Dreams: Cross-Cultural Perspectives.

Since the development of systematic research on different phases of sleep by Aserinsky and Kleitman in the 1950s, it has been known that not only all humans but indeed all mammals dream. They do so several times a night and in specific stages of sleep. Dreaming is primarily associated with Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep. Human societies vary widely in the attention they pay to dreams, the degree to which they cultivate memory of dreams, whether or not dreams are shared, how much specialized practice of dream interpretation exists, what catalogue of dream symbols there may be and so forth. In the contemporary United States, it appears, dreams are generally dismissed as unimportant. This is part of a Western philosophical tradition that can be traced back to Aristotle. However, there also exists a contrary trend: there are dream groups and persons who keep dream diaries. Specialized interests in dreams exist, specifically in connection with certain forms of psychotherapy, particularly in the Freudian and Jungian traditions. There are also popular dream books, some purporting to be of ancient or medieval origins; these are sometimes used as aids to gambling, predicting the future or for other forms of divination. While we understand that dreams are intimate, private productions of individuals, it is clear that their content, experience, use and interpretation are decisively influenced by the culture in which the dreamer lives.

Dreaming in Traditional Societies. In contrast to the devaluation of dreams in Western rationalist philosophies, dreams are assigned a special status in many traditional societies,
including those to which our own is heir. Dreams are reported and interpreted in the Bible, as for example in the story of Joseph and his brothers and Joseph's adventures in Egypt. There are traditions of dream interpretations in Greek and Roman Classical Antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages. Other classical traditions, such as that of the Upanishads of India also accord importance to dreams.

Anthropologists and others have long collected and reported dreams and theories of dreaming from traditional societies in all parts of the world. In one of the earliest comparative studies of dreams, J.S. Lincoln (1935) collected dreams from eight Native American groups. He distinguished between individual, unsought dreams, and what he termed "culture-pattern dreams." Such dreams have major symbolic significance for the individual and often for the society as well. They may be considered to be supernatural revelations and reaffirm traditional understandings or launch innovations, in both religious and political institutions. The manifest content of dreams is rarely taken literally; instead there may be rules for the interpretation of dreams and various dream elements may be assigned symbolic meaning. It is important to note that there is no universal consensus on what specific elements mean. For example, Tedlock (1987) notes how the same dream of being given food might be assigned opposite interpretations among two Native American groups. Among the Quiché Maya of Guatemala it is thought to be a good dream, while among the Zuni of New Mexico, it would be interpreted as predicting death.
Theories of dreaming vary widely and are part of a larger understanding of events and experiences, of cosmology and the relations between human beings and other beings in the universe. In Haitian folk belief, dreams are important sources of information about reasons for "bad luck" (illness, job loss, or other critical events), to be interpreted by a specialist, who finds in the dreams messages from spirits or dead ancestors. The very experience of having (or remembering) many dreams is understood as a sign of supernatural calls for rituals, sacrifices, initiations or other actions. Some of these actions may take place within the dream itself.

Since the individual is often thought of as consisting of various components, often translated as "souls," the question arises of what part of the person does the dreaming. In Haitian folk belief, the dream is the experience of one of two "souls." With regard to the Mekeo of New Guinea, Stephen speaks of the "dream-self," which leaves the body and has the experiences of the dream. Where dreams are calls to ritual actions among Haitians, for the Mekeo they are primarily omens, often announcing the death of someone. Among these people, the very act of dreaming may be considered dangerous.

In studying dreams cross-culturally, many contextual questions may be asked: Are the events of dreams thought to be real, that is, equal in some way to actions of the waking individual? If so, how must they affect the actions to be taken by the individual? How do the experiences of the dreamer relate to the dreamer's self? Are they predictive? Do they require
action? Are the accounts to be shared with others or to be kept secret? Are dreams a means of communication with the dead, with ancestors, with supernaturals? Guides to dealing with life situations? Are dreams used for problem solving? Are there specialists in the interpretation of dreams and do they play a significant role in the group--perhaps as diagnosticians or healers?

Some examples may be helpful. Among the people of the Columbian village of Arimatima, we are told that many dream symbols refer to the death of relatives. At the same time, to dream of the death of one's mother, of dead people, graves and so forth, is a prediction of happiness and to dream of other people's death portends wealth. A somewhat similar view of dream symbols is held by the Pokoman of Guatemala. Here it is also believed that dreams are the real actions of the soul. Among some people, dream sharing is considered of great importance. We are told of the Alorese of Indonesia that a household may be roused one or more times at night when some member wishes to share a dream. Dream sharing also is of importance among the Mekeo of New Guinea, where dreams are intimately involved with magic.

