

CONVERSATIONS WITH AN IMMORTAL

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A day like any other was set to unfold – but not for long.

The Kalinago Nation on the island of Iyanola, moved about their day with reverence for the towering mountain above. Their sharp peaks reaching for the heavens. Fishing, hunting and gathering was the order of the day. But not today. As twilight descended, an eerie hush settled over the land of Iyanola. It was at this fragile moment between day and night that Kukulkan the serpent immortal, arrived.

He came on wings that shimmered like gold, the scales glinting in the faint glow of the setting sun. His presence was almost imperceptible at first, a ripple in the humid air that seemed to carry the whispers of a thousand long-dead voices. Perched atop Atabey, Kukulkan gazed down upon the bay below with eyes as old as time itself.

The people felt the change and feared the awakening of Opiel, the guardian of death, who resides in the mountain. But it was not Opiel it was something else; something more.

They watched as Kukulkan came down the mountain to meet the people as he got closer the people gasped as with each step the serpent became a man – like them!

The seer of the clan stepped forward for who else would or could? He bowed before the glory of Kukulkan, “Sire, we do not know you – yet we know you. We have seen your display of supremacy. Will you speak with us?”

Now in full human form Kukulkan said, “I can and I will.”

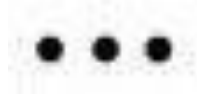
They stood at the water’s edge, where the mountain met the sea—its depths swirling with unreadable intent, while the magnificent peak, born of past eruptions, seemed to rise from the very heart of the waters. The bay was deep, no one knew how deep for it was black from the Sulphur of Qualibou the volcano. This is where, on the edge of the bay at the foot of this mountain, the people sat with Kukulkan.



The chief moved in and was first with a question as was his right as leader, his voice edged with a sneer, honed by years of command. “Who are you?” he asked, as if testing a pretender.

Kukulkan answered without flinch or frown, his voice calm as stone worn smooth by centuries of rain.

“I am breath before word, shadow before flame. I am one who has walked where memory forgets and stood where time holds no sway. I am called Kukulkan, but I am only what is needed in the moment of asking. Speak not to measure me, Chief, but to measure yourself.”



The seer spoke up quickly to cover the reprimand of the chief. “Tell us where you are from.”

Kukulkan replied, “It is not important where I am from, but where I have been.”

The people frowned. So Kukulkan explained, “Where we are from is a place, a land, a river, a mountain. But where we have been—ah, that is the people we have met, the family we have loved, the sunrise we have seen, and the choices we have made.”

“Will you teach us?” the seer dared to ask.

Kukulkan looked at him for a long moment. “What do you wish to know that you do not already hold within yourselves?”

“I do not know it all.” The seer pointed out.

“It is one thing not to know and to know that you do not know. It is another to not know and to not know that you do not know. It is good that you know you do not know. This is the first step to wisdom.”



A woman spoke, “We want to know that what we know is right.”

“Surely your seer has told you so?” Kukulkan replied.

“This is true, he is a good seer,” the woman confirmed, “But how often does one get to meet god?”

“I am no god.” Kukulkan said, throwing the people into confusion.

“But...” the woman began, but Kukulkan raised a hand.

“I am above you in the scale of life, and for that, I am more advanced. But I am not a god. For where science is new – magic is assumed and religion is not far behind. I am no god. Now, ask your questions. I will speak with you.”



Now a fisherman spoke, “Tell me about fishing. Where is best?”

“You know where is best, you know this island Iyanola well. But I am not here to tell you of fishing but to remind you always that it is better to know how to fish than to accept a fish. For to accept a fish is to eat for one day. But know how to fish is to eat forever.”



A youth, bold in his curiosity, asked, “Tell us about getting old. The elders are always telling us about age.”

Kukulkan said, “Listen to your elders, for they are right. They know things that you cannot know. They can save you from many wrong things. Getting old is not for the young. There is a time for everything. You are young. Do the things of youth. Respect your elders and pray that you too are blessed to become an elder, one day.”



