

Oneiric icons: the construction of their significance, value and meaning in the group

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Abstract

Icons avoid the disintegration of the transgenerational favoring the passage from mental continuity with the psychic world familiar to mental discontinuity with the same, which is necessary for the development of an alterity that is the discovery of "what's different on me." The group aims at this stage, as the matrix "other", with its own history, different identically story brought by the individual, at the base of the immutability of mental health problems. The group becomes the site of emergence of a more authentic self, which does not need a mask or to project its Otherness (diversity) from the original matrix of a world of images as far as you near your unconscious that produces them.

Key-words: icons dream, group, mental field, unconscious, transegenerational size

There is a close relation between the group situation and the oneiric situation. According to Freud ("An Outline of Psycho-analysis" 1938 Standard ed. 23rd vol.), the transference of unconscious material and the relative oneiric activity are stimulated by sleep. The sleep-state is a repetition of the inter-uterine state, and the drive of sleep expresses the predisposition of the individual to return to this undifferentiated state with the mother. Thus it is the sleep situation, in that it is an undifferentiated state, that favours the emerging of unconscious elements in dreams. In the group situation, the analytic setting is responsible for the weakening of the defence mechanisms, and so unconscious material is let loose, and in particular the material connected to restrained conflicts in problematic situation finds free expression. The group immerses the individual in a collective, unconscious exchange to such an extent that we can affirm that a "group drive" exists, seen as a tendency towards a transpersonal undifferentiated state. It is this state of "sleep- group" that encourages the oneiric production.

The group setting infact, is a mental field that fully occupies the oneiric space of the patient (C. Amaro "Uno e molti: i sogni di gruppo" (97), and is made evident by the characteristic configuration of the icons present in the patients' dreams that directly refer to the participation and involvement of the group as a whole.

The oneiric icons are visible images in the dream and represent and condense unconscious meanings of fundamental importance. They are the "framework in which the mind expresses itself through the teeming of phantasms from the past or else the pushing forward of creativity. Infact the icon is a visual structure that utilises the intimate phantasmatic past and projects itself into the future. It is produced by the

transpersonal, and is a collective image through which the transpersonal represents its constant development and its history in the group time.

The characteristic feature of the icon is to represent and construct the object (originating theme) visually, being identical in nature and substance. As a construction it is symbolic and at the same time generates symbols, leading to a transformative dimension (hic et nunc) in the group, which is evidenced by a constellation of free- floating associations.

The group mental field (thanks to the iconic signifiers) becomes the matrix of models.

The dream, as an expression of the unconscious and the repressed phantasies becomes a place of signification of the events that are taking shape, offering (through the iconic images) elements for the comprehension of what is happening, be it something that does not yet exist, or a thought still not present. These elements will find space in the icons to emerge and to express themselves.

The icon as a production of the unconscious, is a purely mental form lacking an immediate, imaginative, perceptive and symbolic presence. It is really existing, but not directly present. It expresses an evolutive project but only when referring to possible events: to something that can take place and therefore change.

The oneiric production of highly imaginative activity in small groups is identified as icons that generate symbols, in that they produce new meaning and values. When they appear, an unfolding of the creative, symbolic process is opened. The quality of the icon that generate symbols seems to respond to the needs of the mind for unceasing symbolic nutrition, in the same way the body is nourished by food, sensations and feelings. The oneiric icon is the potential expression of all the possible symbolic signifiers, and takes shape a priori, a preconception, that can be described like a mould or imprint in clay which is capable of recognising its corresponding shape: a convex form fits into the concave mould.

While symbols are a system that tends to go on forever (meaning that new symbols can always be created), the bases of symbolisation are limited and need to relate to the basic affective significance. In this way, the iconic space gives free expression to fundamental, transpersonal characters narrated by the patients and at the same time favours and represents free associations that the group sets in motion. Through this activity the icon expresses the expansion of the internal psychic universe.

We are now looking at a different concept of the unconscious and "the repressed" as they emerge from the oneiric icons that originate in the mental group field. They are no longer considered to be sole expression of a container of traumatic events buried in a crystallised past.

