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DREAMTIME AND DREAMWORK

Decoding the Language of the Night

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Ancient and Native Peoples' Dreams

Like myths, dreams express our inner states of mind. Also like myths, they serve both the individual and society. Because dreams are fashioned from our wishes and memories, they are particularly responsive to a culture's values and dynamics. At innumerable points along the way from the nighttime experience to the story of the dream we tell another person, a dream can change. The ways in which these changes take place provide fascinating glimpses into the ways in which we internalize cultural priorities and patterns.[1]

Dreams—however they are related—are extremely important in what anthropologist A. I. Hallowell called the "behavioral environment" in which individuals acquire their basic sense of orientation to the world.[2] In this chapter, I shall explore the meanings of dreams in various cultural settings.

The Dream, the Foreigner, and the Story

The missionary W. B. Grubb, working among the Lengua Indians of South America's Gran Chaco, was roused from a peaceful slumber by a great commotion. Grubb awakened to find Indians standing accusingly over him. Breathless, one of them gesticulated to the headman, who then explained to Grubb that the breathless man had run over fifty miles to accuse the missionary of stealing a pumpkin from his garden. When Grubb protested that he had never set foot in his accuser's village, the runner said that he had seen Grubb steal the pumpkin in a dream, and therefore demanded that Grubb duly compensate him for the stolen property.

We can presume that as a missionary Grubb wished to be known for his generosity, one of the virtues he may well have hoped to teach by example to these Brazilians tribespeople. If there had been no hope of being compensated, would the native have dreamed of Grubb and run the fifty miles in order to be paid? Had Grubb not been a European missionary, would the native have dreamed that he stole a pumpkin? And if he did, would he have run fifty miles? Whatever the meanings of the dream, Grubb, by paying for the pumpkin, was forced to behave as though the dream of the runner had not been imaginary. We can only wonder what effect Grubb's payment might have had on the beliefs in dreams in the village and what happened to subsequent missionaries and fieldworkers in the area.

This anecdote illustrates some key problems in understanding dreams in other cultures. First, the foreigner can change the usual context of dream-telling by his or her very presence. Also the presence of a foreigner can contribute to the dream. I do not know of any anthropologist who has collected the dreams that have been about him or her, but such a study would be provocative.

Furthermore, our usual ideas about what dreams can and cannot do simply do not hold up to scrutiny in other cultural contexts. Finally, the telling of dreams is affected by the specific context of teller, listener, and—where appropriate—audience. If we lost sight of the fact that a dream, no less than a play or a musical performance, is never the same twice, we miss much of the wonderment of dreams. As George Devereux and other psychoanalysts have observed, fieldworkers inevitably disrupt the field they study.[3] That which social scientists might consider unwanted interference, psychoanalysts have forced into an instrument of understanding and therapeutic healing: the transference. Because they provide insight into the psychodynamics of informants and of those one is seeking to know, the feelings and initially incomprehensible reactions of the fieldworker as a partner in a relationship are indispensable for knowledge of the field situation. They constitute sources of understanding for anthropological work just as they do for psychoanalytic work.

Dreams as Religious Experiences

Nighttime dreams and daytime visions are frequently prized as religious experiences. As such, they confer special powers upon the dreamers, providing solace to the injured and good fortune to those who believe. Father LeJeune,

an eighteenth-century Jesuit missionary, writes that for the Iroquois the dream is divinely inspired.[4] Another missionary of that era commented that "Dreams are to savages what the Bible is to us, the source of Divine revelation—with this important difference that they can produce this revelation at will by the medium of dreams."[5]

In the anthropological literature of North American Indians, there are countless examples of dreams that impelled the dreamer to take action. Father LeJeune writes:

> A warrior, having dreamed that he had been taken prisoner in battle, anxious to avert the fatal consequences of such a dream, called all his friends together and implored them to help him in this misfortune. He begged them to prove themselves true friends by treating him as if he were an enemy. They therefore rushed upon him, stripped him naked, fettered him, and dragged him through the streets with the usual shouts and insults, and even made him mount the scaffold. . . . He thanked them warmly, believing that this imaginary captivity would insure him against being made prisoner in reality.

In another example, Father LeJeune tells of a man who dreamed he saw his hut on fire and hounded his neighbors until they obligingly burned it down for him.[6]

Many ethnographic accounts of North American Indian tribes show that wishes expressed in dreams were acted out in some way by the dreamer upon awakening—or acted out by others. If, for example, an Iroquois dreams of giving a feast, he will arrange to give one when he awakens. This the Iroquois called *Ondinok*, a secret wish of the soul that is expressed in a dream. Indeed, Sigmund Freud also maintained that dreams are the expressions of unconscious wishes!