Now an elder spoke, “Then tell us about being an elder.”

Kukulkan regarded the man with warmth and respect, “It is for you to guide your people.” The visitor’s eyes roamed over the elders. “You have the knowledge your people need. Share it. Some may hear what you say and act upon it to their joy. Some may hear you yet not listen and it doing so lament their folly, but for them it may be too late.”



The chief had a second question. “Tell me about leadership.”

Kukulkan’s voice hardened, “Leadership is not about you. For I hear it in your question – the trace of you. Your sense of self – of being chief. Leadership is about people – your people. If you are to be a good leader you must first follow. Have I not just told you to follow the good words of your elders? To be a proper leader one must care.”

“Which is what the people come to me for.”

“And so Chief, ask yourself and not me; what do you offer your people? Leadership or caring? For with caring will come leadership – it is natural as sunset will follow sunrise. But with leadership, caring is not necessary. Therefore, which will you choose?”

The chief lapsed into silence.



The seer joined in. “Talk about caring.”

“Ahhh caring. Take care of the very young and the very old, for they are the future and the past. But do not do so to boast to all that *‘look how I take care of our people!’* for to do so will lay a curse upon you and tarnish what was once a blessing. To care is to do so because it is needed, not for the giver to seek elevation.”



A pottery maker stepped forward, clay still caked on her fingers, for she had heard of the visit and had come running. “What of creation? Of the things we make with our hands?”

“Creation is sacred,” Kukulkan said. “To make something with your hands is to echo the work of the universe. The pot that holds water, the basket that gathers fruit, the canoe that holds fishermen—these are prayers in motion. Do not underestimate the holiness of your craft, or of what you do; for what you do is sacred. Remember to give is twice blessed: it blesses you that make and give and it blesses those who receive and appreciate.”



A weaver, hunched with age, raised her voice. “You speak of pots and canoes and of baskets, I make baskets. But what of dreams?”

“Dreams are the language of the soul,” Kukulkan said. “They are whispers from the world beyond this one. Some carry meaning, others are mist. Pay attention to the ones that visit you more than once, for they are the ancestors with a message.”



Coughing a woman asked, “And what of sickness?”

Kukulkan turned to her. “Sickness is both shadow and teacher. It humbles; it slows. It reminds you that life is not owed, but gifted. Listen to your healer. And I say to the seer, heal with compassion. But remember, not all pain can be seen, and not all wounds bleed. It is for you to know both and attend each to their needs.”



A man stood tall, his skin markings declaring his position of importance – he was a protector of the people, a warrior. “What of war? What if we must fight? You speak of the very old and the very young, it is for us to defend!”

Kukulkan’s eyes darkened. “War is the language of those who have forgotten how to speak peace. Fight only to protect, never to conquer. And when you raise a weapon, do so knowing that it may not be you who returns home.

“But above all else, remember – you do not give life and so it is not yours to take. As you say it is for you to protect the very young and the very old and so if you must go to war, honour all dead yours and your enemies for they too are defending their own.”



Another warrior had an opinion on the matter and said so. "That may well be. But not everyone who comes in the cloak of friendship is a friend. The elders warn to be careful for though it looks like a fish it may well be fowl in disguise."

"The elders are elders because they are wise and it does you good to listen to them.

"Indeed, treat all strangers with care. Take care of them as you would one of your own, but be aware and take care lest they try to take advantage."

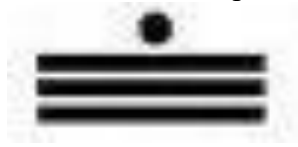


Triggered by the discussion on war, a boy no older than ten spoke, his voice unsure. “Tell us of fear. Should we be ashamed of it?”

Kukulkan turned gently toward him. “You are already on the path of the warrior; I see it in you. You will be a fine protector of your family and your people, one day – but not today.

“You hear talk of war and so you think of fear. This is natural. One who denies fear is a fool. Avoid them. Fear is the drumbeat before the hunt, the hush before a storm. It keeps you sharp, makes you cautious. But if you let it lead you always, you will never dance. Fear is not shameful. It is a warning—not a prison. It is the first step in conquering or managing who you are.

