

## Dreams and Shamans in sub-Himalayan Tribal Groups

Mario Giampà, Stefano Beggiora, Luca Caldironi

### Abstract

On the importance of dreams, a Shaman of the Saora tribe used to say: "I once had a teacher, an uncle of mine, a kuran (shaman) in my birinda (clan); I could easily forget everything he taught me, if I haven't already, but I could never forget what I learned in my dreams because it's engraved in my mind forever." The basic task of the Shaman is to guide the tribe and keep its anxiety at bay by exorcising it. Other basic tasks are carried out by a guiding spirit. All this takes place through dreams, trance, dream-like thoughts, myths and visions (C, on the grid).

**Key words:** Bion's grid, elements alfa and beta, dream, mystic experience, knowledge

*<<The human being, despite similarities to other human beings, may not, through over – or under – sensitivity, have an apparatus adequate to thinking the thoughts. He becomes aware of these thoughts usually through the medium of what is ordinarily known to him as religious awe, and is variously expressed as incarnation, evolution of godhead, platonic forms, Krishna, mystic experience, inspiration, and the like. Thus the source of emission of the received or evolved thoughts is felt as external, Godgiven, derived from a particular person or occasion, phrase, book, painting, awareness of a constant conjunction.>>*

W. R. Bion, in *Cogitations*, p. 306

This is an analysis of results obtained from in-the-field research carried out over a period of years among tribal groups in Orissa, India, Lanjia Saora, Kutia Khond and surrounding communities, as well as the Adi, Apatani, Monpa and groups bordering on Arunachal Pradesh between Bhutan, China and Myanmar, up to the central Himalayan arc in the districts of Lepcha, Sikkim and Chepan and Tamang in Nepal. These tribal communities have a typically shamanic magical/religious concept of the universe. Shamans, in populations whose ancient traditions are still intact, are capable of self-induced states of trance and direct communication with the underworld. They are not only capable of uncovering and resolving the effects of any danger that may be threatening their villages, they can also discover the principal causes, usually of a supernatural origin.

Rapport with the supernatural is extremely important in their daily lives. Their day-to-day gestures -- not just that of the Shaman but also the layman and common man -- seem to be focused much more on maintaining a balance with the world of spirits that permeates the nature surrounding them, than on tending to personal relationships within their communities. From the moment they rise, their day is punctuated by offerings to their ancestors, rituals performed before working in the fields, practices regarding the taking of food, decisions on whether to cross through places considered

sacred or taboo, in a constant effort to ensure that the natural and supernatural are in harmony. Likewise at night, during sleep, dreams, oneiric activity itself, is considered to be a visual manifestation of the mystical universe surrounding them.

There is widespread belief that while dreaming the soul can detach from the body and wander from village to village in the empirical reality of night, or, by going through the appropriate gates, can travel to the underworld, generally thought to be inhabited by the deceased. In the underworld, as well as on the earth's surface, the individual may meet, communicate with, and have visions of, the spirits of the deceased, dieties and demons. However, while normal people's dreams are often not remembered or are confused and difficult to interpret, shamans' dreams are of an entirely different nature.

It seems, in fact, that shamans are somehow able to control their own oneiric activity, weaving a kind of logical thread from one dream to the other. So shamans often think in terms of an oneiric continuum, causing them to lead double lives. In the oneiric state they celebrate weddings, rituals and friendships from which they learn and develop their knowledge. It's amazing to witness with what vivid evocative force shamans are able to recall events and visions experienced in dreams, which, being the mystical manifestation of nature itself, are thought of as a substantial part of contingent reality, to the extent that when conversing with a Shaman it's never really clear whether what is being described actually happened or took place in a dream. This applies to the phenomenon of spontaneous or self-induced trance states as well, inasmuch they are moments of altered consciousness in which the Shaman becomes a bridge between earth and beyond. There is a close link therefore, between trance and dream states.

Consider the fact that the vocation of Shaman is never assumed as a result of inner conversion or personal choice on the part of an individual, but is always the result of a sort of supernatural 'call'. This call usually arrives during puberty and the young person is 'possessed' or the world of spirits manifests itself in a dream. Various spirits appear and torment and tease the young man (or young woman) in question. The one who is superior to the others and expresses a wish to become the young person's guiding spirit during initiation, prevails. After this experience the young person displays anxiety and occasionally has fits, sleeping problems and terrifying, recurring, oreiric visions. Cases of permanent states of confusion, or even catalepsy are not rare. These young people often disappear into the forest for a few days. They report having been kidnapped by spirits and undergoing a kind of authentic 'initiatory voyage'. It is a state of temporary madness that ends when an elder shaman 'interprets' it as a call to the profession. This initiatory rite enables the young person to overcome the state of confusion and begin his/her new vocation within the community. If he/she refuses, the state of madness persists and leads to total 'alienation' and death within a short space of time.