Several other North American tribes held similar beliefs about the relation between wishes and dreams. The Yuma believed that a child can only be conceived if a man has recently dreamed of some guardian spirit or other symbol of potency. Women, for their part, could resist conception by refusing to desire a child. The Cherokee believed that if a man dreams he has been bitten by a snake, upon awakening he must follow the same treatment as if he had really been bitten, for if the snake bite in the dream had been caused by sorcerers, it could become inflamed and even cause death if proper measures were not taken upon awakening.[7]

Such Indian tribes as those of the Plains and Eastern Woodlands, the lower Colorado River, Central California, and the Northwest Coast believed

in guardian spirits. These religious beliefs were largely sustained by dreams. The guardian spirits who appeared in dreams granted individuals special powers: prowess in war, skill in hunting, and facility in lovemaking.[8]

These dreams or visions were regarded as among life's most important experiences. The beliefs in dreams afforded the Indians protection and guidance; as part of their behavioral environment, dreams affected behavior. As religious experiences, dreams were allowed to have powerful consequences for both tribal and personal identity, as well as for the inculcation of cultural values. Cultural attitudes toward dreams, like religious beliefs, are patterned. Among some tribes, both past and present, dreamed snake bites are treated in reality just as they would have been had they actually occurred. As sociologist Emile Durkheim has argued, what has real effects cannot be summarily dismissed as simply illusion.[9]

The Vision Quest

One of the clearest expressions of the patterning of dreams is the vision quest.[10] Anthropologist J. S. Lincoln tells of one Menonmini Indian who, after fasting for eight days, dreamed of

> a tall man with a big red mouth [who] appeared from the east. The solid earth bent under his steps as though it was a marsh. He said, I have pity on you. You shall never live to see your own grey hairs, and those of your children. You shall never be in danger if you make yourself a war club such as I have and always carry it with you wherever you go. When you are in trouble, pray to me and offer me tobacco. Tobacco is what pleases me. Having said this, the dream visitor disappeared.[11]

Such a report is typical of visitation dreams and visions sought by adolescents who, in order to become adults, were required to dream. Among the Plains Indians, adolescents went out in search of a dream or vision promising the protection of a guardian spirit for the remainder of their lives. They sometimes had to dream a protective song and return to sing it. In contrast, Cheyenne men waited until they were adults before seeking visions; if they failed, they would fast and inflict wounds on themselves.

As Wallace notes, for the Mohave "all special abilities of funds of knowledge were to be had by dreaming and by dreaming alone."[12] When European explorers and settlers appeared with rifles, these new weapons had to be

dreamed into the creation myth, the source of all knowledge of their world.[13] Dreams were the one topic of which the nearby Yuman tribes of the Gila River constantly talked, the most significant aspect of their life.[14] As Last Star succinctly said, "Everyone who is prosperous or successful must have dreamed of something. It is not because he is a good worker that he is prosperous, but because he has dreamed."[15] All powers—whether leadership, physical strength and courage, or skill in conceiving children, singing songs, and obtaining information clairvoyantly—could only be obtained through dreams.

Shamanic Initiation Dreams

The English work *shaman* is derived from the Tungus term *saman,* meaning "inner heat," perhaps referring to the internalized magical and spiritual powers of these Siberian "masters of ecstasy."[16] Because of the similarities between shamanism in those areas and in the Americas, the Pacific, and elsewhere, the term *shamanism* is now used to designate these practices wherever they may occur.

Shamans rarely select themselves; they are called into the profession in ways that are culturally determined. Dreams are a common form of the call. Often, the dreamer is reluctant to acquiesce but becomes convinced that there is no alternative, as an account from the Paviotso tribe indicates:

> When Rosie's father had been dead about eighteen months, she started to dream about him. She dreamed that he came to her and told her to be a shaman. Then a rattlesnake came to her in dreams and told her to get eagle feathers, white paint, wild tobacco. The snake gave her songs that she sings when she is curing. . . . Now she dreams about the rattlesnake quite frequently and she learns new songs and is told how to cure sick people in this way.[17]

In Siberia, shamans have initiation dreams that follow clear patterns. Often, exhibiting symptoms of odd behavior or illness, they dream of being whisked off to the sky. In their sleep, their body is carried off to faraway places, then torn from limb to limb. Their bones may be torn from their joints and their eyes from their sockets, and the fluids may be drained from their bodies. Then all the parts are reassembled and the new shaman, to whom this dismemberment is explained by spiritual beings, is reborn.[18]