“Once you understand that then you have taken the first step to becoming what it is you are meant to be.”



A mother with a child at her breast asked, “What of love?”

“Ah... Love,” Kukulkan said with a soft smile as he gazed upon the child, his voice cooed, “is the first fire and the last. It binds you to one another, and to this world. But it is not a possession. Love that imprisons is not love. Love that frees—that, that is divine. When it finds you and it will, welcome it and cherish it.”



The father of the child had a question. “Kukulkan. I have children. This is my child. But my brother has none. Tell us about fatherhood, for one day he will have and it is good to know of such things.”

Kukulkan turned to the father, “You ask a wise question, but your question lacks completion. I shall reward you with more than you ask. One cannot be a father without there being a mother. Therefore, to be a mother or father is to hold the storm in one hand and calm in the other. It is not just the making of a child, but the shaping of a spirit.

“Motherhood is not only birth—it is tending, listening, knowing when to hold close and when to let go. Fatherhood is not only strength—it is presence, patience, and the teaching of balance. Both are needed for there to be stability. Both are needed for the child must be rooted in love, or they will grow with hollow roots, wild and at the will of any wind. Raise children who are not afraid to question, but wise enough to listen.”

Kukulkan looked at the child again. “...especially to the elders, for it will take your entire village to raise this child. They are not yours to own—they are gifts passing through you.”



A curious boy asked, “What of the stars? I like the stars.”

“Then you are the wisest among your people. Stars are your ancestors’ eyes,” Kukulkan said. “Each one a watcher, a witness, a whisper of memory. They tell stories if you are quiet long enough to listen. It is the ambition and honour of all good people to become an ancestor.”



A wood carver stepped forward. “And what of beauty?”

“Beauty is not always comfort,” Kukulkan replied. “It can be wild, painful, strange. Beauty is challenge. But it is always real. To find beauty in a storm, or a scar, is to understand the essence of this world. It is for you to see it and to make others see it. Especially those who are so blind that they refuse to see.”

The wood carver lowered his gaze, eyes shimmering. “You speak truth we’ve always known but dared not name,” he whispered.

“Such is the nature of humans. To see, yet not see.”



A shell worker stepped forward, the scent of sea salt still on her skin. “I too strive for beauty. I use the shells on the beach. The fishermen give me their shells. Tell us of the sea. Does it love us back? For sometimes it takes our men.”

Kukulkan’s face grew solemn. “The sea gives and takes without keeping score. It does not love or hate, but it remembers. It is ancient, older than memory. It does not love as you do—but it listens. It remembers every footstep on its shore, every song sung to the waves, every life offered and lost.

“It is not cruel. It is vast. And in its vastness, it holds both gift and grief. When the sea takes, it is not punishment. When it gives, it is not favour. It simply is. Yet, those who work with the sea, who honour its rhythms, who respect its silence—they are heard. They are held. The sea does not love in words, but in tides.

Treat it with reverence, and it will carry you. Disrespect it, and it will remind you of your smallness.”

Around her, others nodded. A fisherman made the sign of respect toward the sea. An elder pressed a hand to her heart. The wind shifted ever so slightly, and for a moment, the sound of the waves crashing on the shore felt like a lullaby.



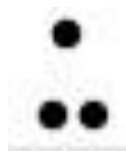
A girl who had not spoken all evening raised her hand. “Kukulkan, what is death?”

A silence fell.

Kukulcan knelt before her. “Death is not an end, but a return. You are not the body. Your body is the clay and Iyanola will one day reclaim that clay – for that is what the gods made you of. No. You are the breath that the gods breathed upon you – the spirit. When your breath leaves you, it returns to the great wind, the ever-moving spirit of the world.

“For the breath of the gods upon you is neither created or destroyed, just evolved as you seek to become an ancestor. Everyone wishes to become an ancestor yet all are afraid to die.

