

## **Dream interpretation; from traditional cultures to group psychotherapy**

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### **Abstract**

It's not surprising that both in western societies and traditional societies, dream interpretation is contextualized socially and culturally. Dream is a human experience, that is filtered through the lenses of our language, our social values, and cultural symbolism.

By focusing on how dreams have been used in traditional cultures: the creative potential of dreams, the role of guide and omen, the knowledge that is gained through dreams, the passage to other dimensions and worlds; all these functions that have been analysed by many anthropologists and they allow us to look at dreams from another point of view.

A dream that is told in group therapy, can underline the need and the willingness of the group to face the shared unconscious and to develop a connection with the unthinkable. There is a difference between dreaming, that can be considered as intra-psychic event and narrating a dream which by definition is an interpersonal event. In group psychoanalytic therapy, a narrated dream can be considered as a message with an un-coded personal content, or as 'public' material that concerns all the participants of the group.

**Key-words:** dream, traditional societies, cultural symbolism, group

### **Introduction**

Psychology incorporated initially at an individual level then at group level, dream analysis as part of its methodology, acclaiming it, to use Freud's famous words as "the royal road to the unconscious".

The psychotherapists Bateson and Holmes state that:

"Even though dreams don't hold the position of privilege as at the time of the pioneers, dream analysis still remains a fundamental part of analytic work. Dreams are an essential reference point, an emblem that show the psychological condition of the patient. However confused the dream might be, it acts as an antidote to intellectualisation: of almost indisputable value and freshness; qualities that sometimes lack in verbal speculation as far as emotions are concerned. With the use of day residual, dreams bring into therapeutic sessions important parts concerning the life of the patient. Through the awareness of his dreams, the patient is in contact with the impersonal nature of his own creative psyche".

In traditional cultures, dreams can be used as "the royal road" in understanding the representative symbolism of the particular culture in question. Not only do these dreams tell us a life story, but by using the manifest content that originates from a

“collection of dreams”, one can discover and confirm hopes and fears and reach cultural perceptions. Dreams can help us understand how culture is built inside the individual, and how the individual uses this cultural material.

In this article I aim at analysing how dream, in particular dream interpretation is completely different, when comparing our western culture and traditional cultures. In many traditional cultures, dream, vision, myth and ritual are closely connected, they allow people to give a meaning to an invisible world. This is a very different position from considering dreams as passive objects that are to be understood. In western society, interpreting dreams holds an ambivalent position; on the one side the real interpretation is left to the expert in question; the psychoanalyst, on the other hand dreams are considered as something of minor importance, that are of little or no consequence whatsoever.

In a large and disparate group of societies the experience of dreaming is held to have a close even determinant, connection with the future life of the dreamer. In marked contrast to western psychoanalysis, but very much in keeping with pre-rationalist dream theories, dreams are interpreted by using the contemporary experiences of the dreamer to construct a vision of some aspect of the dreamer's future life; in this manner a progressive theory of dream is implied. Freud (1900) described the process of dream construction as “regressive”, involving a return to the sensory images of the unconscious. His psychoanalytic theory suggests that dream symbols should be interpreted by looking at the dreamers past.

By focusing on how dreams have been used in traditional cultures: the creative potential of dreams, the role of guide and omen, the knowledge that is gained through dreams, the passage to other dimensions and worlds; all these functions that have been analysed by many anthropologists and they allow us to look at dreams from another point of view. If in the past, anthropologists were primarily interested in listing and categorizing dreams as numerous reified objects, Barbara Tedlock and other anthropologists have formulated a new communicative dream theory. This theory highlights the importance of the context, narration, communication and interpretation. These recent studies seem to redefine the boundaries between psychology and social anthropology of dream.

In this article, I will outline an anthropological approach to dream, then I will continue with the immense contributions on such a topic by Freud and Jung, I will then outline how dream is used in group therapy.

A dream that is told in group therapy, can underline the need and the willingness of the group to face the shared unconscious and to develop a connection with the unthinkable. There is a difference between dreaming, that can be considered as intra-psychic event and narrating a dream which by definition is an interpersonal event. In group psychoanalytic therapy, a narrated dream can be considered as a message with an un-coded personal content, or as ‘public’ material that concerns all the participants of the group.

## **Dream in traditional cultures**

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Dreaming is a universal phenomenon of mankind. Through dreams man has been able to feel the joy of freedom, the breaking of boundaries, the abolishment of discrimination and the magical essence of fluctuating in time and space as if driving a time machine.