Among the Lanjia Saora in Orissa, the guiding spirit manifests itself to the young person with the aim of uniting sexually with him/her. Obviously female spirits visit males and vice versa. The young person generally finds this experience terrifying and

tries to flee. When a young person is consecrated as a Shaman the celebration that takes place is exactly like a wedding between the initiate and the guiding spirit.

This theme of a voyage and spiritual kidnapping also appears among the Tamang, Chepang, Rong and Lepcha tribes and other Himalayan tribes. The kidnapping spirit that appears during the oneiric state is a kind of ancestral forest spirit, and therefore of nature itself. Having enticed the young person into the darkest depths of the forest, demons and evil spirits kill him/her, tearing the body to pieces and ripping out the organs one by one. This is a kind of initiatory death, after which, limb by limb, the spirits recompose the initiate's body, who then returns to the village, reborn. It's interesting to note that the new Shaman doesn't recall this frightening experience immediately. Slowly through dreams he/she is able to piece the events together. This is the preparatory stage which in future will enable him/her to recognize the evil spirits and demons that attack various parts of the body, inasmuch as he has had previous experience of it. When a patient comes to him, he will know which evil spirit to make offerings to in order to cure him. Also of interest is the fact that in the Himalayas the earthly spirit that kidnaps the initiate is none other than the legendary Yeti, the spirit of woodlands and mountains. The Bhut Monpa, growers and gatherers who also do some hunting, live on the eastern side of the Indian Himalayas on the border between China and Bhutan. Their totem and clan element is the spirit of the tiger, and it is this animal, in fact, that torments the initiate's sleep. The spirit of the tiger is the manifestation of the ancestral forest spirit. It is he who takes the young shaman into the jungle to be initiated. All animals can be hunted except for the animal par excellence: older than man himself and the living spirit of nature, the tiger. It's interesting to see that the only one allowed to hunt him, and in fact is called upon to do so, is the shaman during the initiation period, almost like a trial of passage. He extracts the jawbone with all the teeth which he uses as a kind of magic weapon. It enables him to evoke the power of his guiding spirit, the ancestral tiger, which will accompany and protect him along his way.

During the initiation period an elder shaman guides the apprentice, consecrating him before the community and teaching him the mechanical skills he needs to perform rituals (drum beating, offers and so forth), but his/her real education -- from going into trance and controlling dreams up to gaining knowledge of the universe itself -- is imparted by a mystical teacher during altered consciousness and by meditation on it afterwards.

For example a Khond Shaman in Orissa maintains that he learned everything he knows about medicinal plants and their various uses through dreams. By night his guiding spirit appeared to him and explained exactly where and when to search. At daybreak he went into the jungle, recognized the spot and there was the plant.

The subject of dreaming takes on a wider, more collective scope among the Saora tribes who paint animal or murals for exorcistic purposes. When a house is possessed or infested by spirits it sometimes becomes necessary to produce a mural honoring the dead in order to placate a deceased ancestor. This is a very delicate operation as the family must be depicted as it is, intersected by depictions of how it was when the ancestor was still alive. All of his/her effects and any important particulars must be

included. It is therefore necessary to dream. The Shaman himself or the head of the family, or sometimes both, sleep with their heads near the wall to be painted the next day. Their dreams and a joint analysis of what went on during the night affords them the guidelines needed to carry out the anital. When they finish the family members are allowed to intervene, under the guidance of the Shaman, with observations and reminders of any particulars that may have been omitted, completing the mural so that the spirit will be satisfied with this new 'home within a home' and will thus be placated.

In conclusion, on the importance of dreams, a Shaman of the Saora tribe used to say: "I once had a teacher, an uncle of mine, a kuran (shaman) in my birinda (clan); I could easily forget everything he taught me, if I haven't already, but I could never forget what I learned in my dreams because it's engraved in my mind forever." The basic task of the Shaman is to guide the tribe and keep its anxiety at bay by exorcising it. Other basic tasks are carried out by a guiding spirit. All this takes place through dreams, trance, dream-like thoughts, myths and visions (C, on the grid).

Alongside the real jungle there is one containing Beta and Alfa elements that only shamans can see, hear, smell and touch. Are these the elements that make up the supernatural?

**Mario Giampà** is a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst associate member of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society (SPI-IPA). Author and resercher about Bion's thought.

E-Mail: [mariogiampa@tiscali.it](mailto:mariogiampa@tiscali.it)

**Stefano Beggiora** is Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the University Ca 'Foscari of Venice.

**Luca Caldironi** is a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, associate member of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society (SPI), and a member of the 'International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA).

E-Mail: [luca.caldironi@spiweb.it](mailto:luca.caldironi@spiweb.it)