The Buriats of Siberia pattern their shamanic visions in a similar way but maintain that the initiate is cooked as well as dismembered. Teleut women

become shamans only after dreaming that their bodies are cut up by unknown men and boiled in a large pot. According to a Yakut informant, the shamani initiate dreams of being mutilated by a black devil, after which a lance i thrust through the head and the jawbone is cut off. An Avam Samoyed initiat claims he was carried to the underworld. Coming to a mountain pass, he en countered a man tending a kettle on a blazing fire. The man grabbed hin with a hook, cut off his head, minced his body, and put the entire mass into pot to boil for three years. Finally, the man fished out what he could find forged an iron head for the new body, found bones floating in a river an pieced them together, covering it all with new flesh, then sent the new shaman on his way. During his journey back, he met spiritual beings who taught hin curing techniques. Then he awakened, and shortly thereafter he began sha manizing.[19]

Similar dreams and visions of dismemberment followed by rebirth or renewal are common in various parts of South America and the Pacific Among the Dyak of Borneo, the *manangs* (Dyak shamans) report dreams of their heads being cut off and their brains being removed and washed so that they can think clearly. Similarly, Australian aborigine shamanic initiates envision their bodies being cut up and their viscera replaced.

In many shamanic calls, dreams play a central role, and the telling of the dream becomes the form in which the community hears of the call and evaluates it. For Australian aborigines, The Dreaming, or dreamtime, constitutes an eternally present life principle, a mythic source of life that must be sustained and renewed by human activities. Rituals and ceremonies allow the dreamtime to be present in religious belief and daily practice. Knowledge of one's world thus depends on dreamtime, somewhat like Plato's world of ideal forms. As with the Mohave, dreams are a source of knowledge; but in Australia there are even more links between time, dreams, and the mythic ancestors. The Australian aborigines believe that dreamtime is a historical principle that organizes time and space, that it was created by the mythical ancestors at the beginning of things and can be tapped through dreaming.[20]

Gates of Ivory and Gates of Horn

For my purposes, I am considering as dreams nighttime dreams, hypnagogic imagery, drug-evoked visions, waking reveries, and anything else that gets told as a dream.[21] Among native people, dreams often are a kind of shorthand for experiences in which contact with spiritual beings is made; thus they are a

potentially religious experience. They become techniques of ecstasy forged into a narrative by the individual who experiences them, are told to others, and are acted upon. Dreaming is among those techniques by which mortals enter into relations with superhuman beings. The word *ecstasy* is derived from the Greek root *ekstasis,* meaning "to stand outside oneself." This is precisely what the dreamer often is believed to do in a dream, particularly when the body stays behind and the soul wanders.[22]

Visions, I have argued, can be conveniently considered as truthful dreams, a category found in many cultures.[23] Dreams raise precisely the same questions concerning their truth and falsehood as do the data from sense impressions. And since truth and falsehood are cultural categories, the preoccupation with truthful dreams has strong cultural roots. In the Western tradition, it reaches back to the ancient Greeks, who expressed the wish that certain dreams be clear, God-sent, and responsive to human suffering and supplications. Truthful dreams, by their very nature, involve divine responses to human needs, even when the dreams reveal sickness or misfortune.

For the Greeks of the Homeric period, dreams passing through the Gates of Ivory were "true," in contrast to the "false" dreams that passed through the Gates of Horn. Gates remind us of the best-known gatekeepers of them all: St. Peter, who screens aspiring souls waiting to be admitted to Heaven, and the Greek deity Chiron, who ferries the souls of the dead across the River Styx and keeps track of admissions into the lands of the dead.

In all societies of which we have any knowledge, ideas about the dead have been profoundly influenced by the cultural notions of dreams and what happens during sleep. Generally speaking, there are two kinds of belief: either the dead come to visit, or the living wander to the other side. Such beliefs mirror those about dreams: either the soul goes wandering in sleep, leaving the body behind, or spirits come to visit the soul in the sleeping body.

Truthful dreams were often associated by the Greeks with a sense of clarity. In contrast, confusing or disjointed dreams passed through the Gates of Horn—the realm of mortals rather than of deities—and were not trustworthy. Recognizing truthful dreams depended on special faculties: purity of the soul, second sight, and other avenues for discernment. However, message dreams, such as those we find in ancient Mesopotamia and Greece, depended primarily on the dreamer's social station; only shamans, chiefs, prophets, and members of the royalty and clergy could obtain direct communication from deities. Ordinary humans could not obtain these badges of political and religious power.

