it with his hand. He went swinging up on the cable until it lowered itself, and he grabbed the side of a corral, and let go. When he was back on the ground he woke up, afraid that he would die; he went immediately to a shaman who told him that he wouldn’t die, but rather that his life would be long. The calendar was to be his vocation, he would become a daykeeper. At this point he began to perform rituals and to pray, and the faces of the day gods slowly revealed themselves to him, one by one. He also listened to what the old daykeepers said as they recited their prayers at the
earth shrines and at the cemetery. Later, when he went to the plantations to work, he awoke in the night and told a friend from another village, with whom he shared a room, that an old man had come to him in his dream and said, “Keep the day of today in your head. It’s 1 K’ach today.” His friend told him, “Ah, it is the Days who are giving themselves to you. The Days will reveal themselves to you! Since you have dreamt the name of the day, you won’t forget it. But I’ll give you some help, because I know the day count. I’ll give you its essence” (Colby and Colby 1981:65). In this way he learned the calendar and went on to practice as a daykeeper.

DREAM SHARING AND INTERPRETATION

Dreams are also important to Mayans who are not destined to become shamans, daykeepers, or midwives, and public dream narration and interpretation are commonly practiced. All over the Mayan region it is routine to awaken one’s spouse, or other sleeping companion, in the middle of the night in order to narrate a dream (Sexton 1985:68, 278; Laughlin 1988:9–10), and in some communities mothers ask their children about their dreams every morning (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:109; Tedlock 1987:120). Among adults, important dreams involving the ancestors or the earth deities are shared with initiated shamans who are dream interpreters (Tedlock 1987:116–117). Lacandón Mayan men, who live in the jungle of Chiapas, Mexico, annually undergo ritual seclusion during a two-month-long incense burner renewal ceremony, at which time they share their dreams with one another before dawn each morning around the fire (Bruce 1975:39). Their dream interpretation system, like most other non-Western systems, is a “progressive” rather than a “regressive” one in that most dreams are felt to pertain to the future rather than to the past (Basso 1987:87). The majority of the prophecies associated with dream symbols are only interpretable if one examines them in terms of the local mythology, cosmology, and ceremonial practices (Bruce 1975:79–83). The Lacandones are currently undergoing intensive missionization by Protestant evangelicals who mistrust the dreams of laypersons, which they place together with omens and divination as the work of the Devil (Bruce 1979:ix–x, 347–355). Consequently, dream interpretation, and perhaps even the very fabric of their dreams, will change. To date, only
the northern Lacandón of Najá have been able to discourage Protestant missionary activity in their village (McGee 1990:6).

A similar attack on the indigenous religion and system of dream interpretation was launched among the highland Mayans during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s by the apostolic sect known as Acción Católica (Catholic Action) within the Roman Catholic church. At sometime in the mid-1950s, in the Mam community of Chimaltenango, local converts to Catholic Action burned the town’s sacred wooden chest containing old documents (Watanabe 1992:204). After the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Liberation Theology evolved into a major political force sending waves of European and Latin American priests and nuns out into the rural areas of Guatemala to train lay ministers and organize Catholic base communities. Priests and catechists argued for a rigid separation of the soul from the body, stressed the soul, and turned away from the materiality of the body, which they associated with the earth, sin, and the Devil. They also argued that religious symbols should transcend ethnic identities; thus, Mayan ancestors were de-emphasized and replaced by Christ’s Apostles (Melville 1983; Frank and Wheaton 1984; Berryman 1984; Wilk and Chapin 1990; Wilson 1991).

It was not long until Mayan converts to this new form of orthodox Roman Catholicism related dream experiences in which the Christian God appeared to them, declaring that the Holy Earth was in reality the Devil, and called upon them to destroy all of the sacred Mayan earth shrines (Saler 1965:110–111). As a result of these sorts of dreams, hundreds of persons turned against traditional Mayan cultural practices. Mayan catechists, who were mostly young men, soon usurped the power of their elders and attacked Mayan worldview and religious traditions as “pagan” (Warren 1978; Falla 1978; Brintnall 1979; Watanabe 1990; Tedlock 1992). However, even at the height of this religious fervor no Mayan community in Central America became one hundred percent aligned with Catholic Action. Instead, there were large numbers of individuals who continued to practice their traditional blend of medieval Catholicism and ancient Mayan earth and ancestor worship.