The iconic image contains (in itself) the dimensions of the psycho-analytic symbol, carrier of the "repressed", that is at the basis of the pathological structure and unconscious symbolism. It concerns the encyclopaedic knowledge that condenses the primary meanings of the existence, that are at the bases of an opening towards a

future that is free from the events, bringing in reach the possible realisation of the transformations of the Ego (C. Amaro).

The icons in the group organise a "dreams scenography" that doesn't represent on its own a real event (or only symbol) , but expresses a mental event that is part of the process of symbolic construction. For this reason they have no meaning if they are taken out of the scenic context to which they belong, and where they are made harmonious and meaningful.

A field of interpretation of psychological themes expressed in the dreams of the icons, are organised within the group setting. One can even assert that during REM sleep the cognitive structures use the group story to give meaning to the dynamics of intense learning relative to the personal story.

In a group mental field, when we see the affective significance and values invested by transcendental meaning, (expressed by sacred mystery of the origins, or the aims of the personality (identity)), then we know it is to do with the icons. The transcendental meaning in the group, is basically the unceasing creative activity that is set in motion within the group or passes through the group.

This paper's objective, is to present information, collected in a systematic research, conducted over a period of ten years on oneiric phenomena in the group situation. From a detailed, specific study of the symbology of numerous dreams of the group, it has been possible to distinguish three principal classes or iconic dimensions:

- 1) Icons of the families' matrix
- 2) Icons of the dynamic matrix
- 3) Icons of the dynamics of the Self

The icons of the families'matrix represent the basic affective significance of the internal objects. The icons of the dynamic matrix express the relational values of such objects. The icons of the Self express a profound meaning of the story of the subject: past, present and future are given new meanings. Also they are connected with the process of individualisation, as in Jung, (they encourage a process of psychic reunification between the conscious and unconscious world) and as in the mental field (the group's sharing of the internal world).

Icons of the families' matrix

The concept of families' matrix in the clinical theory of group-analysis is fundamental. That concept and transgenerational and inter-psyche dynamic overlaps, structuring primarily the personality of the individual, whether he be normal or pathological.

Initially a group is a void space, an unknown territory, anthropologically speaking, where each participant is alone with his experience, symptoms and personal family history. The families' matrix determines the global modality of the way of life of each member. Its an anthropological group because it generates its own culture (whether

normal or pathological) and is completely interiorized by the individual. This is how we define the internal world of the individual, swept as it is by dynamics and phantasms that are closely linked to the group transgenerational dimension.

The transgenerational is depicted as a combination of feelings, images and phantasmatic constructions that are linked to the culture of the group to which they belong. Just as it has evolved for generations it invades the individual, giving him purpose and guiding him as one would expect from a typical family culture.

The group setting in this sense is the space in which a relational, psychological dimension is given new expression, i.e.: a dimension which sets itself to create (not in a coercive form), its own internal groupality.

The structure of the personality and of the identity, comes about through the assimilation of models of thought and cultural themes typical of the family, definable as emotive- cognitive nuclei: these constitute both the bulk of the existential, transgenerational, historical vicissitudes and the psychological modalities and the characteristic culture, adopted by the family to give meaning to such vicissitudes.

The plasticity of the families' matrix, defined as mythopoeic capacity, indicates both the possibility to construct significative relations around one's past and present history, and contemporarily give meaning to the unknown in the new evolutive project of the subject that is steadily growing.

The potentiality of the matrix to put the child at the centre of his story, in order to encourage his growth, is expressed by culture, family themes. These are none other than the iconic structure of the families' matrix, which take shape in the narcissistic mental environment of the child. In this way the structuring of the personality is made possible by the way in which the icons of the matrix can become the field of action of the more important affective relations, that mark the development of the identity.

From this point of view, the symptoms emerge inside the family thought as an absence of the ideas and phantasies which can develop into icons. The symptoms are lacking the elaboration or the transformation in symbolic events of the story and the cultural themes.

