

# Modern Muslims use dreams to make major life decisions

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The traditional practice of using night dreams to make major life decisions is in widespread use among modern Muslims, reveals a new study whose author is speaking at the British Science Festival on Thursday September 16\*.

Interviews with 60 Muslims in the UK, North America, Europe and Pakistan have revealed that night dreams are being used to make choices on issues like marriage, business, career development and politics.

Research leader, Durham University anthropologist Dr Iain Edgar focused on the centuries-old practice of Istikhara, or Islamic 'dream incubation'. His study is the first comprehensive and the most contemporary academic study on Istikhara prayer and practice, which can also include daytime prayer about an important decision.

His study is published in the September 2010 edition of the academic journal *History and Anthropology* and will feature in Dr Edgar's forthcoming book. It was funded by the British Academy, The Wenner-Gren Foundation and Durham University.

Anecdotes of modern-day use of Istikhara include Muslims and their families deciding on the suitability of marriage proposals, an Islamic business leader making decisions on an important investment, and a politician who was deliberating over whether to accept a high profile post.

One example cited in the research is a Pakistani woman living in the UK, who did Istikhara about her daughter's future marriage. She dreamt of a good looking bowl of dates, which did not taste very nice, imagery which she interpreted as anticipating the outcome of the marriage.

Istikhara is typically learnt from family members and, although the practice varies between countries and individuals, a follower would typically say two additional, specific prayers at night during which they would focus on the big question. They would then lie on their right side and attempt to 'hold the question' as they sleep. Some followers would look for an answer the following morning but in different traditions Istikhara would be done for seven nights.

People who practice Istikhara rely on symbolism to make their decisions. The colours white or green, imagery of important religious figures or beautiful things would indicate that the proposed action was positive. The colours black, yellow or red, an unpleasant person or ugly things are viewed as negative.

Once followers get an answer, they are bound to use the advice as it is viewed as the will of Allah.

Through his fieldwork across the globe, Dr Edgar, who was working with his Ph.D student, David Henig, also found evidence of individuals practising Istikhara on behalf of others - for example, Islamic healers in Bosnia - and advertisements for their services in popular magazines.

Dr Edgar has been studying dreams in world cultures for over 25 years. He has carried out research on different aspects of Islamic dream interpretation, including dream interpretation in the Sufi tradition (the inner, mystical dimension of Islam) and the role of night dreams in Islamic militant jihadists' inspiration and motivation. The knowledge contributes to our understanding of humankind and the motivations of

different cultures.

He said: "Dreams have always had a very important role to play in Islam - the Qur'an shows that the prophet Muhammed was a great dreamer.

"Dream interpretation in Islam is a spiritual way of divining the future and submitting oneself to the personal unconscious and the will of Allah.

"Muslims are often reticent about the use of Istikhara, but through our studies we found evidence of its widespread use amongst a wide variety of [Muslims](#), living in different areas of the world and with different socio-economic backgrounds.

"In Western culture, we say "let's sleep on it" when we have difficult or stressful decisions to make, and often things will seem clearer in the morning. Istikhara is a spiritual version of this practice."

Dr. Edgar has also studied the use of dream interpretation in a more political setting. His forthcoming book (details below) also focuses on the role of dreams in jihadist ideology and al-Qaeda's legitimization of 9/11.

It is commonly known that Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban, founded the movement following guidance from a holy figure in a dream. Osama Bin Laden reportedly begins his day reviewing and discussing his and his companions' dreams.

**More information:** 'Istikhara: The Guidance and Practice of Islamic Dream Incubation Through Ethnographic Comparison'. I. Edgar & D. Henig. History and Anthropology Vol. 21, No 3, September 2010, pp251-262.

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