

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Days from a Dream Almanac. By Dennis Tedlock.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/046584b9>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 14(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Low, Denise

Publication Date

1990-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Balanced against the linguistics papers are four that could be considered purely ethnographic or ethnological, i.e., again, not ethnolinguistic in the strict sense, even though language or texts may figure in the analysis as a source of data: Jay Miller's discussion of a Keresan Pueblo deity; Willard Walker's account of the survival of Creek curing beliefs in an academic setting; Anthony Paredes's amusing addition to the growing literature on the Nacirema; and Philip Bock's analysis of American kinship terminology. Some would argue that the last paper treats a subject that is quintessentially ethnolinguistic. I would agree with the general point, to the extent that the object of the exercise is to deal not only with kinship as a self-contained system that explains all and only the terms in the system, but with the way the system regulates actual behavior and relationships among members of a society, i.e., with the system's pragmatic dimension. Although Bock's paper provides an interesting alternative to componential and other formal approaches to kinship analysis, its emphasis on rule recursivity, which is taken to be its principal advantage over other approaches, actually limits its usefulness in applications to situations of use. It was, as noted above, a point argued by Newman in another context altogether (and in the present volume by Sherzer): Limiting one's description of a language to its grammatical potentialities can result in missing significant cultural regularities, which are often based on narrow selections of linguistic features from larger, possibly unlimited sets. Bock himself acknowledges the point (p. 459).

Finally, readers of *The American Indian Culture and Research Journal* will be particularly interested in Joshua Fishman's compilation of statistics regarding the distribution of periodicals, radio programs, schools, and religious institutions in the United States that have an Amerindian language component.

Michael K. Foster
Canadian Museum of Civilization

Days from a Dream Almanac. By Dennis Tedlock. Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1990. 94 pages. \$21.95 Cloth. \$11.95 Paper.

In some ways, *Days from a Dream Almanac*, an original long poem, is a departure from Dennis Tedlock's previous publications. His

book of Zuni narratives (*Finding a Center*, 1972), and his Quiché Mayan epic (*Popul Vuh*, 1985) are both translations. His theoretical writings, including *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (1983), are about the issues of translations, orality, and written text. As a translator Tedlock has refined his understanding of the poetic possibilities of English. This new book of his poetry, based on his experiences with Quiché diviners, is a logical progression from his involvement with language. It simply is a more personal response to his extensive fieldwork. In the opening notes he writes that, when he returned to the United States, he could not just set aside and forget what he had learned in Mayan Guatemala.

Tedlock's translations are a foundation for his poetry. They show an awareness of the complexity and the cultural contexts of language. The Zuni narratives, for example, are grounded in an understanding of storytelling in formal and less formal situations. Tedlock invented a typography to indicate, in written text, the dynamics of oral presentation, such as glissando and other variants. For his study of the *Popul Vuh*, he not only learned the language, but also, with his wife Barbara Tedlock, studied the daykeeper divination system still extant in Guatemala and reflected in the Mayan epic. This new volume of poetry possesses a many-layered structure, synthesizing the writer's dreams, his travels, and the Mayan calendar and daykeeper rituals.

In his introductory note to the reader, Tedlock explains his intention of writing a "labyrinthine" poem that includes dreams and teachings from his apprenticeship with a Quiché daykeeper and "motherfather" (a living founder of a lineage). The instruction consisted partly of explanations of the twenty day names, including Deer, Yellowripe, Thunderpain, Dog, Monkey, Toothroad, Net, Snake, Death and others. Tedlock has explained some of the meanings of these "lords" in the *Popul Vuh*. The apprenticeship training also required Tedlock to keep a record of dreams for 260 days—one Mayan earth year. The resulting collection of dreams is the basis for *Days from a Dream Almanac*.

Layered over this specialized dream diary are several other systems of meaning. First, dreams are correlated to the Quiché day names and numbers. A dream about a quicksilver mine acquires further meaning because of the day on which it occurred, One Dog: "Lord One Dog/ Lord of Jealous Words/ tell us what speaks from a mine . . ." (p. 49). Tedlock's next process was to review

this dream calendar text and explicate it further by adding divinations from the "sheet lightning" (p. xiii) of the Quiché ritual. He explains, "When this kind of lightning comes close, it moves silently over the horizons of the daykeeper's body, stirring the blood." These "twitches" or "small electric shocks" have meaning, depending on where they occur in the body—"right or left side, the front or back, close to the bone or where the flesh is deep. . . ." The One Dog poem continues,

lightning touches my tongue from beneath on the right
 Seven Sinner shows the way out, says
 God remains to be named
 the bead of precious stone at the sky's center.

The book also is a travelogue. Tedlock edited the original dreams and added new ones during an earth calendar year-and-a-half when he traveled to Brazil, Zuni, Vancouver, and New England. These locales, as dreamed by Tedlock, find their place in the almanac.