Icons of the dynamic matrix

The icons of the dynamic matrix are characterised by the affective relations that go in and out of the patients' stories. It is through the emerging of the oneiric icons of this matrix that the internal world, populated by characters of the family universe, are represented *hic et nunc* in the groupal scene.

When the oneiric images, (that come from the reassuring dynamic matrix) emerge in group, the symbolopoeic capacity of the mind transforms "the repressed" in an observable event and the symptoms, in oneiric icons.

The symptoms differentiate from the icons in that they are lacking in created potential and a "possible" dimension. They comply with the determinism of a repetition compulsion. They trap the mind in "a tower of the "inevitable"" seen as a mental structure involved with the ineluctability of the events where nothing will ever be

different nor will change. The "possible" dimension is linked to visual, mental, iconic images that consent numerous representations of reality. On the contrary, the symptom sets up a dogma in which it is "not possible" to choose.

The dream narrated in group becomes, (thanks to the action of the dynamic matrix), theatre for the staging of the individual personality: a space for observation or "mirroring" of the relations between patients, a place of immersion of the transformative potentiality expressed by the free associations, often made up of other dreams of the group.

The group's mental field becomes an enormous single dream in which the dominant icons, made up of personal and group themes interlace leading to a sole, iconic dimension. On an individual level, it will be used to build a historic sense of each person's life. While on the group level, it will create new elements for the mind (in its unceasing creative work) to develop models of itself through elaboration of group themes.

When we observe the group- clinic, we see dreams icons linking up to the " group's theme". The theme, seen as a construction, is the icon around which the latent discourse manifested by the group condenses and acquires a meaning that can be interpreted as a mental "event". In the scenographic mental space, the associations of each person become icons filled with meaning, matching and intersecting each other. They acquire sense forming a single image (or the theme of "group-dream").

Icons of the dynamics of Self

What thought can we give to a group? A group can be seen as a psychological entity or as a dynamic field. A certain number of participants are searching for answers. After useless attempts, they end up in the group experience.

The psychological mental space of the group must first of all find an environment in which it can exist. The mind of the therapist, seen as a womb, constitutes the place in which the group may be conceived. The period of gestation, in which the analyst can think of all the members in relation to their pathologies or personality disturbances, insures excellent conditions for the growth and maturing of the newly emerging group.

The founding moment of the group's neo-culture expresses the creation (or birth) of the agora, the open public space par excellence. The emerging of the group-Self is understood as a sharing space for the individualisation.

The interlacing of the personal stories narrated by the patients in the group, creates a system of communication, which is the origin and the primary condition necessary for the group setting to take shape as a place of sharing, and be capable of creating a new story, as opposed to the re-editing of encysted stories concerning the symptomatological state.

The story of the group is born, and will become an integral element of the intimacy of the participants. Also a source of culture from which to draw for the present and the future.

The transpersonal dimension of alienation inherent in the symptom or in the disturbance of the personality experienced in the group, becomes, thanks to the "simbolopoeic", iconic transformation of the dynamic matrix, the grounds on which the individual can find a more authentic sense to his existence. An expression of a new, psychic dimension is opened, that conducts to "an awakening capacity to healing".

A psycho-analytical group has fundamental characteristics: it is shared by its members. It is also a mental field. A process of individualisation comes about in that space. An individualisation that has as a consequence, the Self configured as a group, which we call a groupal-Self.

A group mental field is a model of the mind, since it is capable of creating, (through the elaboration of the affective significance and values), an inedited historic sense, where past, present and future coexist.

From a research conducted on about hundred analytic groups, it was found that the analytic process mobilised different iconic "frequencies", according to the particular evolutive moment the group was going to. C. Amaro (1997) proposed three hypotheses concerning the (existing) relation between the work of the dream and the analytic group process. In the first, "the oneiric scene expresses the intensity of the participation of the psychotherapeutic work and is the overall background to the relations that develop during the group session". According to this hypothesis, dreams reflect the emotive and profound attitude towards the analytic treatment, and in particular, the anguish of involvement, deriving from relations with the other participants. Often the icons that are of the "space-type", represent the environment space, that assumes a different configuration in relation to thoughts, motivations, anguish and feelings of the dreamer.

