Specters of Social Antagonism: The Cultural Psychodynamics of Dream Aggression among the Tzotzil Maya of San Juan Chamula (Chiapas, Mexico)

Kevin P. Groark

Abstract In this article, I present an analysis of “persecution dreams” among the Tzotzil Maya of San Juan Chamula, discussing the complex connections among sickness, interpersonal aggression, ideologies of social antagonism, and the spectral phantasies that shadow these social phenomena. Building on this ethnographic foundation, I present a “cultural psychodynamic” account framed in terms of projective-introjective dynamics (functioning at both the individual and social levels), arguing that the aggression dream serves as an experience structure in which inner and outer realities become deeply interwoven—often resulting in an increased sense of insecurity and existential threat. At its broadest level, this article is concerned with the affective dimensions of dream life, the processing of real affects and social relations within the register of phantasy, and the transposition of these phantasy-laden feelings back into waking life, where they influence not only the individual’s sense of well-being, but the tenor of actual interpersonal relations. [cultural psychodynamics, dreams, aggression, phantasy, projection]

Perhaps the best way of encapsulating the gist of an epoch is to focus not on the explicit features that define its social and ideological edifices but on the disavowed ghosts that haunt it, dwelling in a mysterious region of nonexistent entities which nonetheless persist, [and] continue to exert their efficacy.


[If] subjects trace back their symptoms to traumas that are fictitious, then the new fact which emerges is precisely that they create such scenes in fantasy, and this psychic reality requires to be taken into account alongside practical reality.

—Sigmund Freud, On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement (1914)

As long as there have been dreamers, people have puzzled over the nature of troubling and distressing dreams: Where do they come from? What do they mean? And how should we approach them, both in our lives and in our theories? In this article, I explore the phenomenon of anxiety-producing “persecution dreams” among the Tzotzil Maya of San Juan Chamula, in the Chiapas highlands of Southeastern Mexico. Owing to their intimate connection to the onset of illness, such dreams are understood to be
manifestations of covert supernatural aggression in which the “strong soul” of a neighbor, acquaintance, enemy, or hired witch attempts to injure or sicken the dreamer through soul-based attacks.

This spectral aggression is felt to derive from the hidden anger, envy, and hostility underpinning waking life, all of which finds relatively direct expression in the realm of dreams. Within the folk medical system, persecution dreams often become a focus of diagnostic attention during ritual curing, initiating a process whereby dysphoric dream experiences are rearticulated with their presumed social origins, effectively reframing them as the missing supplements to interpersonal conflict in the waking world. A sustained empirical and theoretical focus on dysphoric dreaming allows us to more clearly appreciate the ways in which local constructions of social-existential threat shape the phenomenology of dreaming, the experience of interpersonal conflict and aggression, and ultimately the waking subjectivity and social relations of the individual.

I open with an exploration of the ontological and epistemological context of the highland Mayan dreamscape, emphasizing local ethnotheories of the self and its existential vulnerabilities, and the ways these understandings articulate with dysphoric dream experience. Building on this ethnographic foundation, I develop a cultural psychodynamic interpretation framed in terms of projective-introjective dynamics functioning at both the social and individual level. I argue that the persecution dreams serves as an experience structure in which inner and outer reality become deeply interwoven, allowing for the experience and processing of strongly disavowed social affects within the register of phantasy. A key element in this process is a marked cultural preoccupation with (and general inhibition of) hostility and aggression. Perhaps predictably, this leads to widespread anxieties that hidden persecutors and covert aggression are omnipresent—a conviction that is often borne out in the experience of persecution dreams. Taken together, these two factors serve both to contain and to catalyze social antagonisms, giving rise to a set of dynamics—intrapsychic as well as interpersonal— whereby highly managed affects and fantasies become deeply interwoven with actual social relations. Throughout this discussion, I emphasize the personal, social, and ideological “work” accomplished in this form of dream experience, emphasizing the often-fluid line between phantasy and actuality in everyday social life. The article closes with some reflections on the value of a “cultural psychodynamic” approach to the analysis of ethnographic data.

By focusing on the social inflections of dreaming—a seemingly minor mode of intrapsychic experience—we gain a deeper and more multidimensional understanding of the role of basic defensive processes and phantasy formations in conditioning the exercise and experience of interpersonal aggression and conflict, both real and imagined. At its broadest conceptual level, then, this article is concerned with the affective power of dreams, the processing and integration of waking affects and social relations within the register of phantasy, and the subsequent transposition of these phantasy-laden feelings back into waking life, where they influence not only the individual’s sense of well-being, but the tenor of actual social relations.
The Anthropology of “Pathogenic Dreams”

Over the years, a number of anthropological theorists have struggled with how best to understand the personal and social functions of negative or dysphoric dreams (see Devereux 1966; Hallowell (1938) 1955; (1941) 1955; Hollan 2003, 2009). In his classic article, “Pathogenic Dreams in Non-Western Societies,” George Devereux (1966) identifies a “widespread cultural conviction” that certain forms of negative dream experience are associated with the onset of physical illness. In other words, in many cultural settings, dreams are described as being “pathogenic.” This connection between certain kinds of dream experience and the onset of illness is not unique to indigenous societies; the Western psychoanalytic literature has long noted a connection between dreams—usually of a distressing nature—and the manifestation of subsequent somatic symptoms, generally assumed to be psychogenic in nature (see Bartemeier 1950; Kupper 1947; Leveton 1961; Waterman 1910).

For Devereux, the phenomenon of pathogenic dreams poses not only an ethnological challenge, but also an interpretive problem. Commenting on the “utter chaos” that surrounds our understanding of the connection between dreams and sickness, he suggests that much of our confusion derives not from the “distressing fragmentariness of native dream theory,” but rather, from the anthropological fieldworker’s “general tendency to expect very little from . . . informants in the way of theoretical complexity or multiple or variegated types of explanations” (1966, 278) regarding the processes that might explain the link between dream experience and sickness. The result has been a failure to obtain “precise and specific information about native beliefs concerning the nature of the causal nexus between the antecedent dream and the subsequent illness” (277; emphasis mine). In more contemporary terms, Devereux is arguing that a more nuanced and systematic focus on local ethnotheories of the dream and dreamspace—contextualized within a fine-grained understanding of their broader ontological and epistemological entailments—might help to clarify the complex causal connections understood to obtain between dream experience and subsequent illness.

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in understanding the social and psychological functions of dysphoric or anxiogenic dreams, with particular focus on the reciprocal relations between negative dream experiences, local constructions of existential threat, and the presentation of physical or psychiatric symptoms (Hinton 2009; Hinton et al. 2009; Kirmayer 2009). What emerges from this work is an understanding of how, within certain cultural contexts, anxiety-inducing dream experiences may come to play an important role in local constructions of “trauma subjectivity” (Hinton et al. 2009, 220), forming “a key part of the reticulum that unites . . . traumatic events, conceptions of personhood, ideas about the supernatural, social relationships, personal experiences and the body, what might be called the trauma-somatic reticulum” (Hinton 2009, 217).

As we will see, Highland Maya “persecution dreams” shape the perception and experience of existential threat, while at the same time allowing for a sort of social “risk profiling” through dream interpretation and associated therapeutic interventions (see Hinton et al. 2009, 262). As one of the primary arenas for the experience of various forms of social and
supernatural aggression, dysphoric dreams have become closely linked—conceptually and experientially—to the expression of hidden social antagonism and the manifestation of retributive sickness. Indeed, such dreams gain in their anxiogenic potential as a consequence of local ethnotheories which frame the dreamspace as an interpersonal realm—a sort of shadow society—in which powerful (and often aggressive) coessences, deities, and supernatural forces interact with one another, often generating powerful effects that influence the course of waking life.\textsuperscript{3}

**Mayan Ethnotheories of the “Extended Self” and the Construction of Existential Vulnerability**

In San Juan Chamula, social aggression plays out on many levels. In addition to face-to-face encounters (such as informal scolding, malicious gossip, fights, disputes, and court trials), a great deal of interpersonal hostility is experienced obliquely through dreams, and the proof of its presence is often made manifest in the form of sickness and misfortune (see Groark 2008, 2013a). Although physical assaults and murders do occur, they are relatively uncommon; at least when measured against the experience of covert supernatural aggression (which is thought to be omnipresent, frequently attempted, and often successful). Such attacks are usually attributed to malevolent magical assaults carried out by some person who has “become an enemy” (-kontra't) and is either working sorcery against the victim or has hired a witch to “send illness” or “molest them” in revenge for some real or perceived wrong. These assaults—many of which manifest in dreams—bear all the hallmarks of attempted murder: they are premeditated, personalized, and their goal is the sickness, impairment, or death of the victim.