This was to be the case until 1982, the height of military counter-insurgency attacks on Mayan communities. At this time, in some locations, shamans were forbidden to go into the mountains in order to practice their religious rituals, and if they did so they were
rounded up and accused of helping the guerrillas combat the army (Colby 1989; Nelson 1991; Sexton 1992). In one case, documented by a Tzutujil Mayan observer, a well-known K’iche’ shaman, by the name of Octavio Tuc, had his divining paraphernalia seized and both he and his wife were jailed. Upon their release they were commanded to join in Protestant activities. Fearing that he might be killed, the man converted to the evangelical church, Tabernáculo. Six months later, after dreaming twice about once again practicing as a shaman, he left the Protestants (Sexton 1992:7–8).

This happened in the community of San José La Laguna, near Lake Atitlán, at the same time that army counterinsurgency attacks in the far northern areas of Guatemala were so severe that entire Mayan communities abandoned their villages and went into hiding with the guerrillas in the mountains. At first, in their nomadic condition, the traditional religion, which required visiting specific named mountains and making offerings of incense, candles, pigs, and chickens, could not be properly carried out and they turned to the catechists for spiritual guidance. But, as they adjusted to their new homes in the mountains, the earth deity, Mountain-Valley, took on a guardian role. As one Q’eqchi’ Mayan man put it:

The mountains collaborated with us. The mountains and the elders will never leave you. One Tzuultaq’a [Mountain-Valley] told me, in a dream: “You go away from here because the dogs are coming.” So we left that place and five days later the army was there. The mountain looks like an old man with a beard. [Wilson 1991:45]

VISIONS IN LOWLAND GUATEMALA AND BELIZE

Today, lowland Q’eqchi’ communities in both Guatemala and Belize are involved in Mayan religious revivalism, with the impetus for traditionalism ironically coming from the members of Catholic Action. These men and women are focused on a message being spread by a charismatic Q’eqchi’ catechist who lives in the jungle near Livingston, Guatemala. This past year he had a visionary experience in which the earth deity, Mountain-Valley, instructed him as to the proper care and worship of nature.

In his vision he saw a little boy walking down a mountain toward him; then the child spoke, telling him that his father, the earth deity, wished to converse with him. He followed the child into the mountain. When he entered the mountain an old man questioned him,
asking him if he was ready to undertake a mission. When he said yes, the old man told him that he must first travel around the local villages and see how the corn was being mistreated, just thrown away. It was growing weevils, worms, and mildew. Then he saw all the plantings: bananas, cocoyam, all sorts of root crops thrown away. The people misused them. He traveled around and saw many things, including wounded animals abandoned in the woods to suffer and die. Then he walked past a pen containing furious animals—snakes, jaguars, peccaries, and tapirs—past another pen containing good animals—deer, antelope, and gibnut—on past a pen containing bad animals—small chickens and turkeys who appear suddenly at crossroads. After this, he was shown three of the thirteen sacred Mountain-Valleys (cf. Pacheco 1985:94). Two of them, Sorio Xan and Kaxlan K’ejen, were male, and the third, Tzuul Xiyab’, was female.

When the man emerged from the mountain it was raining, but he couldn’t feel the rain until he reached his home, where he immediately fell asleep in his hammock. Upon awakening he saw his house filled with visitors; they spoke to him, but he was deaf and dumb, and had to reply in sign language that he could not speak. Then he went back to sleep. The following day the mountains shook as if there were an earthquake, and he began to speak. He explained to his family and friends that he had been taken inside the mountain where he met a 131-year-old man who had a big book containing all the songs that should be sung in celebration of the earth deity and the precious corn. He was also taught the proper care of the animals and crops, how to set up the 13-day community and 6-day family sacrificial rituals, and how to make the appropriate offerings at the four corners of a new house. He learned that, although Jesus Christ died for us, we cannot be like him because we have flesh and body, so we have to work and care for our body. Also, while the earth deities, the Mountain-Valleys, are not Gods equivalent with the Lord Jesus Christ, they are the guardians of the crops and the wildlife that gives us our food. So we must worship and make sacrifices to them.

