

ANTHROPOLOGY



DREAMED

Ethnographic studies shed light on how indigenous peoples such as the Yanomami interpret dreams

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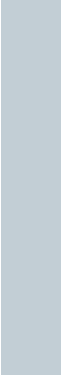


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reams were rarely studied in anthropology until the mid-1990s, but academic interest in the topic is now growing. New interpretations of how indigenous peoples perceived dreams—a topic about which little was previously known—have emerged in recent years. The Yanomami ethnic group, for example, sees dreams as real experiences that can have collective impacts and change the course of events. This perspective is opposed to the widely accepted psychoanalytical theory of dream expressions, according to which the dream world is generated by the individual subconscious. “The waking life and dreamed life are of the same importance for indigenous peoples in the Americas. Recent studies have looked at dreams as events that have consequences in the real world,” says anthropologist Renato Sztutman of the University of São Paulo (USP), one of the organizers of a special volume of essays on the subject, published by *Journal of Anthropology* in December.

According to the researcher, the importance of dreams to indigenous people has been observed as far back as the precolonial era, when the first European travelers to arrive in the Americas noted descriptions of dream beliefs in their travelogues. Despite this documentation, Sztutman points out that for a long time, anthropology treated dreams as a secondary topic. “Studies on indigenous cosmologies generally cover the issue of dreams, but specific ethnographies on dream worlds are still scarce,” he stresses.



In recent years, however, this scenario has changed. Dreams are earning increasing attention in ethnographic research, leading to renewed debates on classic themes, such as mythology and shamanism, which have come to be considered inseparable from dream activity. Sztutman believes that new studies on indigenous ways of dreaming allow scientists to expand on the reflections of Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). In the book, Freud provides a bibliographic review of the subject in Antiquity and elaborates his interpretation method, analyzing 50 of his own dreams and hundreds of reports from others, reaching the conclusion that dreams are the disguised realization of repressed desires.

However, a common thread running through many articles in the *Journal of Anthropology*, according to Sztutman, is that for indigenous peoples, the dream world is not seen from the perspective of psychoanalytical theory, which is a representation of individual desire and a means of accessing the subconscious. “Indigenous Americans see dreams as ways of entering realities that are inaccessible while awake,” says the researcher.

This is part of how the Yanomami conceive dreams, as identified by anthropologist Hanna Limulja in her PhD thesis, defended at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) in 2019 and published in the book *O desejo dos outros: Uma etnografia dos sonhos yanomami* (The wishes of others: An ethnography of Yanomami dreams; Ubu Editora, 2022). Limulja has been studying the Yanomami since 2008 in dialogue with shaman and leader Davi Kopenawa. She has transcribed and analyzed more than 100 reports of dreams from children, teenagers, and adults who dreamed of hunts, festivities, myths, dead and absent relatives, distant places, and the unknown. The testimonies were collected in the community of Pya ú in the Toototopi region, located in the Yanomami Indigenous Reserve, close to the border with Venezuela. At the time of the fieldwork, carried out between November 2015 and February 2017, the region consisted of 10 communities with family ties, with a total population of 748 people. Pya ú was the largest in the region, with 154 inhabitants.

Limulja first made contact with the Yanomami in 2008 while working with an intercultural education project run by the nongovernmental organization Comissão Pró-Yanomami, as well as other teacher-training initiatives. At the time, she told Kopenawa about her own dreams, and he offered her explanations for them. In the book *A queda do céu* (The fall from the sky; Companhia das Letras, 2015), an autobiographical testimony and shaman manifesto by the Indigenous leader written together with anthropologist Bruce Albert, Kopenawa states several times that white people “only dream of themselves” and that they sleep in a “spectrum state,” like an “ax on the ground.” This means that white people are “stuck in their own personal stories, they don’t travel far, and don’t turn dreams into an instrument of knowledge about the world,” the anthropologist writes in the book. Limulja explains that in contrast to this, the Yanomami believe that dreaming is a way of seeing the invisible.

In her work, she reports that dreams are a form of knowledge to the Yanomami. She explains that when a Yanomami person dreams, their body remains lying in the hammock, but the *pei utupë*, their image, is detached and travels to places that the dreamer has been in during the day or to unknown places. The Yanomami believe that in dreams, a person’s image can meet up with close, distant, and even dead relatives, and everything they experience in a dream is considered something that has already happened or could happen, which could affect the life of the entire community.

“The Yanomami know that what they experience in their dreams is different from what they experience when they are awake. However, what they experience when dreaming is seen as just as important as the experiences of their waking lives. They are two complementary ways of existing in the world and relating to it,” explains the anthropologist. As such, for this ethnic group, dreams are related to other people and not to their own ego, highlights Limulja. “In the same way that there are elements of the world that we cannot see with the naked eye, such as insect skeletons or the microscopic structures of a leaf, the Yanomami believe that dreams allow them to see invisible worlds,” she says, noting that shamans also believe they can access other



Above and on the previous pages, images from the series *Yanomami dreams*, by Claudia Andujar, produced shortly after the demarcation of their lands in the 1990s and presented in full for the first time in 2021

universes through the use of psychoactive substances. Limulja points out that whenever the indigenous people were asked about their dreams, they talked about myths, and as a result, she established a connection between the two. “All myths are dreamed by them,” she explains.

Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, an anthropologist from the University of Chicago and USP, says that Limulja’s work can be interpreted as an addendum to the book *A queda do céu* (The fall from the sky) by Kopenawa and Albert. “Limulja’s book reveals the domestic and everyday side of a Yanomami village, showing how and what ordinary people—not just shamans—dream. The world of women and children appears more prominently than usual, and in this sense, her work is a complement to the story of Helena Valero, a girl who was kidnapped by the Yanomami in the 1930s and spent three decades with them, during which time she got married and had children,” she says. The anthropologist also praises the exemplary and didactic nature of the author’s effort to describe her own itinerary and research experience. “The text begins with a somewhat vague and imprecise theme and takes shape as she abandons direct questions, arriving at effective ways for the Yanomami to talk about the topic and reaching a stage where living together is enjoyed without the central theme being pursued obstinately,” she says.

“While Freud maintained that dreams represented repressed desires, Limulja argued that Yanomami dreams are events that manifest the desires of others. In other words, when you

dream, a part of you, your ‘double,’ goes out and meets beings that inhabit other worlds, which until then were invisible. This represents an inversion of psychoanalytic concepts,” says Sztutman from USP. He notes that Limulja’s research is part of a flourishing field of recent studies on dreams that is not restricted to anthropology. By way of example, he highlights texts by Indigenous leader and philosopher Ailton Krenak, as well as by neuroscientist Sidarta Ribeiro of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN). He also cites the work of French anthropologist Nastassja Martin, an expert in indigenous peoples from the extreme North, including the Evens of the Kamchatka Peninsula in Siberia, who dream of nature in the form of people and believe that the dream world gives access to a “soul dimension.” One aspect the French scientist has been investigating in the dreams of these populations is how they perceive climate change. “As Kopenawa and Limulja point out, you have to stop dreaming solely about yourself in order to travel farther and open yourself up to multiple worlds,” concludes the anthropologist. ■

Book

LIMULJA, H. *O desejo dos outros: Uma etnografia dos sonhos yanomami*. São Paulo: Ubu Editora, 2022.

Edited Volume

SHIRATORI, K. *et al.* (orgs.). Novas perspectivas sobre os sonhos ameríndios: Uma apresentação. *Revista de Antropologia*. 65(3). Nov. 2022.