This preoccupation with the presence of hidden malefactors and the working of aggressive magic is nothing new. Working in Chamula in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Henri Favre provides a vivid description of his informants’ fears of hidden—and potentially lethal—forms of covert social aggression:

> For the Chamulas, death can intervene on diverse levels and on various planes. It is thus that the techniques of witchcraft and other magical operations—to which we deny any practical efficacy—imply for them a real and immediate danger and constitute genuine acts of violence which can result in death . . . . It is said that magical aggression against [a person’s essential soul], his cb’ulel . . . is frequent. The Chamulas admit that the majority of deaths that occur in the community are voluntarily caused by relatives or “jealous” neighbors who, with the aid of appropriate techniques, succeed in capturing the cb’ulel of the [soon-to-be] deceased person and separate it from its material substrate. In other words—and to situate it within the internal logic of their system—the majority of deaths are, for the Chamulas, murders (1964, 307; translation and emphasis mine).

Favre’s account provides a rare glimpse into the interpersonal dynamics of Chamula in the 1950s, revealing a social world rife with suspicions and fears of sorcery, poisoning, and covert (soul-based) violence.\textsuperscript{4} Although fears of poisoning seem to have faded, anxieties linked to soul-based aggression remain vivid in the lives of contemporary “traditionalist” Chamulas.
Despite widespread adherence to an ideal of conflict avoidance and reconciliation—often spoken of as the “cooling” or “sweeping away” of anger—attempts to manage interpersonal aggressivity do little to alleviate the underlying social tensions, which manifest as overt conflicts and disputes, as well as the more complex covert derivatives mentioned above.

To more fully understand this cultural emphasis on soul-based aggression, it helps to know something about the way contemporary Chamula Tzotzil Maya conceptualize the human being and the nature of existential vulnerability. Most people recognize two distinct “souls” or “essences”: a body-based “essential soul” (ch’ulel) and one or more extracorporeal, conatal, animals referred to variously as ebon/chamul (“animal”), or vayijel (“dream alter”) that are linked to the person from birth. The essential soul (ch’ulel) is immortal, imbuing the body with life-essence (and reincarnating in another person after death). It is the “self” of dream experience, leaving the body each night in search of adventures, then returning before dawn. The conatal animal, in contrast, is entirely external. It is born at the same moment as the human to whom it is linked, and because of this, the two share a common soul, and thus, a common fate. In Chamula, these animal souls are usually conceptualized as a duality, possessing a senior aspect (bankilal) that resides in heaven, and a junior aspect (itz’inal) that lives on the “earth’s surface” where it is watched over by tutelary deities in protective corrals on the sacred mountain of Tzontevitz (see Gossen 1975, 1993, 1999; Page Pliego 2001).

Within this network of distributed alters, the co-natal animal is considered to be the most vulnerable, linking human well-being to the vagaries of an uncontrollable and largely unknowable animal realm paralleling that of human society. Given its existence outside of the human body, this self-extension is a common target for supernatural attacks. Witches and other supernaturally powerful individuals are said to possess one or more “strong” predatory animal coessences (such as a jaguar, coyote, or ocelot), through which they can dominate the weaker animal souls of common folk, frightening, assaulting, pushing, or devouring them. In Chamula, this predatory tendency is reflected in the metaphorical language of therapeutic prayer: the ravenous souls of witches are called “flesh eaters” or “carnivores” (jti’bal)—literally, “devourers of souls”—while the animal souls of “normal” people are referred to as “food” or “meat” (ti’bol).

The person’s physical body (sbek’tal/stak’opal) acts as a sort of nodal point for these alters, embodying their characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses in distinct ways. The well-being of the individual is closely tied to the health and vigor (or “strength,” -ip) of its various souls; their misadventures are experienced by—or communicated to—the person through dreams, and injuries sustained by any of these alters manifest in the human body in the form of illness. The link between these self-extensions and the physical body of the individual is sometimes imagined by Chamulas to take the form of an invisible tether or “cord” (yak’il) that carries vital warmth (k’ixnal) or life-force (kuxlejal) from the celestial realm into the physical world. This cord descends from the highest level of heaven, passing to both the conatal animals and the human being in an interconnected chain. Insults or injuries suffered by any of the self-extensions pass through this cord to each alter, eventually arriving in
the human body, where the vicissitudes of the soul becomes discernable to shamanic curers through the medium of the pulse (see Groark 2008, 441–43).

Perhaps predictably, highland Maya souls are the focus of a great deal of anxiety related to perceived self-vulnerability. This anxiety tends to take the form of intense preoccupation with the signs and symptoms of illnesses thought to derive from the vicissitudes of interpersonal envy, hostility, and aggression (Favre 1964; Gossen 1975, 1999; see also Page Pliego 2005, 233–50). Indeed, within the local ethnomedical system, these souls function as extrasomatic nodes of vulnerability, and evaluation of their relative well-being plays a key role in local explanatory models for a number of health conditions. Of course, the health of these souls is difficult to assess directly. In dreams, however, we are provided with clues: the experience of threatening dreams is often the first indicator that the dreamer is somehow imperiled, having become the focus of otherwise-hidden forms of soul-based aggression, retribution, or punishment. Through correct interpretation, dreams can reveal the vicissitudes of the “extended self,” signaling the presence of hidden enemies and covert threats.

**Dreaming, Sickness, and Phantasmatic Aggression**

Dreaming and exposure to supernatural aggression have long been linked in highland Maya thought. Ancient Maya epigraphers have linked the glyph for the verb stem -way (“to sleep”) with dreaming, animal souls, and supernatural assault (Houston and Stuart 1989). Echoing this ancient association, A Colonial-period Zinacantec Tzotzil dictionary notes that the word for “dream” (vayichil) derives from the verb “to sleep” (-vay) and links this root to two other terms: vayajel (witchcraft) and vayajelal k'op (black magic) (Laughlin and Haviland 1988, 326). In contemporary Chamula, these connections among sleeping, dreaming, witchcraft, and sickness endure. The experience of “seeing a bad dream” (-il chopol vayichil) is generally understood to be both symptom and cause of a class of illness referred to as “dream scolding” (utilanel ta vayichil) or “dream torment” (ilbajinel ta vayichil), a complex illness category in which the latent conflicts and hostilities of waking life—both real and imagined—are experienced in the realm of souls. Such dreams are usually explained as forms of covert social aggression (motivated by suppressed envy, anger, and ill will) in which the predatory souls of “enemies,” envious neighbors, or witches try to injure, imprison, or kill one or more of the dreamer’s soul extensions through direct assaults or magical procedures designed to bring about misfortune.

The aggressor in cases of dream affliction is most often referred to synonymously as j’ilbajinvanej or j’utilanvanej (“the persecutor, tormentor, or molester”). The agent is usually presumed to be a person—either a witch possessing a dream alter capable of oneric attacks, a person with a particularly strong and aggressive soul, or a normal person who harbors ill will and envy against the victim and “knows how to pray and burn candles” to cause harm. Witches are said to “transform into” (-pas ba ta) or “disguise themselves as” (-katajes ba) certain domesticated creatures (often a black dog, cow, goat, cat, or horse). They are also said to take the form of wild birds, insects, and even common objects such as foodstuffs,
airplanes, and vehicles. When one of these witch transformations is encountered in dreams, it is sometimes referred to as me’ chamel, “mother [or source] of illness.” In this disguised form, the witch is able to gain intimate proximity to the victim’s essential soul (ch’ulel), thereby causing harm. Perhaps the most explicit articulation of this idea can be found in the phrase, “witches weaken our soul/witches weaken us in our dreams” (txchopvan/xyamvan ta jch’uleltik li jak’-chamele) (Laughlin and Haviland 1988, 125, 383).

As mentioned, soul aggression is assumed to be motivated by a range of strong negative emotions—particularly those which have been suppressed in waking life. A Chamula man explained this to me as follows:

When someone feels bad [because of something you did] . . . there are two ways he might act. We might see that “his head becomes angry,” that he acts angrily. But there are others who don’t become [outwardly] angry—they work their wickedness [in secret], they offer candles there where we walk, they offer candles in a cave, and we see bad dreams. Maybe we see a dead cow, or someone butchering some meat . . . . Perhaps he wants me to encounter illness and to sicken, or maybe he wants one of my children to die. He always works this way. You’ll see something bad in your dreams. That means that some misfortune will befall you.

The manifest content of such dreams may seem innocuous (such as being stared at by a sheep or goat, receiving red clothing or ribbons from an official, or being given a gift of raw meat), but upon waking, the symbolic significance of the imagery registers with the dreamer and with it comes a great deal of anxiety and fear. While some “persecution” dreams manifest in this symbolic mode (which requires decoding through a culturally standardized lexicon of dream images), other dreams arrive with frightening directness and are understood to reflect real-time, soul-based interactions in the dreamspace. These “direct aggression” dreams have the potential to be directly pathogenic; following the return of the dreamer’s soul, the effects of the injuries, traumas, or frights sustained by the dreamer’s essential or animal soul begin to manifest (sometimes upon waking, but more often in the evening following the dream).