A tape recording of the narrative of his vision, and the singing of the songs he learned from the old man inside the mountain, was made by a catechist in the village of Crique Sarco, just over the Guatemalan border in Belize. When he began relating his vision he asked the audience not to make any criticisms, not to think that he
might be performing a superstition. He said that the story was true and if they wanted to believe, that’s okay; but if they didn’t want to believe, that’s okay too. Because it is something that nobody has seen except himself. He also said that he had been given just seven years to spread the word, and from now on he would be regularly joining Mountain-Valley for his meals. So far, he has carried the teaching to 26 communities and he has an invitation to speak at a 27th village. At the end of seven years, or perhaps sooner, he will leave; where he will go he does not know, but another person will be taken inside a mountain and given the mission.

The tape of his account, together with a transcription of three songs given in the vision, have been circulating widely among Belizean Q’eqchi’ and Mopán Mayans. The song lyrics mention 13 sacred Mountain-Valleys, admonish people not to mistreat the precious corn, and remind them that even though they might learn Spanish they mustn’t forget their own mothers and fathers. In other words, they must remember that they are Mayans. Last December, after these tapes had circulated among people in the largest Mopán Mayan village in Belize, San Antonio, the elders sent for the man to come in person to tell them of his vision, but he has thus far been unable to receive an exit visa from the Guatemalan government.

**MYTHS, VISIONS, AND DREAMS**

As is often the case with visions and dreams, mythic elements appear in the narrative account. In order to demonstrate how this works, I will briefly summarize a Q’eqchi’ folktale, collected in 1980 in the same region where the vision was narrated. The protagonist of the narrative was a man experiencing difficulties with animals eating his milpa (crops) who complained to a Mountain-Valley by the name of Lord Cojaj about the situation. The earth lord gave him permission to hunt on his land (Schackt 1984). One day when he was out hunting he trespassed onto land belonging to another Mountain-Valley, Lady Itzam. Since he did not have permission to hunt on her land, she was angry and sent her son to bring the trespasser to her. The child approached the man in his milpa and said that his mother had sent him to tell him to come to meet her. The man asked the boy which way to go and he told him to close his eyes. When the man opened his eyes, he found that he was inside the mountain of Lady Itzam and that she had already sent her son off
to bring his uncle, Lord Kojaj. When the lord arrived he told the man to leave immediately and never trespass on Lady Itzam’s land again, because she had no patience. He cautioned the man that he should have been hunting only on the land where he had given him permission, and ordered Lady Itzam to set the man free. Lady Itzam did as she was told but she was angry and threw a piece of rope at the man; it changed into a snake. Lord Kojaj sent down Lord Thunder (Qaakwa’Kaq), who killed the snake with a lightning bolt.

Before comparing this myth with the visionary account, I want to make it clear that while some psychoanalysts have been tempted to interpret myths as if they were dreams, and in fact one analyst called myths the dreams of a culture (Abraham 1955), I do not intend to collapse one cultural system into another. While it is undoubtedly true that “the reasoning of the unconscious and the logic of mythical thought are both not only rigorous but also similar in kind” (Kuper 1979:661), explaining dream signs in terms of other cultural media in a reductive fashion trivializes the question of the relationship between dreams and other expressive media. Instead, one ought to study the precise nature of the linkage between dreams and myths by treating dreaming as a cultural system, or organized conventional set of signs, that is articulated with other systems but is not to be confused with them.

Both this mythic narrative and the visionary account center on a protagonist who is brought, by a child, inside a mountain where he is instructed about the proper behavior toward the natural world and then sent home under the protection and guardianship of an earth deity. Just as one appropriates a myth by dreaming it, one also learns to communicate dream or visionary experience by modeling it on other cultural codes, such as myths and rituals, that are available within a society (see Devereux 1957). Whatever the catechist actually saw in his vision, we can have no way of knowing, but it is clear that a believable Mayan visionary narrative requires a child as a guide and an old person as the spirit of Mountain-Valley.

