

## 4.2 “Native American Epistemology Through Dreams”

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### About the Author

Joel Alvarez (Puerto Rican and Ecuadorian) earned an undergraduate degree in Philosophy (2019) with a minor in history and Latino studies from Brooklyn College. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD in Philosophy at the University of South Florida. His paper "Christian Materialism, Logic & The Spiritual Realm" won the third prize in the 2022 Tyndale House Cambridge for Philosophers of Religion. He also has a forthcoming publication, "Spinozism & Native Americans on Pantheism & Panentheism," (Springer Series). His particular interest in philosophy is topics on religion/theology, identity, metaphysics, and topics that pertain to the problem of evil, free will, and God's Omniscience. His other interest in research is archeology and science and their relation to philosophy and theology.

### Key Terms

Knowledge, Dreams, Guidance, Identity, Epistemology, Truth, False

### Reading

#### Introduction

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes argues that one cannot trust their senses since they are not a reliable source of obtaining knowledge of the world. One of Descartes's main contentions to support such an argument is from his explanation of dreams where one can feel that they are awake, but instead they are dreaming. Native Americans, however, may argue that the experiences one has in dreams are real and are a source of knowledge of the real world.<sup>1</sup> Although Descartes uses dreams to support his argument, some Native Americans have a different take on dreams. Dreams for Native Americans are a source of epistemology as well as a source for obtaining one's identity. Gregory Cajete in *American Indian Thought* notes that "Dreams and Visions are a natural means for accessing knowledge and establishing relationship to the world. They are encouraged and facilitated."<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is through dreams that individuals are guided, destined, and informed. Therefore, dreams as understood by some Native Americans are an extension of reality that anticipate events that will happen or can happen. The focus of this paper is an exploration of the philosophical and religious epistemology pertaining to Native Americans as described in their accounts of dreams.

## **Native American Dream-Vision and Legends**

For some Native Americans, phenomena or experiences in dreams (or visions) are real, and the knowledge someone obtains in dreams can assist them when they are awake. For example, the value of dreams is apparent in what some Native American traditions call the vision quest.<sup>3</sup> On the outset, a vision quest is a cultural practice that many Native Americans follow and, when successful, the individual gains power, guidance, protection, understanding, and knowledge from a spirit. For example, Shay Welch in *Dance as Native Performative Knowledge* states,

The vision quest is its own mechanism through which to gain insight into intuitive knowledge through bodily practices; but it is also a bodily practice through which access to blood memory, more specifically, might be gained. Most times, vision quests are an individual journey towards deeper meaning and knowledge of the world and oneself through an extended testing of the body in exposed natural conditions. In some instances, these quests can be taken on in the confines of a sweat lodge alone, in community, and/or in the presence of a medicine person. But in all cases, the embodied practice is to deprive the body of nourishment and expose it to extreme conditions in order to turn in towards the inscape to tap into the knowledge that lives there.<sup>4</sup>

The quest is extremely important for many Native American tribes since the vision provides individual enlightenment and guidance. Visions or dreams are “a way of closing the gap between our internal connection to the energy of the universe and our more explicit knowing and understanding of the world.”<sup>5</sup> But more importantly, visions or dreams are, for many Native Americans, “a primary source of revealed knowledge” where the individual obtains knowledge of what they should do in the real world.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Dunne-za and Ojibwa Tribe and Their Vision Quest Culture**

David Martinez cites a couple of examples of the vision quest, notably from the Dunne-za and Ojibwa tribes. In these cases, the visions and dreams guide the individual in their life journey. From a young age, the children are instructed to fast so they can obtain dreams and visions. For instance, the Dunne-za believe that when a child reaches a certain age, they are ready to begin their vision quest journey.<sup>7</sup> In particular, what the child pursues in their vision quest is a song that is given by an animal spirit. David Martinez, describing the practice states,

What the Dunne-za boy will be seeking in particular during his vision quests is a *m a yine*, which is an animal’s song, itself modeled ‘after the songs that are the cries of giant prototypical animals represented in myth.’ In order to acquire this song, the boy will have to travel away from camp into the bush. [...] Going into the bush, then, on a vision quest means joining the world of animals. [...] If the boy can fend off his

apprehensions and maintain the fast that's part of his quest, the boy will enter a 'transformation when he is 'just like drunk' or in a dreamlike state'. At this point the meeting between an animal and the vision seeker will be one in which the boy will understand the animal's speech. During this time, which may seem to be 'for days or even weeks,' the animal who visits a vision seeker will impart its song [...]<sup>8</sup>

During the quest, the child seeks the song because it is believed that it provides them with information about their identity. In other words, the song from the spirit gives the person "an understanding of his own humanity."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the vision quest for the Dunne-za tribe is to receive knowledge of their identity, which is only given by the animal spirit that visits the vision seeker.