Resulting physical symptoms are generally minor, including: fever (k’ok), headache (k’ux jol), and body aches (ta x’awan sbak’il). General malaise and lack of energy (mu’yuk ‘ip) is also common. The person is described as “softening” (-k’unib) and “weakening” (-lumtzaj), and frequent sighing (uyubajel) is indicative of a generalized exhaustion (lubel) which is associated with the condition. These small insults are intended to gradually weaken the dreamer, affecting their economic productivity while providing an opening for more serious conditions to manifest. One of my dreamers explained the potential gravity of these seemingly minor symptoms: “It’s like chipping away the bark of a tree with a little knife; even though you don’t chop it down right away, if you remove enough bark the tree dies.” He continued:

Witches can make you sick through dreams. When you are dreaming a lot—of sheep or other animals that come to bite you each night—well, that’s the soul of an envious person [a witch] (ch’ulel j’it’ix-’onton) coming to molest your soul (ch’ilel). This is what
happens in dreams, you see a lot in your sleep. Sometimes you see bulls—maybe a bull comes and throws you [with his horns]. Also, sometimes you fall into water or slip, but you don’t die because, well, it’s a dream. But you become sick because of it—by afternoon you have a fever, your head hurts, you become fatigued, and your whole body aches. You don’t want to get out of bed, you just lay there in bed sleeping all day. Thus we encounter sickness there in our bed, but our soul is up above [in heaven]. Whatever happens to our soul arrives here in our body right away.... This is dream affliction (utilanel ta vayichil), this is what the illness is like.

Although dreams open one up to the soul-based aggressions of others, they also provide valuable diagnostic evidence useful in both self-protection as well as shamanic curing. Among more culturally conservative Chamulas, dreams are frequently recalled and discussed as part of the everyday, ongoing evaluation of well-being—a sort of “ontological security assessment” (Hinton et al. 2009, 262). Careful monitoring and discussion of dream experience between adults (usually spouses) is quite common, and older children will often report odd or troubling dreams to their parents. Despite the load of anxiety carried by dysphoric dreams, some people see them as providing potentially valuable information—referred to as “signs” or “traces” (senyal)—concerning the relative security of one’s self-extensions (which serve as proxy indicators of the positioning of social self within complex and often obscure affective and interpersonal currents).

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of a pathogenic dream was provided by a Tzotzil man named Xalik, who suffered from a musculoskeletal injury derived from a dream. Having missed a scheduled meeting with me the day prior, Xalik arrived the next morning with his wrist wrapped in a poultice of herbs held in place by white medical gauze. When I asked what happened, he replied anxiously, “Ah, it was that damn witch! I saw him last night. He tried to get me again.” He then proceeded to narrate a vivid and dramatic dream in which he struggled with a black cat—a witch transformation—who was trying to sneak into his house. Just before Xalik vanquished his assailant—twisting off the cat’s head and licking the inky blood that streamed down his arms—it managed to bite his wrist. By the next evening, his hand was swollen, stiff, and largely immobile. He attributed this injury to the “poison” or “wickedness” from the bite of the dream cat. He explained that, although he won the struggle with the cat, his soul had been infected, and the sickness was now becoming manifest (-vimaj) in his physical body.

When I asked Xalik what the dream meant, he explained: “It must be that there’s an envious person trying to enter my house, trying to hurt me. But I overcame everything. I even killed the evil one and drank its blood. I defeated him because I knew that he wanted to kill me. So I totally destroyed his body.” Upon waking, Xalik offered candles and prayers, describing what he’d seen in his dreams and asking Our Father in Heaven (Jtotik ta Vinajel) to intervene and put an end to the torment, “binding” (-cbuk) and “tying up” (-moch) both the bad dreams as well as the “tormentor” responsible for them: “You do the holy favor, you cause it to abate for me/You do the holy favor, you bind it for me/You do the holy favor, you knot it up for me/The dream, the tormentor/For I want goodness/Here where I sit, here where I live/In my house, in my bed.” He then asked Our Father to intervene directly against the dream
mentor, blocking his path: “As for the tormentor, block him for me/Turn his face away, bow his head [so he can no longer afflict me . . .].” In closing, he requested that the dream torment be completely brought to an end and repelled: “Cast it from my back! Throw it from my side!”

Through this dream—which was both terrifying and exhilarating—Xalik became aware that he had temporarily vanquished a hidden “enemy” who was marshalling powerful, aggressive forces against him. Over the next few days—in light of additional “torment” dreams experienced by both of us—he concluded that the aggressor was probably a neighbor who had grown envious of our relationship and my frequent visits to his house. According to this logic, the dream assault derived from the hidden envy of someone in his intimate social orbit—in this case, a man who lived across the road. In the dream, this neighbor marshalled his “strong soul” in an attempt to sicken Xalik so that he could no longer work with me. The assault seemed to have worked, at least in the short-term: incapacitated by his injured wrist, he was unable to meet with me the next day.

For skilled dreamers—those who “see clearly with their souls”—such dreams offer the opportunity for protective action, but only if the dreamer “respects” the dream and the message it bears:

Dreams are a source of knowledge (hiba’as’anej, lit. “someone or something that makes one wise”). . . . If you see a bad dream, it “makes you wiser” (ta sbijubtasot) [by indicating what’s happening to you]. But you must respect it (“-tzak ta muk”) . . . . If a dream is “given” (“-ak’bil) and you don’t respect it, saying “I don’t believe in those dreams, they don’t matter at all . . .,” well, you know what will happen? You’ll encounter something bad [in your dreams and will sicken]. This is because you didn’t respect your dream [and take corrective action]. That’s the way it is—dreams are really powerful (lek tsots ti vayichile).

The principal questions with which the dreamer wrestles center on the identity of the dream aggressor and the connection between dream events and precipitating events in the waking world. Who is doing this to me? And why? While the identity of the tormentor usually remains uncertain, answers to these questions sometimes arrive as life moves forward: subsequent events and interactions often provide the clues that help establish clearer connections between dream encounters and the people in the dreamer’s social world who might be responsible. In other cases, a specific person may be suspected from the start—usually as a result of a recent dispute or conflict—and these suspicions can affect the emotional tenor of the relationship, adding to already-present tension and discord.

The Therapeutic Uses of Dreams: Diagnosis and Prognosis

One way to “respect one’s dreams” is to consult with a curer (j’ilol, “one who sees”) to help discern the meaning and significance of troubling dreams, particularly when they occur in conjunction with sickness or misfortune. Throughout the therapeutic process, close attention to dreams—both their own and those of their patients—forms a key weapon in the diagnostic
armamentarium of Tzotzil curers. In the initial stage of treatment, which includes a form of diagnostic pulsing, curers often ask patients and family members to recount recent dreams and describe the tone and quality of their nighttime experiences (see Contreras Cortés 1998).

In the case of children, a form of “proxy dreaming” is recognized, in which the dreams of parents and other family members are scrutinized for diagnostic potential.

When correctly interpreted, dreams provide valuable clues concerning the precise nature of the affliction, as well as the current state (and even the location) of the dreamer’s souls. For example, dreams of cold, wet places may indicate that one’s soul has been sold to the earth by a witch and is now imprisoned in one of his lairs—perhaps in a cave, sinkhole, or lake (see Köhler 1995). In other contexts, the patient might report dreams in which he or she witnesses some misfortune that has befallen their animal soul; perhaps they see an animal that falls down a hillside, is attacked by another animal, or is simply running aimlessly through in the forest. In such cases, the curer must recruit the deities to locate the lost or injured soul and bring it back under their protective gaze, thus returning the sufferer to health.

In 2009, I participated in a curing ceremony for a case of “pushed soul sickness” (jip’el, balch’ujel) that was revealed through dreams. For several days, Pascuala had been suffering from severe pains in her back and sides, chronic lack of energy, lack of appetite, and persistent vomiting. At the request of her family, a curer was called in to diagnose the illness. When he arrived at her house and began to talk with her, she explained her symptoms, then—unsolicited—began to report a dream she’d had about a week before. In it, she saw an animal—a small cat, perhaps, or an ocelot—that had fallen down from the sky and was lying injured on the ground. She remembered seeing other animals, but she couldn’t recall any additional details. She speculated that one of these animals might be her animal soul. The curer told her that she was correct and that her dreams indicated that she was suffering from “fallen soul sickness” (bajemal ch’ulelal). This condition—known also as “pushed [soul sickness]” (jip’el) or “shoved [soul sickness]” (balch’ujel)—indicates that a person’s animal soul has been pushed from its place in heaven, falling to earth. As a result, the person may suffer “soul injury” (k’asemal ta ch’ulel) or “injury in dreams” (k’asemal ta vayichil).