Differences between the myth and the visionary narrative are equally as revealing, particularly in the area of gender status and stereotyping. Here the ill-tempered, malevolent woman earth deity is portrayed as less important than the male earth deity, while in the catechist’s vision the female earth deity is beneficent, knowledgeable, and more important than the male earth deity. In Mayan so-
ciety, which has traditionally been patrilineal and patriarchal, there has been a recent movement toward greater sexual equality. The position of women in the myth is more attuned to the older status hierarchy, while the status of women in the vision is more attuned to a newer postwar attitude. Rigoberta Menchú, a catechist Mayan woman revolutionary, noted that while her male counterparts had trouble at the beginning of the civil war accepting her as an equal because of her sex, these attitudes quickly changed because revolutionary struggle demands equal effort and, consequently, equal treatment for all (Menchú 1984:220–226).

The catechist’s visionary narrative functions simultaneously to facilitate cultural innovation while sustaining traditional culture. His narrative validates Mayan earth worship, thus contributing to cultural continuity, but it also supports the current nativistic revitalization movement by giving voice and meaning to a reconciliation between Catholic Action and traditional Mayan religion (Pacheco 1985:171–174). Mountain-Valley is important because s/he gives us food and helps us grow in our daily lives; thus, we are obligated to make regular offerings of incense, candles, pigs, and chickens. However, Mountain-Valley is not a God, like Jesus Christ. Here we see a person moving from the absolute oppositional dualism of God versus the Devil, which he learned in catechism classes, to a dialectical position in which he allows both Jesus Christ and Mountain-Valley to coexist in the world as positive forces. This new accommodation between the earth deities of the traditional religion and the absolute monotheism of Roman Catholicism is one outcome of the Guatemalan civil war. Another quite different outcome, which I also have firsthand information about, occurred in the department of Totonicapán in the highlands of Guatemala.

DREAMING IN HIGHLAND GUATEMALA

In the large K’iche’ Mayan community of Momostenango, where the Catholic Action movement by the 1970s had claimed a membership of more than one-third of the community, today it is difficult to find people who will even admit to having once been catechists. This remarkable realignment of religious commitment occurred after Momostecan elders who were initiated shamans, or ajq’ij (“daykeepers”); received information, early in the war, that the presence of large numbers of catechists might cause the community...
to be labeled as “subversive,” and thus invite a military counterin- 
surgency attack. After a series of night raids on the town center by 
guerrillas, who left spray-painted slogans on the walls of the munic-
ipa! offices and leaflets containing death threats against numerous 
wealthy Mayan merchants and town leaders, three unidentifiable 
odies were found on the road to the neighboring town of San Fran-
cisco el Alto. At this point Momostecan ex-military men, many of 
whom were daykeepers, decided to fight back. They participated in 
armed confrontations with guerrilla groups along the northwest 
borders of the municipality. By demonstrating that the community 
was organized, ready and willing to fight guerrillas, they kept the 
national military and its scorched-earth counterinsurgency cam-
paign out of Momostenango.

Daykeepers in this community, who number several thousand 
men and women, together with an all-male politico-religious hier-
archy consisting of patrilineage, canton, and town leaders, represent 
the best organized group of shamans in all of Central America. 
These individuals, who undergo several months of training and a 
formal initiation, practice as healers, midwives, calendrical experts, 
astronomers, diviners, and dream interpreters. During the training 
period their own dreams, together with their teacher’s dreams, are 
carefully monitored and interpreted. Their teachers, who are mem-
bers of the politico-religious hierarchy, were recruited to the role in 
classical shamanic fashion, with “divine election”—through birth, 
ilness, and dreams—followed by marriage to a spirit spouse at ini-
tiation.

The precise day a person is born on the 260-day calendar deter-
nines a person’s uwäch uq’iij (literally, “the face of one’s day”), that 
is, one’s character or personality. The Nahua term nawal is used in-
terchangeably with uwäch uq’iij among the K’iche’, with both terms 
designating the part of the self that leaves the body while a person 
dreams and travels about, meeting other people’s nawales (Bunzel 
1952:274; Saler 1964; Tedlock 1987:120). Ten of the twenty day 
names in the Mayan calendar give children born on those days a 
special type of body soul, known as “sheet” or “heat lightning.” 
(This form of lightning contrasts with “bolt” or “ray” lightning.) 
This special soul, which is located within the muscles and blood, 
enables these people to receive messages from the natural and su-
pernatural worlds within their own bodies. Only a person with this
sheet lightning in their body can become a daykeeper and thus a
dream interpreter. A person who is destined to be trained as a day-
keeper has a series of dreams in which body lightning, religious
shrines, the ancestors, the earth deity Juyub'taq'aj ("Mountain-
Valley"), and divining paraphernalia appear in symbolic form.