In a similar fashion to the Dunne-za, members of the Ojibwa take the vision quest journey when they are young. The Ojibwa, like the Dunne-za, seek a spirit that would provide them with important knowledge and guidance. As Sam D. Gill, a scholar of religious studies, states in *Native American Religions*,

In the Great Lakes area Ojibwa culture, it was the practice to begin early in a child's life to prepare him or her for a vision fast. The parents implored their children to engage in short fasts to prepare them for receiving the power of a *manido*, or spiritual being. By age eight, a child might fast two meals every other day... While religious awareness through the visionary experience was certainly momentous, it was not attained without much training and preparation. During the years of scheduled fasting, the child was made to think constantly about the power and guidance that he or she would receive in a vision.<sup>10</sup>

Gill mentions the children of the Ojibwa tribe would take this journey of fasting to obtain a vision. The importance of this vision or dream is so that they can know which *manido* (spiritual being) would assist them in their journey in life. The *manido* would provide the individual with the necessary knowledge, protection, and advice they should take.<sup>11</sup> However, one's vision does not only provide what *manido* they have, but the vision also shows what power the individual gained. In other words, such a vision or dream would provide them with important existential information such as the way the individual has to live, what directions they ought to follow, and the powers they have gained. Therefore, for the Ojibwa visions or dreams are extremely important since they provide the individual with the reality and knowledge of their identity in the world.

### **Tribe Legends on Dreams**

Since dreams are an essential component in Native American everyday living, the communities have shared and passed down legends that show the effectiveness of dreams. One example of a legend regarding dreams is from the Pawnee tribe, which insists that dreams provide the

individual with knowledge and guidance. The Pawnee legend, *The Medicine Grizzly Bear*, illustrates an individual receiving strength and power of a bear and gets guidance from a Bear spirit through a dream.<sup>12</sup> The specific guidance that the bear spirit gave was not to marry the Chief's daughter since it would cause the individual to lose the power that was given to him. The information given to the individual was an instruction, informing the individual about what they should do concerning a problem they wished to avoid.

The Seneca tribe also has a similar perspective on dreams. According to the Seneca legend, *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, a Chief receives guidance regarding his very sick daughter. Every remedy or medicine had been given to her, but none were enough to make her well. A friend of the Chief had a dream where he was instructed to tell the Chief to place his daughter beside a tree so she could be cured.<sup>13</sup> The Chief followed the guidance of his friend's dream. The examples of the Pawnee and Seneca legends demonstrate that it is through dreams that spirits communicate to individuals, directing and giving them information that instructs how they should act when confronted with a particular problem.

Gregory Cajete provides a legend shared by many Native American communities that illustrates why dreams or visions are essential. The legend maintains that humans had at one time the ability to speak to animals, but communication between them was terminated due to human malevolence towards the animals. In spite of this loss, however, humans and animals can still communicate with each other through dreams or visions. Cajete describes it this way,

In the beginning of time, Native myth contends that humans and animals could communicate with each other. Animals cared for humans, helping them find food, water, and shelter. They even sacrificed themselves when needed to help humans survive. They would assist humans in knowing when to prepare for the change of seasons or the coming of storms. This intimacy with animals came to an end when humans began to be disrespectful to their animal relations. Humans, it is mythically related, began to abuse animals, kill them without need, steal the food they had stored for winter, and arrogantly mistreat them in various ways. In some Native myths, such as those of the Southeastern tribes, it is said that the animals had a grand council meeting in which it was decided to punish humans by leaving them to fend for themselves and by refusing to communicate with them through language. This early direct connection to animals thereafter became submerged and could only be evoked through ritual, dream, and visioning.<sup>14</sup>

Although this passage claims one can only communicate with animals through dreams or visions, the legend also mentions that animals used to provide humans with an enormous amount of assistance. Thus, if one notices carefully what this passage says, it mentions that before the malice of humans, the animals protected and directed the individual by informing them. In other words, the animals helped humans by giving information on how to obtain food, where the individual should go, or what the person should do. But unfortunately, all this information is now difficult to obtain since we no longer have such communication with

animals. For this reason, in order to receive direction or protection from animals, one needs to dream or have visions.