Before the curing ceremony began, the patient and her family were questioned about any conflicts or interpersonal problems that had occurred recently. The patient’s daughter recalled a dispute over a property boundary that had taken place the previous year. Although the presumed antagonist was never named directly, the curer confirmed that this was the cause of the dream torment. Now the woman and her family “knew” the connection between the land dispute and their mother’s recent sickness, as well as the likely identities of the people responsible.

During the curing ceremony that followed, the vital connection between the patient and her injured animal soul was highlighted: the curer informed the deities, in prayer, that the woman’s animal soul had been pushed from its place in heaven by an “envious person” (jun j-it’ix o’nton) and that it was now lying lost and injured somewhere. He exhorted saints from
across the region to search for the lost soul, informing them that the animal “had left its sleeping place” and had fallen from heaven, landing on its back and its side (indexing the location of the patient’s pains), was “laid out with no energy,” and wasn’t eating or drinking (both of which were among the patient’s presenting symptoms). He then asked the saints to return the woman’s conatal animal to its protected celestial corral, referred to metonymically as “its sleeping place” (vayebal), “its eating place” (ve’ebal), “its bathing place” (atinajel).

After the prayers concluded, the curer enacted these same therapeutic actions with the woman. His wife constructed a “nest” of aromatic and curative plants under the patient’s sleeping mat, and she was fed meat from a sacrificial chicken (killed to satisfy the carnivorous hunger of her persecutor, who—it was hoped—would devour the chicken’s soul rather than that of the patient). Through these actions, a symbolic isomorphism was established between the woman and her animal essence; this symmetrical “mirror” relationship ensured that both the woman and her soul were placed under the protective gaze of the deities, where they could recover and regain their health and vitality.

In addition to eliciting diagnostic dreams from the sick person and family members, curers typically monitor their own dreams closely during the multiday curing ceremonies in order to determine how the treatment is progressing and to gain additional diagnostic insight into the condition. These prognostic dreams allow the curer to calibrate the treatment as it progresses, and in some cases, provide “signs” that serve to refine the diagnosis, suggesting alternate ritual interventions. The following prognostic dream illustrates not only the diagnostic and therapeutic value of dreams, but also their importance as a realm of direct action and intervention.

Years after the “Black Cat” dream described above, Xalik—who had debuted as a curer—was treating his nephew for an as-yet unidentified sickness. On the first night of the ceremony, he had a dream. In it, he saw a pine tree wrapped about by an electric cable which was sapping its strength:

“Well, I saw that there was a pine tree, a really beautiful pine. There were two or three, perhaps. Up near the top of the trees I saw that there was a cable—like an electrical cable. The trees were bound by the cable up there. The heat of the trees was being taken by the cable. Well, it seems I saw a man approach. But he was not a good man, he was evil. My heart told me that he was the one who had bound the trees.

“You there, what are you looking at?” he asked me.

I said, “I’m just looking at the pine tree, I see that it’s bound with a cable—that’s all.”

He said, “Let’s see if you know the unbinding . . . If you’re really a powerful man, sever that cable!”

“Fine,” I said. You see, in my dream I remembered that I know how to handle electricity, that I know how to hook up electrical wiring. I told him, “I can take care of that.”
He said, “Oh really, you can take care of that? It’s full of electricity; it’s a high voltage line! Look how thick it is, it carries so much electricity! Cut it if you can!”

“Even though it’s full of electricity,” I told him, “it’s no problem.”

Now the cable was up high, but it seems I was taller too. I just grabbed the cable, I cut it! I severed it! I said to the man, “You see, even though it had electricity, I didn’t feel anything!”

Xalik explained to me that the souls of his patients often appear in his dreams as pine trees. The evergreen pine tree represents the vitality of human beings, a metaphorical rendering of the central “sustaining post” (yuyal) that keeps body and soul “standing upright” (va’al), or healthy. The “electric cable” seen in the dream represents the magical rope (ch’ojon) witches use to bind the souls of their victims, slowly sapping their vitality. By severing this cable, the curer unbound the patient and triumphed over the malefactor. When he awoke, he knew that he had more strength than the aggressor and that the cure would be successful.

The next evening, when he returned to the sick child’s house to continue the curing ceremony, he informed the child’s father of his dreams:

“I saw a bad dream. The person who made the illness come [here] is powerful—it’s an envious person that you all have encountered. It was shown to me in my dream . . . It is because you are a ritual advisor— I think you have made many enemies because of this.”

The father replied that he had been “seeing really bad dreams” as well and was at a loss as to what to do about them. The curer reassured him, telling him not to despair, and informing him that they should pray to Our Father, asking for his protection.

As this case illustrates, the dream not only provided Xalik with diagnostic information on the condition, it also became a key element of therapeutic action. As an advocate before the saints on the patient’s behalf, the curer promises to help “release” the patient from his suffering, thereby undoing the work of the aggressor. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the curer often comes to the attention of the witch, who approaches him in dreams and attacks or challenges the curer in an attempt to “win” in the competition for the patient’s soul. By taking up the oneiric challenge and severing the cable, the soul of his patient was unbound and a cure was affected. This dream also illustrates the complex orientation to temporality provided by dreams; in this case, the dream was retrospective in focus (providing information on illness etiology), yet it also served as a here-and-now oneiric struggle, the outcome of which held real and immediate therapeutic effects.

Although the curative process is often deeply reassuring and comforting to sufferers in the midst of the illness experience, this immediate security appears to come at the cost of a heightened appreciation of the hidden dangers of social life. Indeed, shamanic diagnosis and curing plays a key role in both sustaining and reinforcing widely circulating anxieties linking dysphoric dreams and fears of covert social aggression and retribution. Through the open
discussion of interpersonal conflicts and tensions elicited while “listening” to the patient’s pulse, the curer forms an idea of who may be responsible for these dream assaults.

Despite the often-clear indication of the identity of the aggressors, in the intercessionary prayers of the curer, these real-world antagonists tend to fade into the background, replaced by the archetypal figure of the “tormentor,” the “persecutor,” or the “envious one.” Indeed, in the discourse of ritual curing, this generic persecutor becomes the focal point, condensing the tensions and unresolved anger stemming from diverse interpersonal conflicts into a single proximate antagonist—the assaulting witch.

At various points within the prayers, the curer will renarrate these episodes in a condensed and formalized ritual register intended to elicit the curative intervention of the deities. In doing so, the root conflict underlying the illness—along with the antagonists responsible for the patient’s suffering—is made explicit, thereby connecting the phantasy figure of the persecutor to its actual interpersonal analogs. The patient is therefore left to manage the anxiety, fear, and hostility that accompany the knowledge that specific people in his social orbit desire his suffering and are working secretly to bring this about.

Perhaps predictably, implicit or explicit accusations of dream aggression can become focalized on a specific person, sometimes leading to deadly consequences. In 2003, a well-known Chamula curer was found murdered in a remote canyon. I mentioned the man’s death to a friend of mine—a young woman who lived near him—asking if she thought the murder was related to persistent rumors that the man was actually a witch:

Oh yes! That bastard always came tormenting me in my dreams! I’ve see a big black dog glaring at me, threatening me! But I recognized who it was [and avoided him], that’s why he was never able to hurt me! But he was always bothering people in their dreams—my [female] friends have also been tormented by that damn witch. It’s well known that he’s a witch—all the people [in Chamula] say so. That’s why he was killed.

As this example illustrates, dream experience can provide a basis for making claims about the motives, intentions, and identities of others in the immediate social surround. Indeed, at the hamlet level, dreams provide valuable evidence for shamanic and lay interpretation of the social dimensions of illness experience—and as we have seen, the diagnostic and therapeutic practices of local curers continually reassert the connections among unresolved conflicts, suppressed interpersonal aggression, and pathogenic dream experience.

The Cultural Psychodynamics of Highland Maya Dream Aggression

In this section, we shift perspective, drawing back to discuss the broader social context in which highland Maya persecution dreams occur and to explore the cultural psychodynamic processes mobilized by local ethnotheories concerning emotional concealment, the pathogenic potential of anger, and the dangers of unreconciled conflict. As we will see, these understandings interact dynamically with one another, giving rise to a general sense of
hidden social threats, motivated by suppressed aggression (deriving from unresolved conflicts), which are realized in the dreamspace in the form of soul-based assaults. The anxiety and aggression linked to these social tensions are managed (on both social and personal levels) in ways that promote linked processes of splitting and projection, resulting in the complex phantasy-form of the “persecution dream.”