The surface content of these dreams may involve such seemingly
secular events as being chased by a horse or a bull, but it is the inter-
pretation of the dream symbols that matters. The identical dream
content is interpreted differently for a layperson as for a novice or
initiated daykeeper. For example, the dream of being chased by a
bull means "the casket," or "death," for a lay dreamer, while for a
novice or fully initiated daykeeper it means an obligation to visit an
earth shrine. In both cases the connection to the dead is made by
way of a box: for ordinary dreamers a wooden box (casket) and for
initiated daykeepers a small stone box-shaped shrine where offer-
ings are made. In the case of the layperson the dream is interpreted
at a personal level—his own or another family member's imminent
death—while in the case of a novice, or fully initiated daykeeper, the
exact same dream content is interpreted at a social level, indicating
that religious rituals should be performed. However, if the daykeep-
er fails to do the rituals, then he or she will die. Thus, the dream of
being chased by a bull ultimately means "death" for both initiated
daykeepers and laypeople, with the important distinction being that
the initiate can avoid it through performing socially sanctioned re-
ligious rituals, while the layperson cannot, except of course by be-
coming an initiated daykeeper and performing the necessary rituals.

According to K'iche' dream epistemology, the reason for this dif-
fERENCE in interpretation is that once the main deities of the K'iche'
pantheon—Nantat (literally, "mother-father," the ancestors), Tiox
("God"), and Juyub'tak'aj ("Mountain-Valley")—are informed by
the teacher of the names of all novices, they begin visiting them
nightly. The nawales (or disguised images) of the deities—such as
bulls—visit the dreamer's own nawal. The dreamer is then taught
by the teacher how to interpret the meaning of these visits. If a non-
 novice, in his or her dreams, randomly encounters a deity, he or she
usually dies rather than learning from the encounter. Thus, for the
K'iche', the identical, unsought night dream varies in interpretation
depending upon the religious status of the dreamer.
This status shift in interpretation poses a difficult problem for any attempt at a scholarly dream typology in which a distinction is made between unsought, spontaneous “individual dreams” occurring during sleep, and consisting primarily of subjective phenomena with only a bit of cultural reflection, and sought (or induced) “culture-pattern dreams” or visions, that conform to a stereotyped pattern laid down by the culture, and thus of special tribal significance (Lincoln 1935). In the K’iche’ case it would appear that the difference between dreams of personal significance and those of more general cultural significance is not so much a matter of manifest content as a matter of dream epistemology, which shifts according to the status of the dreamer, and that even the culture-pattern dream, with its relation to the supernatural, need not be a phenomenon apart from the dreams that occur during ordinary sleep.

When initiated daykeepers set out to interpret a dream there are three main ways of going about it. First is what I have called “intratextual dream interpretation,” where all that is needed is a single dream text, which is then read as an allegory, an inversion, a wish, or else as the literal situation in the world (Tedlock 1981). This form of dream interpretation is most frequently used by the uninitiated in the self-analysis of their own dreams. Momostecans also submit dream texts to interpretation at what I have called a “contextual” and an “intertextual” level. While a purely intratextual analysis of a dream focuses on the dream imagery, a contextual analysis includes events or circumstances from the dreamer’s life (such as her social status) as well as her reaction to the dream imagery. An intertextual analysis combines the content of a particular dream and its immediate context with other dreams and texts given through divinatory, calendrical, mythological, and other cultural codes in order to arrive at an interpretation. At the intertextual level, dreams function as cultural representations analogous to myths and rituals, rather than as strictly individual manifestations revealing a dreamer’s psychology.