When I was working in Morocco, for instance, my field assistants

pointed out to me repeatedly that *ruya* (truthful dreams) were the manifestations of inner purity and required leading a saintly life. They were conceived as the rewards of a good person; Allah would not send them to the heathen.[24] There is a certain circularity about these beliefs: powerful men and women have true dreams because they are favored by Allah, and Allah's grace and favor is in turn demonstrated by their political or religious prominence. Having true dreams is a sign of election. However, some other traditions held that high station sufficed to qualify for knowledge from the other world.

Anthropologists and sociologists writing in the nineteenth century assumed that native (or so-called primitive) religion arose through dreams and visions and, further, that dreams provided the concepts on whch ideas about the soul were based. Psychologist Wilhelm Wundt went so far as to propose that dream images produced the notion of an eternal soul.

Sex, Dreams, and Demons

Even though the rationalist tradition shies away from using the soul concept, cultural mythology is laden with stories of dreamed sexual unions with deities and other superhuman beings. Merlin supposedly was born from the union of Charlemagne's daughter (a nun) and an incubus, or demon. Other people supposedly born from such unions were Alexander the Great, Plato, Scipio Africanus, William the Conqueror, and the entire population of Cyprus![25]

Western tradition holds that sexual intercourse with demons disguised to make themselves seductive is a cause of possession. Initially these demonic spirits appear to be friendly, desirable, and seductive; then they turn into monstrous beings whose lasciviousness knows no bounds and who thoroughly ravish the unsuspecting dreamers. Among the Dyaks, infants who die are believed to have been carried off by incubi who have had intercourse with their mothers in dreams. The shaman must pursue these unseen creatures and do battle with them in a public ritual.

Demonic possession is common throughout Africa, the Mediterranean, and many other areas. When the dreamer awakens dramatically out of sorts, or when an individual engages in uncharacteristically negative behavior, a diagnosis of possession is often given. Therapy consists of persuading the demon to leave, or in forcibly expelling, or exorcising, it.

In Morocco, thousands of people make yearly pilgrimages to sanctuaries in search of cures for these dream illnesses. Here, as in the temples once dedicated to the healing deity Asklepios in the Greek world, dreamers await the

dream that is to cure them, either by indicating that the patron saint (or other holy person) of the sanctuary has evicted the demon or by directing a course of action that will be therapeutic. The acting out of commands believed to be provided in these dreams resembles the acting out of dreams by such past and present tribes as those in Siberia, North America, and the Pacific.

Inner and Outer Worlds

As we have seen, all cultures have their own notions of inside and outside, ideas about orientation with respect to dreams in which superhuman beings play important roles. In other words, dreams are equally necessary in the formation of concepts and experiences of both self and society.

Often, dreams are thought to be conditions in which the soul goes outside the body, or in which a spirit ventures inside the dreamer. Dreams passing through the Gates of Ivory and the dreams sent by God or Allah are all communications from divinities who respond to the wishes of mortals. These dreams validate political or religious power, provide instructions for healing, or answer questions posed by individuals or by groups. In Christian belief, there is a dichotomy between rationally clear, God-sent dreams and those that are demonic or Satan-sent. In Islam, however, this dichotomy is somewhat mitigated by the cult of saints who can send dreams and by the far greater variety of powerful demons.

What the natural state of the dream may be is hard to determine, just as we cannot really know the status of our natural body—our physical state stripped of decoration, garb, and social concept. It is obvious that unadorned nakedness does not mean the same thing in the Nubian desert as it does on the London or New York stage. There is always a cultural context for nudity; therefore there can never be any such thing as a natural category of nudity, which is no more a natural category than a dream.

We necessarily assign meanings to perceptions of this illusively natural state. As a result, neither our perceptions of dreams nor our perceptions of nudity can ever be purely natural. Both are influenced by our cultural values. As Shakespeare wrote (in *The Tempest,* IV:i), we are indeed such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with sleep. Reclaimed and recreated as illusions from the inchoate world of forgotten impressions, dream stories are fleeting and evanescent. Yet they do complete our lives, a third of which is spent in sleep.

Experiences in dreams are "re-membered," assembled again just as arms

and legs—members—might be put back on a body. This dream experience is, furthermore, so private as to be impossible for anyone but the dreamer to remember. Once remembered, however, it can be brought into the social world, reborn (somewhat like the Siberian shaman), and told as a story—a story of feeling states, of wishes, and of relationships. Dreams bear the marks of the dreamer's personality: his or her age, gender, social class, education, priorities, and lifestyle. As Freud observed, dreams reflect "the events and experiences of [one's] whole previous life." We dream of what we have sensed, seen, said, wished, and done. Especially in dreams "do the remnants of our waking thoughts and deeds move and stir within the soul."[26] And since this is so, dreams are no less dependent upon cultural values, patterns, and processes than are the activities of human experience that are carried out in waking consciousness.