Of course, Highland Maya dream aggression can only be understood in relation to the social field that generates the anxieties and repressions underlying dream formation, while also providing explicit understandings of what the resulting dream productions mean and how they should be interpreted. Thus, in addition to exploring the individual-level psychodynamics of these dreams, we must attend to their broader social functions, which often reflect dominant ideologies and serve to further “manage” the culturally disavowed affective states that emerge in dream experience.

The Vicissitudes of Conflict and Aggression: Repression, Reconciliation, and Revenge

In Chamula, aggression and interpersonal hostility are sources of great ambivalence and anxiety, and failure to manage them properly constitutes one of the central “danger situations” in this community. Anger in its various forms is viewed as individually pathogenic as well as socially volatile, inasmuch as it motivates not only overt conflict, but covert forms of retaliation (Groark 2005, 239–90). As a result, rancorous feelings tend to be suppressed in the self: a good person doesn’t hate; rather, he “knows how to forgive.” The “evil person,” in contrast, “doesn’t know how to end the anger in their heart”; he or she is easily offended and seeks to act upon hostile impulses through covert means such as witchcraft or gossip (see Groark 2008). Indeed, a great deal of “emotion work” is directed toward the personal management and metabolism of anger (Groark 2005, 353–77; see also Hochschild 1979).

Despite this, social life in Chamula is rife with disputes and conflicts centering on land and water-use rights (Burguete Cal y Mayor 2000), intrafamilial fights over inheritance (Favre 1964), and religious and political factionalism (Cantón Delgado 1997; CDHFBC 2001). Despite both formal and informal efforts at reconciliation—as well as the aforementioned emotion work—such conflicts leave a great deal of unprocessed anxiety and negative emotion in their wake. While the people I spoke with made clear that they worked hard to “end the anger in their hearts” following a conflict, they often voiced suspicions that the other party was following a different path; rather than allowing their heart to become “cooled” (through personal emotion work or formal reconciliation), it was assumed that they preferred to cultivate their rancor in secret, pursuing retributive vengeance through magical means.

The fact that unassuaged anger is one of the key causes of witchcraft serves as a potent motivation for both conflict avoidance and subsequent reconciliation. The suppressed or concealed emotional states that form the underbelly of social life—described as “buried” (mukul) or “hidden” (nak’al)—are assumed to press for expression, motivating the person to commit acts that will allow them to vent these troublesome feelings. The pursuit of covert forms of
aggression (malicious gossip, “sending illness” through witchcraft, and various forms of soul affliction) is assumed to be the ultimate—and perhaps most common—route for expressing hidden rancorous and invidious feeling. Fear of being labeled a witch (or conversely, of falling victim to one) encourages a presentation of self that is nonconfrontational, cooperative, polite, and nonaggressive. Similarly, the conspicuous public display of an ability to forgive, and “to forget the anger in one’s heart” through apology and reconciliation, is also a key performative element in protecting oneself from witchcraft accusations (Collier 1973; Groark 2005, 465). Indeed, the absence of reconciliation following conflict is tantamount to an open admission that one or both parties have decided to pursue retribution through witchcraft (see Collier 1973). In the ritual language of prayer, such people are sometimes described as “the one with the fevered heart, the one with the crimson heart” ($k’ak$ al-o’ton, $jtzoj$-o’ton) in reference to their suppressed anger and resentment. In everyday speech, they are simply referred to as “enemies” or “adversaries” ($-kontrailetik$).

My Tzotzil interlocutors are acutely aware of the directed and purposeful emotion work people perform in order to actively hide socially disvalued feelings and to act in ways that align with local norms of comportment (Groark 2005, 159–68; 2008; see also Goffman 1959). This explicit awareness of the purposive suppression of negative emotions in both self and others—combined with high levels of both latent and manifest social conflict—leads to a widespread suspicion that the heart of many interpersonal exchanges remains dangerously hidden (see Haviland and Haviland 1982). It is generally assumed that emotions displayed publicly ($ta$ $jamal$) reflect conventional norms of comportment, whereas those that remain “hidden” reflect the true feelings of the person, which are, by nature of their hiddenness, most likely self-serving, aggressive, invidious, or otherwise immoral (see Groark 2005, 454–65; 2008).

If an emphasis on reconciliation and interpersonal harmony (and a suppression of direct conflict) is the primary way of sublimating or managing the individual’s antisocial or hostile feelings, then acts of indirect aggression and accusations of witchcraft become socially understood means for expressing them (Hallowell [1940] 1955, 281). Indeed, the free circulation of cultural models of witchcraft and sorcery may actually foster both the practice and experience of covert aggression to the same extent that norms of comportment requiring self-control in face to face situations discourage direct overt aggression (281).

Judging from the persecutory imagery that circulates so widely in the community, awareness of these hidden dimensions of social life elicits significant anxiety, as well as a marked preoccupation with the degree of concordance between surface appearances and inner motivations: Who, exactly, are the people in your social orbit? How do they really feel about you? Is their soul “strong” or “clever”? Are they benign or malevolent? The answers to these questions are not matters of idle curiosity—in a moral economy structured around the threat and exercise of covert supernatural aggression (such as witchcraft, sorcery, and dream aggression), lack of attention to the subtle undercurrents of power, motive, and character structuring social interactions represents a serious breach of self-defense.
As I have noted elsewhere (Groark 2013a), despite the presumed inability to directly “know” (-na) or “see” (-il) what goes on in the heads and hearts of others, through dreams the highland Maya gain access to an “extended intersubjective field” that reflects the hidden economy of socially disvalued affective and intentional states (namely negative states such as retributive hostility and punitive vengeance). Given that hostile impulses are strongly controlled in everyday life, individual preoccupation with this fraught dimension of social life leads to the production of rich projective material and phantasy formations (such as the persecution dream). Suppressed anger, hostility, envy, and talion dread thrive in the night, and following their oneiric resurgence, are often carried into social life in the form of affect-laden residues of visceral experience in the dreamspace. These nocturnal encounters often reflect very real interpersonal discord and tension. But when transposed into the dreamspace, the anxieties of social life—now inflected according to the movements of unconscious phantasy—take on more archaic and dangerous forms: insidious threats, mortal attacks, infliction of sickness, and the threat of death. In this liminal zone, persecution dreams both reflect and intensify widespread anxieties centering on the presumed omnipresence of hidden rancor and aggression in the social world, and perhaps in the self as well.

In the following section, we will explore how these widely circulating (and individually motivating) beliefs serve to catalyze a rich “cultural projective system”; one in which sanctioned aggressive impulses—in both self and other—are externalized and actualized in the form of the persecution dream with all its attendant anxieties about social aggression, supernatural retribution, and punitive illness.

Splitting, Projection, and Phantasies of Persecution
As Hallowell ([1940] 1955) and Kluckhohn (1944) pointed out long ago, the fact that a society is organized around an explicit ideology of interpersonal harmony and smooth interpersonal relations does not mean that the problem of aggression management disappears; the prohibitions of social life always involve at least some suppression of individual desires and impulses, particularly those linked to anger and aggression. These feelings do not simply vanish; rather, they often find derivative expression in symbolic forms and beliefs (for instance, a widespread belief in witches or other persecutory agents). Building on Kardiner’s (1945) classic account of cultural “projective systems,” Spiro (1965) has characterized such beliefs as constituting “culturally constituted defense mechanisms”—in this case, the patterned displacement (or projection) of socially disvalued affective and relational states from their conflictual source onto some other consensually validated target. Once relocated, the underlying affective energy is often channeled into socially sanctioned forms of aggression against the target of these projections, such as lynching, retributive witchcraft, or other forms of revenge (see Murphy 1960; Spiro 1952, 1984).

From this perspective, the persecution dream can be understood as a basic element in the “culturally constituted projective system” of the highland Maya. In its classic psychoanalytic formulation, projection refers to a defensive process in which an unconscious “internal perception” of feeling or thought (almost always of a dangerous or conflictual nature) is
initially repressed and subsequently “thrown outside the self” where it finds expression—in a derived and distorted form—as an extrapsychic feature of the interpersonal world (Freud 1909, 231–32; 1911, 63–66; see also Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 349–57).

For Freud, the defense par excellence was repression—a dynamic process whereby offending ideational material was exiled into the unconscious in an effort to eliminate the uncomfortable “signal anxiety” associated with the threatened emergence of the dangerous or forbidden idea. In contrast, projection is based on a radical externalization of the problematic affect. Rather than existing in repressed form inside of the person, it is now experienced as a quality located in others. Projection, therefore, does not result in a negation of awareness of the conflictual material; rather, at a phenomenological level, this form of psychic evacuation gives rise to the experience of threatening omnipresence—dangerous (and therefore disavowed) affects become a basic constituent of the social world into which they have been placed, giving rise to conscious anxieties that the resulting phantasy-infused external world is persecutory and hostile, threatening the very survival of the self.