The following dream of a novice daykeeper and its interpretation provide an illustration of these three levels of dream analysis:

My husband, myself, and our teacher decided to visit a saint. In the base of this saint there was a circular yellow and white mosaic consisting of bits of mirror covered over with a cloth. Each visitor had to lift the cloth in order to see their own face in the mirror fragments, and then roll a coin into the offering slot in its base. The proceeds were for the building of a school.
The novice’s teacher, an initiated daykeeper, began analyzing this dream at the intertextual level by speaking a mnemonic phrase that gives a meaning to the day name Kawuq, the day on which the dream occurred. The phrase was remelik tikilik (“to hold water,” “to plant,” or “set out”), in the sense of putting stew in a bowl on the table before a meal. At a more general level, this mnemonic phrase indicates that something is set, ready to go. Next, he switched to the contextual level by pointing out that he had planned to hold a fiesta for San Antonio at his house the following week, a fiesta to which the dreamer had already been invited. Then, combining these two levels, he suggested that the dream of his student was a positive indication that everything was set: that he himself and his wife should go ahead with plans to have the family, neighbors, and the dreamer in and feed them, as well as making offerings to the saint. But he also pointed out that the dream could relate, contextually, to the novice’s tentative plans for a trip to visit Saint Simon in another community. Or, on the intratextual level, the fact that the coins were for the building of a school could point to Saint James, the patron saint of the municipality of Momostenango. However, upon asking his own bodily “sheet lightning,” and thus shifting back from the contextual to the intertextual level by bringing in a third semiotic code or text, he decided that the original San Antonio interpretation was the best one after all.

Intertextual analysis, in which divinatory, calendrical, blood, mythological, and other codes are combined to interpret a dream, with the intratextual and contextual levels subsumed within it, is considered by Momostecan daykeepers to be the most precise methodology in dream interpretation. As in the previous example, it is used with novices and initiated daykeepers. The analysis of a layperson’s identical dream might have stopped at the intratextual level with a literal reading of the saint as the local patron saint, Saint James (which is always a standard reading where a money box is involved), or else at the contextual level with an indication that the dreamer should go ahead and visit Saint Simon, as she was planning to do anyway. However, if a layperson begins to have frequent dreams which a daykeeper feels the need to analyze at the intertextual level, bringing in myths or other cultural codes, and if the dreamer has suffered any of the classic shamanic illnesses, or if she was born on the proper day of the Mayan calender, then this person...
may begin training as a daykeeper. At this point she has begun to dream in “clear light,” which is to say, truly, and the epistemological base for the interpretation of the dream is no longer limited to the dream world itself and to the ongoing private life of the dreamer, but participates in a broader world of cultural representations at the level of myths and rituals.

In the fall of 1989, when my husband Dennis Tedlock and I attended the Wajxaq’ib’ B’atz’ (“Eight Monkey”) ceremony in Momostenango,10 we found that not only were there more local daykeepers undergoing formal initiation, but there were more people from other highland Mayan communities crowding into the earth shrines than there had been when we lived in the community during the seventies. And although everyone was poorer than before the war, the traditionalists were involved in constructing a cement-block chapel next to the most important earth shrines at Ch’uti Sabal (Tedlock 1992:66–68). They had decided to build this chapel after a Protestant alcalde (mayor), appointed by General Efraín Ríos Montt, had barred priest-shamans from using the municipal offices in the town center, as they always had, for religious purposes. All day long on Wajxaq’ib’ B’atz’, each person who entered the earth shrines was asked for contributions to help with the construction expenses. Even people who once had been catechists and had gone about destroying earth shrines and sneering at dream interpretation as “mere superstition” were donating to the shrine and presenting their own dreams to initiated daykeepers for interpretation. Some of them were even among the novices being initiated that day. Perhaps they had this change of heart, accompanied by a change in dreaming, when they realized that since it was primarily Mayans who were suffering, dying, and fleeing from the military during the civil war there was a sinister possibility of ethnocide, the loss of their culture and ethnicity (Smith 1988). As one highland Mayan catechist stated the matter: “I used to speak against the traditional religion. We can be the worst destroyers of our own culture. But now that I am more involved, I understand the barbarity I’ve committed and the need to support our traditions” (Nelson 1991:14).

CONCLUSIONS

The dialogue between traditionalists and catechists appears to have ended in the community of Momostenango with the recruit-
ment and initiation of the majority of the catechists into the traditional shamanic religion. However, the inclusion of so many individuals who were once active in various regional and national social movements, such as farming co-operatives and rural healthcare organizations, within the traditional religious structure is sure to bring major changes in both symbolic content and ritual practice. On the other hand, the newly resumed dialogue between traditionalists and catechists in several Q'eqchi' villages in the lowlands of Guatemala and Belize will also, no doubt, produce a whole new set of religious syncretisms between traditionalism and orthodox Roman Catholicism.