### **Other Native American Tribes on Dream-Vision**

Along with the Dunne-za, Ojibwa, Pawnee, and Seneca tribes, other tribes also have a take on dreams. The Zuni people assert that dreams have information about real events.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the Huron tribe believes dreams have the same value of existence as someone being awake.<sup>16</sup> In other words, dreams for the Huron tribe are an extension of the world where it has its comparative reality of the world where people are awake. This take on dreams is similar to the Dunne-za tribe since they believe that “waking and dreaming are both part of the same life story.”<sup>17</sup> The Menomini tribe, on the other hand, takes dreams a bit further and says that they not only have reality, but they provide prophecy and warnings. For instance,

For the Menomini of the Great Lakes region, all dreams had significance, and the prophecies or warnings that dreams might contain were to be observed scrupulously. For example, if a man dreamed of drowning, he would make a small canoe as a talisman and carry it about with him at all times. If the meaning of a dream was unclear, a person sought the interpretation of an elder, who, being nearer the end of his life or her life, was believed to be closer to the world of the spirits.<sup>18</sup>

Every dream for the Menomini has significance and meaning in the real world, and thus one should take precautions on what to do if they receive a warning in their dream. In a similar fashion, the Nozinho takes dreams to be symbolic, where dreams can mean danger or good fortune.<sup>19</sup> For example, in the Nozinho tradition, if one dreams about hawks, elks, or thunder, it would symbolize good luck or good fortune.<sup>20</sup> This interpretation of the symbolism in dreams is similar to the Cherokee since a Cherokee legend illustrates that someone dreaming of an eagle or its feathers symbolizes that one should do an Eagle Dance.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the Mohave,<sup>22</sup> Cocopah,<sup>23</sup> and Maricopa<sup>24</sup> tribes incorporate dreams to speak to their ancestors so they can receive direction from them. Overall, many Native American tribes depend on the information they receive in dreams because such information directs them in decision-making.<sup>25</sup>

Although many Native Americans’ dreams have a reality and provide important information to the individual, some dreams can be false. For this reason, the next section will discuss how Natives can still trust dreams even if some dreams can give false information.

### **Verifying if Dream Information is True or False**

The Cree tribe has a legend called *Mudjikiwis*, which tells a story of a father-in-law who thought his dream was true but then realized that the dream was indeed false. The story illustrates it this way:

So he told all the people to go and get fish and eat them freely. On the following day, the young man, according to his mother-in-law's wish, took his wife to fish. They took many fish, and carried them home. The father-in-law knew, before they returned, that they had caught many. The old man had a dream. When he saw how the youth prepared the spear which his daughter had given him, he said, referring to his dream, 'My dream was wrong, I thought the youngest of the ten liked me the best. I made the spear in the way I saw it, not as this one has shown me. It is due to my dream that it is wrong.'<sup>26</sup>

As shown in the story, the father-in-law had a dream where it gave him false information, and such information did not have its truthfulness in the real world. For a dream to be considered true, then it must be consistent with other facts in the world of reality. In the father-in-law's case, his dream was not true since, in reality, the youngest of ten did not like him the best, and he made the wrong spear. Therefore, even though dreams are important, some can be false.

Although dreams have the potential to mislead, there are ways to test for a dream's veracity. An example of this can be found in the Huron tradition, where dreams are confirmed by events in the real world. Larry J. Zimmerman, an anthropologist and a scholar of Native American culture, when speaking of the Huron tribe, states,

...the Huron paid particular attention to any dreams that occurred just before they went hunting, fishing, trading, or to war. So much did they rely on dreams for guidance in everyday life that the first Jesuit priests to contact the Huron described dreams as the tribespeople's main god. Sometimes advice received in dreams followed in preference to advice given by the tribal chiefs. However, not all dreams were assumed to be reliable—public confidence in an individual's dream varied according to his or her social status and how many of that person's earlier dream predictions had come true.<sup>27</sup>

As Zimmerman mentioned, the Huron tribe, like all other Native American tribes, is dream-driven, but dreams are counted as true when the dreams reveal themselves as true in the real world. In other words, although dreams are essential for the Native people, dreams must show their trueness in reality. The more the individual's dreams are verified in the real world, the more they will be respected among their community.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, dreams for Native Americans are a source of epistemology and a way to obtain one's identity. For this reason, Native Americans would take their dreams or vision seriously since they could provide important information. Such information received through dreams can provide the individual with a power that a spirit has bestowed on them or a direction one should take in their life. Additionally, dreams can mean misfortune, prophecy, luck, or even

have symbolic meaning. Also, sometimes the information in dreams can be false, but in order to verify its trueness, the dream needs to be confirmed in reality. This stands in contrast to Descartes's claim that our sensed experience in dreams is not a reliable source of knowledge. Generally speaking, Native Americans learn and know things about the real world because of the information they gathered in the world of dreams. Therefore, dreams are an essential component in Native American everyday living.