In the highland Maya context, this projective system operates—at least in part—in the service of a prevailing ideological position that emphasizes the value of comity and fellow feeling, while also providing the individual with an avenue for the management and expression of culturally disavowed feelings. Dream affliction allows for a profound verbalization of the anxiety and fear generated by the vicissitudes of anger and unresolved interpersonal conflicts, presented in an idiom of covert aggression that is readily accepted and socially understood.

Explicit prosocial ideologies generate unconscious processes of disavowal and projection in an effort to maintain the self as a moral subject, while the cultural projective system (as manifested in the scripted “genre” of persecution dreams) serves to concretize, intensify, and contain these disavowed mental contents, personifying them in the form of the maleficent and ill-wishing oneiric Other (see Spiro 1952).

Through culturally guided dream hermeneusis, the various events and beings encountered in dreams are interpretively reified into manifestations of a “real” but hidden persecutor. This interpretive transposition collapses the symbolic field from which the dream originated, in effect externalizing a psychological entity and bringing it into actuality. Unlike the classic culturally constituted defensive systems (which serve to channel and neutralize social sanctioned impulses, thereby protecting against anxiety), Mayan persecution dreams leak anxiety at every turn. Although this may indeed secure some internal equilibrium through the evacuation of troublesome feelings, it comes at the cost of an increased sense of ontological insecurity and threat.

Unfortunately, the phantasy of externalized containment offered by projection is doomed to fail. These split-off, conflictual, aspects of self must be dynamically maintained as external, yet as disavowed parts of the self, they constantly press for return. As Racker (1957, 339) notes, the underlying aggressive component involved in persecutory fears is generally unconscious—or at least, disavowed. However, its presence can be inferred if we view
these persecutorial feelings as “talion” or “counteraggressive” phantasies. Talion phantasies are generated in response to the dreamer’s own suppressed hostile impulses toward others: “I harbor aggressive feelings toward other people (or feel I have committed aggressive acts toward someone, perhaps by evoking their envy)—as a result, I expect some form of punishment for these immoral desires, acts, etc.”

Somewhat paradoxically, talion phantasies often serve to elicit the very same aggression, anger, and anxiety that that had been so assiduously defended against. Within the phantasmatic dyad of aggressor and victim, the projected aggressive affect stages its return, rebounding upon the dreamer. The repressed aggression reemerges, but it is now transformed into a morally justified reaction to the immoral persecutory acts of another: “This person wishes me ill and is trying to injure or kill me, so I am morally justified in hating them (and perhaps, for seeking revenge).” As the hatred for the “persecutor” increases, his phantasied talion hostility increases in turn, and the dreamer comes to identify more and more closely as the target of attack.

In extreme cases, this can give rise to a morbid spiral: the sufferer experiences increased anxiety and insecurity, which leads both to more frequent and more distressing dreams, which generates heightened levels of anxiety, resulting in acute fears of sickness, and often, the production of somatic symptoms. We might speculate that the physical symptoms deriving from dream persecution represent an unconscious attempt to satisfy—and thereby control—these phantasied aggressors by “accepting” the talion punishment in the form of sickness (Racker 1957, 346–47). Through illness, the punishment is taken upon the self, the internal persecutor is satisfied, and the underlying unconscious guilt for aggressive phantasies and impulses is ameliorated (see Segal 1964, 30).

**Dreaming as Bridge Between Psychic Reality and Social World**

As the preceding discussion has shown, highland Maya dream experience and interpretation serves to integrate the topos of both souls and waking selves, in effect grafting the vicissitudes of the soul onto actual interpersonal experience. Dream experience, when properly understood, potentiates a form of binocular vision in which both here-and-now social relations as well as transposed soul-relations are maintained in narrative focus. Each phenomenal “horizon” represents partial access to broader field of human relationality construed in its fullest sense as the interaction of complex compound selves which span two interpenetrating domains: the physical and the essential (Groark 2013a, 287).

Shifting from sleep to wakefulness and back again, Tzotzil dreamers cycle endlessly between these two registers. The perspectival “tacking” facilitated by this movement serves to situate the dreamer in a world of dimension and depth, one that provides two different views on reality—each a partial perspective in and of itself—that interweave and inform one another, yielding a full-bodied understanding of the social realm in its corporeal and numinous dimensions (see Faure 1996, 17). While Freud (1900) emphasized the importance of the
“day’s residues” in shaping the surface content of dreams, we might follow Lohmann (2003b, 207) in arguing for the conceptual importance of “night residues”—psychically charged memory traces and affects generated by dream experience—that persist into waking life, haunting our “real” experiences and adding emotional depth, complexity, and intensity to seemingly banal social encounters (see also Leveton 1961; Shafton 1995, 335).20

In some cases, this interweaving can work to subvert the primacy of waking life. French historian Bernard Faure has argued that within certain cultural imaginaries—particularly those which posit the dreamspace as a realm of “real” experience—dreaming serves to bridge distinct orders of reality—the mundane and the essential (or in his terms, the “real” and the “imaginaire”)—linking them though the work of “mediating imagination,” a form of mentation that “develops on the threshold of, in the space between, two contradictory systems, and draws its vitality from connecting them in practice…” (1996, 286).

By acting as bridge between two distinct registers of experience, the dream serves to “introduce the ‘uneasiness’ of an [incommensurate] duality… into the very heart of the real, to blow it apart… [Social reality thus becomes] an ideal state constantly threatened from within” (Faure 1996, 17). This inversion of the relationship between the “reality” of waking life and the “phantasy” of the dream allows us to appreciate the ways in which dreaming can be experienced as an encounter with a sort of hidden reality which must then be accommodated within everyday life and social relations. Seen in this light, “the trauma encountered in dreams is thus in a way more real than (external, social) reality itself”—precisely because it instantiates those dimensions of social experience that are deeply felt and known but often conspicuously absent from real-life interactions: “what appears in the guise of dreaming… is sometimes the hidden truth on whose repression social reality itself is founded” (Žižek 2006, 9).21

Indeed, the highland Maya dream experience both confirms and subtly undermines the integrity of real-world interactions, while simultaneously infusing them with a quantity of phantasy. As discussed, the persecution dream serves as a phantasy screen upon which ambivalent feelings about social relatedness are projected and contained, while the figure of the “tormentor” or the “molester” serves as an archetype of antisocial aggression and destructiveness that is first “realized” in the dreamspace, then subsequently reintegrated as a hidden feature of the social world. Despite local theories to the contrary, such dreams are not disclosures of a “hidden reality”; rather, they reveal the disavowed affective dimensions of everyday life that have woven themselves back into waking experience and awareness through the backdoor of the dream. In “revealing” the seemingly transgressive existence of visceral hate and murderous interpersonal aggression, they serve to reinforce a more fundamental ideological conviction: surface appearances are not to be trusted, and the inner “subjective” core of others is likely to be dangerous and self-serving (see Groark 2008, 2013a). Seen in this light, persecution dreams reveal the disavowed precipitates of the existing social order that have been folded back into the system in a way that serves to sustain its most fundamental propositions.
Closing Coda: The Dynamics of Culture and Psyche

As anthropologists, we are sensitive to the interpretive violence committed when culturally distinct worldviews, ontologies, and social realities are absorbed and homogenized by the reductive “master discourse” of Western psychology. And yet, as psychically complex individuals, we are also aware of the shallowness of purely culturalist accounts of human experience. We know that the human psyche—our own, as well as those we encounter in the field—is a dynamic system shot through with strong and sometimes contradictory feelings (only some of which are culturally recognized and elaborated), complex and often conflicting desires and impulses (many of which have no available social outlets or spaces for expression), variable zones of unawareness and unarticulation (both culturally and individually produced), and constant attempts to manage the tensions that arise from this complex meeting of the inner and outer worlds. In other words, we are all psychically complex—and psychically conflicted—in deeply cultural ways.