Finally, another level of meaning is the small glyph at the beginning of each new day. The red ink drawings follow the style of Mayan hieroglyphs and present a key image from each day. Though not formally part of the text, the glyphs add aesthetically to the beauty of the book and resonate with the language. The collection is divided into quarters, like a calendar, and again the graphics for each section division complement the text.

These complexities—Quiché day names, dreams, divinations, and travels—become accessible when conveyed in poetic images. Tedlock outlines the underlying premises of the book in brief introductory remarks, but the verse is the focal point. The question then arises, Does this poem have aesthetic appeal to noninitiates of Quiché ways?

Tedlock is enough of a stylist to know how to present his ideas. The Zuni translations have a specific format quite different from that of the *Popul Vuh*. Both show sensitivity to the English language as well as the original languages. These dream diary entries are distinctive. They rely on clarity of phrasing and sharpness of image.

Each word fits its place in a line as individual stones fit into a wall. Although the overall effect is one of simplicity, almost reportage, there are indeed quiet flourishes. In the verse for "Nine Marksman" (p. 28), the second stanza begins, "When

these words reach their nine-month measure/ we go southwestward on a one-dirt-track road." The hyphenated adjectives add interest, and they blend with the rhythm of "southwestward." They reflect the calendar name *Nine Marksman*, and, further, they slow down the poem in a way that mirrors the journey itself. Such subtle, free-verse language carries the meanings along to fulfillment in each day-section poem. The style is consistent throughout the book, so although each part is individual and may vary in length and mode, all of the sections work together as a single long poem.

Some almanac entries are simple vignettes of dreams, such as the poem beginning, "Where Seven Jaguar becomes Eight Bird/ I dance at the front of a file of Indians." The ten-line verse goes on to describe the line of dancers and the narrator's sense of "looking for directions." This poem relies on the interplay between Seven Jaguar and a dream. The vivid day names, though not explained, suggest striking images. Tedlock refers his readers to his notes in the *Popul Vuh* and to Barbara Tedlock's *Time and the Highland Maya* for further information. An understanding of the allusions does indeed make the poems more coherent, but not more arresting.

The longer poems depend on surrealism and on "leaping poetry," poems that shift from conscious to subconscious levels (Robert Bly). Some longer dreams have a narrative thread, interpenetrated by divinatory readings and day name associations. The poet juggles these elements skillfully, keeping them all suspended in the air at once. The reader's job is to hold many ideas in mind simultaneously and allow associations among them to occur. Often the result is remarkable, as with "Thirteen Net" (pp. 30-32). A narrative of an old man in a hospital is interwoven with images of a drive along "Southwest Marine Drive" and a sunset. At the end, on the night of Two Death, the sick man speaks: "When you get this old/ you learn to expect less." The drama and imagery work together.

At other times the dreams are so personal as to risk obscurity. But even for the reader who does not possess a thorough knowledge of Quiché culture, many ideas are compelling, as in the section that begins, "Tonight we cross the line of zero degrees" (p. 54). It ends,

We think good thoughts, we think bad thoughts
we ask the Heart of Sky to forget

what we ourselves have seen reflected
in the black mirror of his forehead.

This is a highly personal rendering of Quiché fieldwork and autobiography, unique in contemporary American poetry. The Black Mountain poet Charles Olson also lived among the Mayans (1950-1951) and studied the language, but his reflections occur in his letters to Robert Creeley, not in his poetry, which remained centered in his hometown of Gloucester, Massachusetts. The conceptual artist Robert Smithson also integrated Mayan geography and ideas into his project, "Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan" (1968). But again, Smithson used Mayan concepts to illuminate his own concerns of time, metaphor, and specificity. Other ethnographers, translators, and anthropologists have also written poetry, including Stanley Diamond (*Totems*), Paul Friedrich, and Jerome Rothenberg (*The Seneca Journal*). But Tedlock's sustained, book-length poem is unique.

Perhaps there will be political objections to Quiché culture's being used out of context. Tedlock does not, however, present this book as anything more than it is: a personal response to his life work, including years of translation of Quiché. Its subject matter of dreams and divinations may not find universal appeal, but the book's execution is flawless; the poet's work with language has made him a virtuoso of style. His studied use of Quiché terms may prompt his readers to further inquiry into a remarkable civilization.

Denise Low
Haskell Indian Junior College

Late Woodland Sites in the American Bottom Uplands. By Charles Bentz, Dale L. McElrath, Fred A. Finney, and Richard B. Lacampagne. American Bottom Archaeology FAI-270 Site Reports, Volume 18. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 331 pages. \$17.50 Paper.

This book covers archaeological sites that were to be impacted by construction in the American bottom lands east and northeast of St. Louis, Missouri on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. The site locations excavated were designated to be destroyed when dirt was removed for use in highway construction. This is