## **Notes**

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## Suggestions for Critical Reflection

1. In what ways do Native Americans learn through dreams?
2. How do Native Americans verify if a dream is true? Do you think a dream can be verified to be true? Why or why not?
3. Why are dreams and visions important for Native Americans?
4. How are dreams for Native Americans epistemologically related or connected to the epistemology from when one is awake?
5. What knowledge does one obtain when going on a vision quest or when one has a dream?

6. Do you think dreams can provide someone with important information? Why or why not?

7. Is pursuing knowledge always an active process?

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<sup>1</sup> In particular the Native American tribes that will be discussed are the Ojibwa, Zuni, Seneca, Pawnee, Cree, Cherokee, Mohave, Nozinho, Cocopah, Maricopa, Dunne-za, Huron, and Menomini.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Cajete, "Philosophy of Native Science," In *American Indian Thought*, ed. Anne Waters (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Cajete in *American Indian Thought* mentions other forms of quests that the Native Americans would undergo. Cajete says it this way on page 54, "Paths: Predetermined systematic activities of learning are viewed as ways to search for and find knowledge. All of nature pathways through which it may be understood. The 'Good Red Road', 'Dream-time Path', 'Earth Walk', and 'Pipe Way' are some of the ways Native peoples have referred to the directed path in the quest for knowledge, meaning, and understanding."

<sup>4</sup> Shay Welch, "Dance as Native Performative Knowledge," *Native American and Indigenous Philosophy Newsletter*, ed. Agnes B. Curry, 18, no. 1 (Fall 2018), 28. See also, Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, *American Indian Myths and Legends* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 69.

<sup>5</sup> Shay Welch, "Dance as Native Performative Knowledge," 27. See also, McPherson and Rabb, *Indian From the Inside: Native American Philosophy and Cultural Renewal* (McFarland & Company, 2011), 63.

<sup>6</sup> Shay Welch, "Dance as Native Performative Knowledge," 27.

<sup>7</sup> David Martinez, "The Hidden Path from Dream to Reality: Myth, Character, and the Dunne-za," *Newsletters on American Indians in Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2001), 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Sam D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (Thompson Wadsworth, 2005), 71.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> "That night the Bear came to the boy in his sleep and spoke to him. He said: 'My son, tomorrow the chief of the tribe is going to ask you to take his daughter for your wife, but you must not do this yet. I wish you to wait until you have done certain things. If you take a wife before that time, your power will go from you'.... In the night, before he slept, he filled the pipe and smoked as the Bear had told him to do, and then he went to bed. In dreams the Bear said to him: 'My son, you have done what I wished you to do. Now the power will remain with you as long as you shall live. Now you can marry, if you will.'" George Bird Grinnell, "The Medicine Grizzly Bear." In *Harper's New Monthly Magazine Volume 102*. (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1901), 741.

<sup>13</sup> "A long time ago human beings lived high up in what is now called heaven. They had a great and illustrious chief. It so happened that this chief's daughter was taken very ill with a strange affection. All the people were very anxious as to the outcome of her illness. Every known remedy was tried in an attempt to cure her, but none had any effect. Near the lodge of this chief stood a great tree, which every year bore corn used for food. One of the friends of the chief had a dream, in which he was advised to tell the chief that in order to cure his daughter he must lay her beside this tree, and that he must have the tree dug up. This advice was carried out to the letter." Frank de Caro, *An Anthology of American Folktales and Legends*, (Taylor & Francis Publisher, 2014), 42.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Clear Light Publishers, 2000), 151–52.

<sup>15</sup> Larry J. Zimmerman, *The Sacred Wisdom of the American Indians* (Watkins Pub Limited, 2011), 142.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>17</sup> David Martinez, "The Hidden Path from Dream to Reality," 8.

<sup>18</sup> Larry J. Zimmerman, *The Sacred Wisdom of the American Indians*, 210.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>21</sup> James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, (Outlook Verlag Publisher, 2020), 283.

<sup>22</sup> Bertha P. Dutton, *Indians of The American Southwest* (Prentice-Hall, 1975), 171.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>25</sup> A Dunne-za tribe leader is obligated to use their dreams or visions to make tribal decisions. For example, if they

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should go to war or not. David Martinez, "The Hidden Path from Dream to Reality," 15.

<sup>26</sup> Alanson Skinner, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Jul. – Sep., 1916, Vol. 29, No. 113 (Jul. – Sep., 1916), pp. 341-367.

<sup>27</sup> Larry J. Zimmerman, *The Sacred Wisdom of the American Indians*, 142.