Given this, we need some sort of working theory of cultural psychodynamics in order to better understand distinctly organized subjects and lifeworlds, providing for a more granular focus on the inner world, how it works, and how it is both shaped by and the shaping of the social milieu and cultural context in which it occurs. It is in this spirit that I have been working to develop a contemporary “cultural psychodynamic” approach to the interpretation of ethnographic material (see also Groark 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2015). The goal is to approximate the sort of “bifocal” vision advocated by Sapir (1938): an interdisciplinary integration in which anthropological understandings shed light on the role of cultural ideologies, ontologies, ethnotheories, and social practices in conditioning group psychology, with psychoanalytic thought brought to bear on the processes of meaning making, conflict, defense, and motivation that characterize complex cultural subjects. Without culture we have no psychology, but without psyche we have no subject.22

More than half a century ago, Hallowell ([1954] 1955) argued that culturally particular ontologies must be considered “real” insofar as people believe in them; and inasmuch as they exist as objects of belief, they have the potential to become dynamic elements in the psychic economy of individuals, capable of mobilizing (and being managed by means of) more or less universal psychodynamics processes.23 If this is true, we are left with an array of compelling questions: What are the basic psychodynamic processes that underpin human social interaction and experience? How do local beliefs, social relations, and the practices of everyday life structure this psychic field, encouraging certain culturally specific psychodynamic configurations? In what ways might locally distinct ethnotheories of experience, emotion, self, and interaction alter the psychic terrain of both groups and individuals, allowing them to sidestep certain conflicts and dilemmas while throwing others into high relief? How do variations in these generative framing assumptions yield different dynamic cultural subjectivities? And how do these intrapsychic dynamics feed back into social life, shaping not only individual-level social relations, but also shared frames of meaning and even sociocultural institutions?
The hallmark of a cultural psychodynamic approach, thus conceived, is the systematic linking of some notion of “deep” intrapsychic processes with a highly particularized understanding of the constitutive role of cultural dispositions, ethnotheories, and social practices—in other words, joining a contemporary psychodynamic depth psychology to a nuanced cultural phenomenology. Such an integration effectively decolonizes Eurocentric models of mind and experience (through the incorporation of a ethnophenomenological-ontological sensibility) while simultaneously resuscitating a reculturalized, psychically complex anthropological subject (through commitment to some plausible model of psyche).

This article has provided an extended ethnographic case study of how an integration of anthropological and psychoanalytic sensibilities can increase the depth and dimensionality of our understanding of both individual and cultural psychodynamics. In it, I have analyzed the complex ways that highland Maya “persecution dreams” relate to the experience of social antagonism and conflict in everyday life, exploring what happens to “troublesome” aggressive and antisocial feelings in a cultural context that encourages their processing through dreams. By displacing conflict and negative social affect into a register of experience dominated by unconscious phantasy (and associated processes of splitting and projection), the persecution dream serves to both contain and amplify anxieties related to existential vulnerability and the vicissitudes of anger and interpersonal discord. Crucially, this “inner reality” of phantasy is never quarantined from social experience or cultural worlds; rather, it derives from these domains—a personal response to the manifold tensions, ambivalences, and conflicts produced by the affordances and prohibitions of everyday modes of being and relating.

The persecution dream reveals an individual threatened both from without (by the reified aggressors postulated in local ethnotheories, vivified through the process of projection) and from within (by disavowed emotional materials that are projected into the world). Diffuse anxieties that are registered first in the social realm are soon transposed into theater of the dream, manifesting as persecution dreams, which are later recounted, received, and engaged with as a feature of consensual reality. As these psychic products transform into social narratives; they are filtered through the interpretive frames offered by native curers, as well as the opinions of family members and others in the dreamer’s social sphere. In this way, what originated in phantasy effectively transits from intrapsychic to interpersonal, becoming externalized and “realized” as a consensually validated social fact with the power to shape actual social relations.

As I hope this article has shown, an anthropological approach that integrates an everyday ethnographic emphasis on social reality and perceptual consciousness with a cultural psychodynamic focus on psychic reality and “phantasy consciousness” (Brudzinska 2012, 35) allows us to more fully appreciate the always-present inner world that both derives from and shadows the actual, often transforming it in the process. Of course, as with any psychic product, the meaning of phantasy is overdetermined: multiple and conflictual representations, both veridical and defensively inflected, can exist side by side within any individual. Highland Maya persecution dreams are no exception; they may reflect more or less accurate
dramatizations of real-life conflicts, or they may derive from conflicts that are primarily intrapsychic fears and projections. Similarly, they may aid in the processing of—and adaptation to—a difficult social milieu marked by opacity and misdirection, while simultaneously serving to manage conflictual forms of self-experience centering on hostility and aggression—feelings that might be too dangerous to contain within the consciously organized self of waking life.

Regardless, the cultural and personal salience of persecution dreams among the highland Maya points toward the profound unconscious cost of the emotional work needed to suppress the many negative emotions of everyday social life in an attempt to live as a moral person. Indeed, as Freud reminds us, despite their often solipsistic and persecutory overtones, the dynamics of projection represent a profound attempt to maintain rapport with an external world: through phantasies of persecution, “the human subject has recaptured a relation, and often a very intense one, to the people and things in his world, even though the relation is a hostile one now” (1911, 71). Although this process takes place largely in the realm of phantasy—and, paradoxically, often results in greater mistrust and suspicion of surface appearances—the experience of persecution dreams among the highland Maya represents an attempt to maintain a relational world based on insight and understanding of human motives, feelings, and intentions, while simultaneously resurrecting affective experiences that have been strongly suppressed in waking life.

KEVIN P. GROARK is Lecturer at Macquarie University and Psychoanalytic Associate at New Center for Psychoanalysis.

Notes

Acknowledgments. Research funding for the initial period of fieldwork was provided by a National Science Foundation Dissertation Improvement Grant, with additional funds provided by the Ford Foundation-UCLA International Studies Overseas Program (ISOP), the Tinker Foundation, the Departments of Anthropology and Latin American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. All research was conducted with human subjects approval from UCLA’s Institutional Review Board and with the permission of the local community.

1. Throughout this article, I adopt the psychoanalytic convention—most common in the Kleinian literature—of using the term “phantasy” (rather than the more common “fantasy”). As originally proposed by Isaacs (1948, 80), this orthographic difference (phantasy vs fantasy) signaled a technical psychological-phenomenological distinction: “phantasy” referred to the unconscious fears, affects, and anxieties that trigger defensive processes such as projection, while “fantasy” was used to refer to the conscious imaginal derivatives that result from the operation of the defenses (for instance, conscious fantasies of dream persecution). As Spillius et al. (2011, 5) note, most contemporary Kleinians now use the single term phantasy to refer to both conscious and unconscious forms, mainly because of the difficulty in establishing the degree of consciousness that accompanies any particular phantasy formation (which may be fully conscious, tacitly conscious, or fully unconscious).

2. A similar approach can be discerned in the work of Hallowell ([1938] 1955, 1941) and Nader (1990), each of whom argues, implicitly or explicitly, that an anthropologically sophisticated analysis of conflict and violence must take into account local epistemologies that define both the degree and severity of various acts, as well as what counts as an act of aggression.
3. Although I emphasize negative dream experience in this article, the Maya also recognize powerful positive dreams. Curers and religious officeholders are often called to their work through “investiture” dreams in which they are visited by deities and provided with the symbols of their new office, complex technical skills (such as weaving or playing musical instruments) are bestowed through “tuition” dreams, and a range of dream images are interpreted as signaling positive future developments. Thus, in addition to the regressive anxiogenic dynamics described in this article, dreams can also mobilize powerful progressive developmental forces in the lives of Mayan dreamers (for additional details, see Groark 2009, 2015).

4. See Manguen, de León, and Ichín (1978), Contreras Cortés (1998), and Burgete Cal y Mayor (2000) for more recent discussions of the conflict and violence in San Juan Chamula since the 1970s.


6. Page Pleigo (2005, 161) suggests that the Tzotzil experience of having a self, that is, in part, constituted by these self-extensions is similar to that of the biomedically defined person who “knows” that they have a liver or a pancreas, but only becomes aware of its existence when it ceases to function properly. This analogy is misleading precisely because it fails to account for the distributed and uncontrollable agency that characterizes Tzotzil souls, which are willful, appetitive, impulsive, and wandering (see Groark 2010). It also ignores the fact that some people are capable of directing their various self-extensions to stage attacks upon the souls of others.

7. In Chamula, the terms ilbajinel and utilanel are centrally associated with the idea of persecution or torment motivated by suppressed (and covertly expressed) envy and anger; hence my gloss as “dream affliction” (see Contreras Cortés 1998 for similar data on envy-based illness sent through dreams). Both terms derive from transitive verb stems (-il and -ut, respectively) whose core meaning is “to scold, rebuke, criticize, reproach, reprimand” (Laughlin 1975, 59, 75). These terms also provide derived forms referring to expressed anger, such as -ilin (“to reprove or scold angrily”) and -utin (“to scold or criticize”) (59, 75).

8. Laughlin’s (1976, 7–10) corpus of Tzotzil Maya dream motifs from the nearby community of San Lorenzo Zinacantán reveals that 82% of common dream images were interpreted to presage a negative event, principally sickness, death, or poverty. Indeed, many of the dream narratives he recorded include exegetical comments highlighting the load of anxiety surrounding sleep and dreaming, such as “it’s just that there are so many resentful people behind me, beside me. I dream too much when I don’t pray at bedtime. When I pray at bedtime, when I cross myself at bedtime, I don’t dream very often” (Laughlin 1976, 21). An entry in the Great Tzotzil Dictionary of Zinacantán highlights the strong connection between anxiety and dreaming: under the verb “to worry,” we find the phrase “he worries so when he dreams” (tol sik'poj yo'on ti mi xachitne) (Laughlin 1975, 197).