Persecutory, naturalistic icons are related to the difficulty of constructing the group space, and to be located within it.

Initially the dream- scene is attributed to the families' matrix and a universal of archetypal images, that suddenly emerge with characteristics of fragmentation.

The icons, related to the feelings of the subject (who enters a group), evoke a new space, "to be in relation with ", a catastrophe in act, an inevitable, natural event and a source of deep anguish.

The following dream was brought by a patient who started a group a few months earlier. His entering the group scene, and the consequent "mirroring" is expressed by the problematics, the preoccupation and the unconscious ambivalence present in this dream.

"I had to drive down a steep, narrow road to the beach where a group of friends were waiting for me. Someone told me it was impossible, I would never have been able to get back up again, that I must go on foot. I set off, and arrived on the beach where my

colleagues were waiting for me. The scene changes. The new building where I work, appears on the beach. My new office was situated one floor lower than the old one. I went into my old office: it was furnished very differently, with rare antiques and big armchairs. The cleaning lady was tidying-up and dusting. I went into the antechamber, then came back passing through tunnels and corridors. The cleaning lady was at her usual place, as if she had never gone away. I moved towards another antechamber searching for my things. I searched through the drawers, but without success., they contained children's stationery - coloured pencils and perfumed erasers. I looked around and saw the room full of dolls and furry toys. My colleagues, on the other hand, were able to find their things among the coloured objects. I don't know if I was able to climb back up again..."

Many dimensions and tightly-packed elements are visible in this dream, the interpretation of which cannot be treated in detail in this paper. Briefly, it is as if the patient inside the oneiric frame, (as in a mirror) sees his reflection, his story, his phantasms, people significant to him, his emotions and his doubts, presenting them to the group.

Not only the beginning, but the conclusion of the analysis generates emotions expressed by dream images referring to dramatic contexts or events. The following dream is an example of this: "I was at my sister's house, and through the window I could see her crushed body on the ground, in a pool of blood, lots of blood. I felt nothing, only indifference. I knew I had to get rid of the body, but I couldn't be bothered. I thought to myself, I must find someone to take it away. I had things to do, I was going out. The house was completely empty and the windows wide open".

Here the catastrophic, mortiferous experience is linked to the loss of the group as an object. The iconic scenery, the empty house, show fear of having constructed nothing at all.. The failure is experienced as a form of suicide, connected to a defensive, emotive distance, that tells in advance the problematicity of the elaboration, necessary for the separation.

A second hypothesis, (concerning the relation between the work of the dream and the psycho- analytic process) is the following: the transference in the group is observed in the relationship between the plot of the dreams and the relative associative elaboration, ("working through"). This assumption shows how a personification of the internal world of each person takes place in the oneiric plot. This allows the Ego to visualize, through a game of reciprocal echoes, the psychic conflicts at the basis of the mental suffering. In these dreams the icons of the characters express the multiplicity of the transference and the significance, that transform a personal story into a shared story.

A final hypothesis may be formulated like this: "Group dreams give access to trauma. The dream icon is a key, a prelude to the analytic constructions of the dynamic matrix."

A person who conceives "the other" different from himself, has taken a step forward. When a person can conceive the group and the group matrix as being different from himself, the group can develop its own story. The group's story is different from the story of the individual, the basis of which cannot develop the very-ill part of the personality.

A brief dream of a patient who was half-way through the psycho-analytic group process, may be useful to illustrate this hypothesis: "I was being followed by a Chinese, or a Cambodian. No, it was a Khmer Rouge, who was threatening me with a revolver. He was hiding in the mountains, and he wanted me to go down to the valley to fetch him a bread-roll ". The alien icon of the Asian evokes images of different worlds (unknown and terrifying), yet produced by an internal psychic dynamism, denied up until that moment. This dynamism seems to be searching for a source of nutrition, that allows it to survive. And thus be recognised in its diversity, which after all is the acceptance of a different, internal dimension, that is no longer dreaded or fearful.

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