It has often been noted that, as narratives, myths and dreams share certain characteristics. In some societies, for example among the Hopi people of the American Southwest, as studied by Dorothy Eggnan, myths are used in the construction of "dream stories", which consist of the remembered content of a dream together with the dreamer's associations to it. The
relationship between myths and dreams may be a reciprocal one, that is, mythic material may be used in the construction of dreams and elements from the dreams of some individuals may be accepted into the mythic repertoir of a community. This is the case among Haitian participants in the vodou religion. Here, too, at least some dreams are treated as equal to waking actions, as accounts of actions by the spirits or ancestors, warning of dangers and so forth.

It is known that life experiences ("day residues") find their way into dreams. In addition, elements of concern in daily life enter into the manifest content of dreams. In some societies, action taken by the dreamer in a dream may be thought of as dealing with a given situation, particularly ones involving supernaturals. They are then thought of as equivalent in reality status to waking actions.

The social uses of dreams. As noted, the interpretation of dreams may be used by specialist in assisting individuals in the resolution of problems, including the healing of illnesses. In Haiti, as in the other AfroAmerican regions of the Caribbean and South America, dreams may be interpreted as calling for initiation into religious groups (Vodou, Santería, Xango, etc.). Among the Iroquois, dreams used to be interpreted as "the wishes of the soul" and called for the accomplishment of actions that the dream proposed. It was thought that if these actions were not carried out, the dreamer would suffer. Since, however, the wishes of the soul were not always clear, diagnostic and interpretive procedures had to be carried.
Among North American Indian groups, a guardian spirit was sought by adolescent boys through the "Vision quest." This involved isolation, fasting and other elements of sensory deprivation. It is difficult to distinguish whether these visions were indeed dreams or waking dreams (visions, hallucinations). Among the Ojibwa a series of four night dreams was required to become a medicine man or conjurer. It is clear that in these cases preparation and anticipation were able to influence the content of the dreams or visions and the achievement of the desired goal. The quest and the dream was part of the socialization of young men, giving them the kind of confidence they required in their mature lives. The North American vision quest is part of a world-wide complex which d'Andrade has referred to as "the use of dreams to seek and control supernatural power."

In situations of rapid social change, dreams have often played an important role in the development of leaders, their innovations and their revelations of new social programs. This is partly related to the creative imagination that dreams give play to, and partly to the authority dreams have where they are interpreted as supernatural messages. The so-called "cargo cults" of Melanesia and New Guinea offer a number of examples of such dream inspirations.

While dreams occur spontaneously and most are not remembered, interpreted or consciously controlled by the dreamer, it is clear that there are cultural styles of dreaming and that persons can learn to control their dreams. "Lucid dreaming" is a
process whereby the individual is aware of dreaming and controls the course of the dream. This is a learned skill and is often associated with shamanism. More generally, as is particularly clear with regard to so-called "culture-pattern dreams," both the content and the very experience of dreams is influenced by what people believe about dreams and by their experience of daily life. The experience of the dream is often transformed by the very act of recording or telling it, putting it into words and often partially analyzing it in the process, according to prevailing beliefs.

Group Studies. The study of dreams of individuals by anthropologists have often been influenced by psychoanalytic approaches and has been conducted as part of life history research, or, more rarely, of psychotherapy. As such, the analysis of symbols and interpretation has played an important role. G. Devereux, both anthropologist and psychoanalyst, worked as therapist with a Plains Indian veteran. He notes that in people of that cultural tradition, profuse dreaming may be seen not as a sign of anxiety, as in some other groups, but as part of the tradition of the vision quest. By contrast, some social science studies of dreams from given populations have focussed instead on the manifest content of dreams and considered the relationship between it and some aspects of the sample population's situation. For example, in studies of groups in conflict situations, anxiety over being attacked appears clearly. In the 1930s, L. Sharp collected a large number of dreams among the Yir Yoront, a group of Australian Aborigines. Analyzing this
sample more than 30 years later, D. Schneider found that in the majority of dreams with themes of aggression it was the dreamer who was the victim, expressing a fear of being attacked rather than a wish to harm others. Similarly, in a study of Jewish and Arab children in Israel and on the West Bank, during the years 1980-84, Y. Bilu found that these children expressed in their dreams the themes of the ongoing conflict. Again, the children tended to dream of themselves as victims rather than perpetrators of aggression. Such dreams were more frequent among the Arab children than among the Jewish children.

Dreams and dreaming offer fertile sources of information about psychological development and adaptation, cultural differences and similarities, the use of intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions to control the environment, human creativity and innovation, means of self expression and communication and many more aspects of psychological functioning.

References


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