9. Technically speaking, it would be a mistake to characterize the dreams themselves as pathogenic: the dream is not the actual cause of the affliction; rather, it is the experiential domain within which the pathogenic assault takes place. This understanding shifts our focus away from the dream as such, toward an emphasis on the dreamspace as a realm of interaction in which certain kinds of events, processes, and social interactions—often quite distinct from those of waking life—are understood to dominate.

10. In the nearby Tzotzil Maya community of San Pedro Chenalhó, Guiteras-Holmes reports that parents would engage children in a process of morning dream interrogation, during which they would attempt to discern impending illnesses in the child as well as spiritual attacks directed toward the family (1961, 119). If the dream signals sickness or misfortune, prophylactic fasting and prayer is begun in an attempt to eliminate the impending affliction. As a result of these repeated inquiries, she writes, “[the child] soon realizes the importance of recalling faithfully every
detail of what occurred in the daytime and in the dark of night, and will recount them to his mother worriedly, while he awaits her verdict” (118).

11. Although anyone can make offerings and recite apotropaic prayers, they are most effective when recited on the sufferer’s behalf by a curer (who, by definition, is understood to maintain privileged access to the deities). Despite this, the ability to invoke the benevolent protection of the deities seems to provide a degree of “existential armor,” allaying some of the anxieties linked to the vicissitudes of the “extended self.”

12. During diagnosis, the curer asks the patient to recount recent conflicts while holding his fingers on the patient’s arm, “listening” to their pulse. When the relevant episode has been recounted, the blood is felt to “jump” and then begin to flow smoothly. Through the flow of blood—which is connected to the soul by nature of their shared origin in the person’s heart—the true nature of the affliction is communicated to the curer.

13. Elsewhere, I have analyzed how these beliefs serve to motivate conflict reconciliation through invocation of an “illness sanction” (Groark 2005, 477–80). Indeed, fear of the sickening power of anger and unreconciled conflict (which invokes the specter of witchcraft-based revenge) supports local ideologies concerning the positive value of social harmony, providing a medico-moral impetus for the restoration of smooth social relations (and often, for the suppression of real antagonisms).

14. In Amatenango, men who ignore this norm of nonconfrontational, prosocial comportment were likely to “wake up dead,” having been killed as witches (Nash 1967). Favre (1964) and Nash (1967) both document “epidemics” of brutal witch lynchings in the highlands during this period and identify witchcraft accusations as a significant element in the motives for these killings. During my own fieldwork, no fewer than four men were violently lynched and burned as a result of witchcraft accusations in outlying hamlets of Chamula (Groark 2005).

15. These concerns are reflected at the level of local emotion theory: emotions that are clearly and honestly signaled are said to “come out” (lok’) from their seat inside the body (generally in the heart), becoming “open” (jamal) or visible (-vinaj), and easily deduced from interaction or behavior. In contrast, guarded or concealed emotional states are said to be “buried” (mukul), “hidden” (nak’al), or “placed/guarded inside one’s heart” (tik’il ta yut yo’nton).

16. Although Freud emphasized the mechanism of repression, in his early works repression and projection were conceptualized as working in tandem. In 1909, he writes: “Repression is effected not by means of amnesia but by a severance of causal connections brought about by a withdrawal of affect. These repressed connections appear to persist in some kind of shadowy form (which I have elsewhere compared to an endopsychic perception), and they are thus transferred, by a process of projection, into the external world, where they bear witness to what has been effaced from consciousness” (1909, 231–32; emphasis mine). Despite their origins in the Freudian corpus, these concepts were most fully developed in the work of Melanie Klein, for whom processes of psychic splitting (accompanied by projection, introjection, and identification) form foundational elements in the structure of the unconscious defensive arsenal of psychic life (see Klein 1946, 1948, [1957] 1975).

17. Although the psychic mechanism of projection describes a process in which disavowed feelings are placed into the social world, as Grotstein (2005, 1058) points out, this is a misleading characterization: it is not possible to project “into” or “onto” an external other; rather, we project into our inner image or representation of the other, a process that lies at the very heart of unconscious phantasy formation. The material we speak of as “projected” into the outer world is evacuated from the self only in phantasy; although it now feels as if it is “out there” in the world, in fact, it never actually leaves the confines of the self.

18. As Kardiner (1939, 1945) argued, projective systems can productively be understood as “secondary institutions” that develop as counterweights to prevailing and dominant cultural ideologies. Seen from this perspective, they are not necessarily adaptive (for instance, in alleviating anxiety); rather, they represent a culturally provided adjustive affordance that allows the individual to manage the complex and often conflictive internal dynamics generated by primary cultural values and their network of associated social sanctions, inhibitions, and repressions.
19. Despite the value placed on comity and nonaggression, among the highland Maya it is morally justified—in fact, demanded—that good people feel hatred toward those who “cultivate” their own rancor and act on it through aggressive magic or witchcraft. In other words, hateful people are the only ones who can be justifiably hated. This culturally channeled hatred can take spectacular form: when witches are lynched, the killings are extraordinarily violent affairs, distinguished by a surplus of aggression (see Nash 1967).

20. For examples of similar “objectivist” conceptions of dream experience (and the variable integration of dreams with waking life), see the edited volumes by Tedlock (1987), Jedrej and Shaw (1992), Mageo (2003), and Lohmann (2003a). Although dreaming and waking experience differ in significant ways (both in terms of the psychological processes that predominate, as well as the various ethnotheories framing these modes of experience), each one of us shifts between these states in a systematic and regular manner, continually drawing influences—both conscious and unconscious—from one domain into the other.

21. I am not claiming that dreaming and waking are experienced as undifferentiated states by Mayan dreamers. In fact, the two phenomenological registers are clearly distinguished within local theories of experience (and from a psychoanalytic perspective, the mental processes that predominate in each are thoroughly distinct). What I am trying to draw attention to through this discussion are the complex ways in which local ethnotheories facilitate a heightened interpenetration of dreaming and waking life, allowing them to become woven together in a culturally distinct manner.

22. As Henrietta Moore (1994, 142) has pointed out, despite a commitment to understanding culture and its shaping role, there has been a striking lack of theorization of the importance of psyche in social life.

23. A phenomenological-ontological approach such as that advocated by Hallowell ([1954] 1955) serves to map what Boothby (2001) refers to as the “dispositional field”—the implicit conceptual topos of meanings, values, and cultural logics that organizes both the personal and social fields. But on its own, this is not enough. We must combine it with some theory of culturally shaped psychic functioning (an “anthropological metapsychology,” for lack of a better term) if we hope to understand the dynamics of the cultural subject.

References Cited


Manguen, Juan Jaime, Antonio Garca de León, and Oliverio Ichín S. 1978. La violencia en Chamula. San Cristóbal de Las Casas: UNACH.


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P2, L31 – change fantasies to phantasies
P2, L34 – change often-fluid to often fluid
P8, L42 – change the torment to it
P9, L3 – change first occurrence of tormentor to aggressor
P9, L9 – Change “enemy” to enemy
P9, L10 – Change “torment” to torment
P9, L23 – delete lit.
P9, L25 – change (-tzak ta muk)’ to (-tzak ta muk’)
P10, L30-31 – change “pushed [soul sickness]” to “pushed soul sickness”
P10, L31 – change “shoved [soul sickness]” to “shoved soul sickness”
P10, L39 – change “knew” to understood
P11, L11 – delete recover and
P11, L20 – delete closely
P11, L25 – change realm of to tool for
P11, L30 – change wrapped about by to bound by
P11, L45 – change know to knew
P11, L46 – change know to knew
P12, L12 – change rendering to representation
P12, L26 – change as well to as well,
P14, L5 – change social and personal to personal and social
P14, L36 – change While to Although
P15, L3 – change aggression to revenge
P15, L4 – change affliction to aggression
P15, L36 – Replace (281) with (see Hallowell [1940] 1955, 281)
P15, L44-45 – Delete (such as witchcraft, sorcery, and dream aggression)
P17, L11 – Change person to self
P17, L31 – Delete blank line and append following paragraph to previous one
P17, L43 – Change aspects of self to affective experiences
P20, L22 – delete also
P21,L14 - change phycodynamics to psychodynamics
P21, L30 – change theater to the theater
P21, L31 – change dream to persecution dream
P21, L31 – delete manifesting as persecution dreams,
P21, L31 – change which are to which is
P21, L31 – changed recounted, received, to recounted

After these edits, the sentence on P21, L29-32 should read: “Diffuse anxieties that are registered first in the social realm are soon transposed into the theater of the persecution dream, which is later recounted and engaged with as a feature of consensual reality.”

P21, L43 – change actual to outer world
P26,L19-29 – change all citations to Groark, Kevin P.