“Do not fear death, but do not seek it too early. There is a season for everything – a time to live and a time to die.”



Kukulcan waited, observing the child. There was more, he could and would wait. The child looked with shy eyes with the immortal. He held up his hand to pause the adults.

"You have another question." He prompted.

"Er..." She hesitated.

"Tell me." His voice was soothing.

"Well, if that is death, then..." She hesitated.

"What is life?" He finished and she nodded.

Kukulcan looked at the crowd. "Your children are wise, how much more so, your elders?"

He addressed the little one, his eyes soft upon the child.

“Life,” he said gently, “is the breath between the first cry and the final sigh. It is the river that flows through the body, the fire that dances in the spirit. Life is the story you are writing with your every step, every choice, every kindness—and yes, even your mistakes.

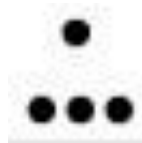
“Life is meant to be felt. It is laughter under trees, tears on cheeks, the ache of love lost and the joy of its return. It is learning, giving, stumbling, and rising. Life is not about never falling—it is about rising again and again, each time stronger, wiser.

“You ask what life is?” He smiled. “It is now. It is this moment. You, standing before me, brave enough to ask.”

He placed a hand over her heart.

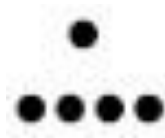
“It is also here. Do not forget to live from this place.”

The child grinned at him. It was all the answer he needed. He grinned back.



A truculent teenager had a question “Ancestors you talk about them all the time! So! Tell us of the ancestors!”

Kukulcan closed his eyes for a long moment as if to absorb the energy of the youth. “The ancestors walk with you. Their voices speak in the rustle of leaves; their breath rides the wind. They are not gone—as long as they are remembered in the stories, the names, the practices you preserve. Honour them not by carvings in stone alone, but by living well—by carrying forward what was wise, and laying down what no longer serves. Their blood flows in your veins. You are their continuation, the prayer they once spoke into the firelight.”



Kukulcan rose slowly, his eyes sweeping across the gathered faces. He straightened to his full height. “The time of speaking is done,” he said.

The people stood, silent now, they had asked their questions. There was no more to say. The sky had turned indigo, stars beginning to wink through the clouds. Kukulcan raised his eyes to the mighty Atabey. “The time has come for me to leave.”

The people wailed, they wanted him to stay. The wind stirred as though listening. Far above, the twin mountains of Atabey and Yocahu stood like silent guardians beneath the starlit sky.

“There are others waiting,” he gave a soft almost sad smile. “There are people on other islands that I must visit – Wadadli and Siba and Hayti, other people who will raise their voices to the sky and wonder if the heavens ever hear them.”

“Will you come back?” A small boy asked as he struggled to control his trembling voice.

“There is a time for all things. This is my time with you. Soon it will be the time for others. As it is now time for you to be small, so too one day it will be time for you to be an elder.

“Will I return? Time is a forward thing.”

With that, Kukulkan turned and began to climb. With every step he shed his human form, scales replacing skin, wings unfurling once more. By the time he reached the summit, he was fully serpent, glorious and glinting in the starlight. He paused, looking back one final time at the people of Iyanola and found them looking up, back at him. Then, with a powerful beat of his wings, he soared into the night sky.

It was not a day that many would soon forget.

“He’ll be with us,” The seer whispered. “In the air, in the water, in the trees. Watching.”¹

¹ For the Kalinago Atabey or Atabera for Petit Piton and Yocahu for Gros Piton. The Pitons are two mountainous volcanic plugs, volcanic spires, located on the Caribbean Island of Saint Lucia. Petit Piton is 743 m (2,438 ft) high and Gros Piton is 798.25 m (2,618.9 ft) high.

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Iyanola, meaning ‘Land of the Iguana’ is the Kalinago name for the Caribbean Island of Saint Lucia.

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The Kalinago, misnamed as Caribs by Europeans, are one of the indigenous people of the Lesser Antilles of the Caribbean.

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Kukulkan is the serpent deity of Maya mythology.