Clearly, dreams and visions in both of these regions of Mesoamerica will continue to validate Mayan traditionalism while simultaneously facilitating cultural innovation. One result of the civil war is that Mayan people, who represent at least sixty percent of the Guatemalan population (Varese 1991:16), have responded to the military attack on themselves as an ethnicity in different ways, but the results include an increased emphasis on dreams and visions that enable them to stay in touch with their own ancestors and the sacred earth on which they live.

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NOTES

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1 This recent effort to promote and revive Mayan culture is an example of nativism, which is "any conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture" (Linton 1943:230).

2 Speakers of the Q'eqchi' Mayan language are referred to as the Kekchi in Belize, while in Guatemala, after the spelling reform suggested by the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (ALMG 1988), they are called the Q'eqchi'.
For more information on the proposed Mayan Homeland in Belize, see Coc (1984), Toledo Maya Cultural Council (1986), Sletto and Sletto (1990), and Wilk (1991:235).

These mountain spirits are known as Juyub’taq’a in K’iche’, Tzuultaq’a in Q’eqchi’ (Wilson 1991:43); Uitzailic in Chuh (Thompson 1970:275); Itacai in Chorti (Thompson 1970:323); and Witz in Jacaltec (La Farge and Beyers 1931:131–132), Chol (Aulie and Aulie 1978:35), Mam (Watanabe 1992:75–76), and Tzotzil (Vogt 1969:298–299). An alternate name for Witz, in Tzotzil, is Totilme’il (“father-mother”), meaning the ancestors.


The Guatemalan Q’eqchi’ Mayans, numbering more than 360,000 individuals, live in the departments of Alta Verapaz, El Quiché, Izabel, and the Petén (Pacheco 1985:41; Wilson 1991). There are also about 3,600 Q’eqchi’ living in the Belizean districts of Toledo and Stann Creek (Wilk 1991:42).

This mountain is the best known of the 13 largest sacred mountain-valleys of the Q’eqchi’. It is located 27 kilometers from San Pedro Carchá (Pacheco 1985:94).

K’iche’ Mayans consist of close to one million individuals living primarily in the departments of Totonicapán and El Quiché.

For words in the K’iche’ language I use the new alphabet agreed upon by Mayan linguists who are also native speakers of Mayan languages (ALMG 1988). The sounds are approximately as in Spanish, except that q is like Hebrew qoph, tz is like English ts, x is like English sh, and ’, the apostrophe, indicates the glottal stop when it follows a vowel and glottalization when it follows a consonant. The major differences between this orthography and the previous one in general use by scholars, is that where the glottalized b was simply written b in the old orthography, today it is written b’; wherever a c or qu was used in the old orthography, today a k is used; and wherever a k was used in the old orthography, today a q is used. The use of Spanish accents to indicate stress has been dropped altogether. These changes often affect the written form of the name of a Mayan ethnic group so that the people who were referred to as the Quiché, in the old orthography, are now the K’iche’, the Cakchiquel people are now the Kaqchikel, and those who were known as the K’ekchi’ are now known as the Q’eqchi’.

Wajxaqib’ B’atz’ is the largest ongoing public religious celebration in Central America timed in accordance with the ancient Mesoamerican 260-day calendar (Tedlock 1992:xiv–xv, 59, 60, 116–117).

At the time of my original research in Momostenango there were slightly more than 43,000 Mayan inhabitants, of whom less than one percent were protestants, about thirty-nine percent were members of Catholic Action, and nearly sixty percent were traditionalists. Today, there are more than 73,000 Mayan Momostecans, of whom approximately nine percent are protestants and ninety-one percent traditionalists. As in other areas of Guatemala, previous members of Catholic Action are currently being recruited into various Protestant sects (Scotchmer 1986; Annis 1987; Goldin and Metz 1991). For more discussion of the recent changes in the social and religious life of this community, see the revised edition of my book Time and the Highland Maya (Tedlock 1992).
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