More often than not, dreaming is mysterious and completely unpredictable, the incomprehensible nature of dream has since the beginning of time led man to understand, un-code and in some way interpret his dreams.

Dreams don't just happen, they are interpreted when one wakes, and such interpretations take place considering the culture to which the individual belongs, as Bastide points out in *"The Sacred and the Primitive"*:

"It's a dream, and a specific dream that consecrates a shaman or witch doctor, a dream in which his internal organs are torn out and pieces of magic quartz are inserted into the flesh.

It's a dream, and a specific dream that during initiation ceremonies reveals the individual totem and the social status amongst the American Indians. It's a dream that in certain Australian tribes, gives the woman that has fallen into a doze under a tree the child that will develop in her womb".

Anthropologists understood the central importance of dreams in traditional cultures, the respect that is held for them, and how this phenomenon can influence daily life. Studying dreams, anthropologists grasped the link that there is between dream and myth, defining myths as if they were dreams of a culture.

Bastide underlines the important link between myth and culture when he writes: "Dreams are fed by primordial myths; myths and dreams can't be explained at two different imaginary levels, one collective and the other individual; the language used is identical, and the certainty that dream has an objective reality rather than a subjective reality comes from the fact that between dream and myth there is continuity, they use the same collective representations; we could say that myth justifies the value of the dream, seeing as the root of a dream is in a myth: it's valid due to the fact that they are the words of ancestors and gods. Myths are the truth, dreams are the vessel to gain knowledge of this truth".

Lincoln also refers to dreams when he emphasises their creative potential amongst primitive tribes, he affirms that the culture of primitive societies is itself to a great extent the result of psychological processes that originate in dream activity.

This is furthermore underlined by Lanternari in *Sogno/Visione* 1981:

"Dreaming means to descend into the reign of power that created the world through myths, to enter into contact with the world of creation. The images and the voices of dreams are the signs of that contact with the world of creation; obscure and enigmatic signs that need interpretation, from which the individual receives messages of profound knowledge that would otherwise be impossible to receive. From here onwards dreams were looked upon as sources of knowledge, to foresee the future, to know one's own destiny and that of others".

Considering that most of our understanding of dreams comes from another person's verbal narration, it seems reasonable to treat the verbal narration of dream

as a linguistic text. But do dream narrative and myth narrative have the same form? This is a question that was raised by Waud Kracke in *Myths in Dreams* 1987. Kracke affirms how in many cultures there are parallels between the narrative style of recounting a myth and telling somebody a dream, but the difference is that in the narrative of a dream one must start from a sensory impression of the image to the verbal recount of the dream, whilst with myth one must start from the purely verbal recount to that of the sensory image.

Kracke studied the Kagwahiv population of the Amazon in Brazil, he discovered that both myth and dream needed to be regularly told. Both myth and dream have specific grammatical forms. Dreams that are told have a specific meaning that needs to be unravelled, they can be either good or bad omens for the future. Often dreams will allow a communication with divine beings, that are recognized through myths.

In his famous book "*Witchcraft, oracles and magic amongst the Azande*" Evans Pritchard underlined the prophetic function of dream amongst the Azande:

"Since dreams have a prophetic function, the Azande people make considerable effort to vividly remember them, and as soon as they awaken will avoid restarting the fire as they associate this action with the disappearance of the dream from their conscience".

Amongst the Azande, some people eat *ngua musumo*, "dream medicine" that allows them to have truthful dreams. The prophetic dream will therefore be a truthful prediction of the future, warning he who dreams of forthcoming dangers or lucky events that are about to happen.

This anthropologist describes how the Azande classify and interpret their dreams:

"The Azande people say that dreams reveal what the future holds, there are two types of dream, good dreams and bad dreams. A man has a bad dream and this worries him terribly. A bad dream is when an elephant attacks you in order to kill you, even if you're desperately trying to escape. This dream reveals death, and the witchdoctors will divide amongst themselves the flesh. If an animal attacks you during a dream, someone will die in the immediate future...dreams in which you see good things are good dreams. If you dream of red sweet potatoes, in the near future you'll have meat...if you dream that you're floating in deep water...you're about to become rich...".

The techniques that are used to provoke dreams, trance with visions, possession and hallucinations are all part of the shaman repertoire mainly from the traditional African, northern Asian and north American cultures. Even if there are small differences within these different cultures there are in fact many traits that these different shamans have in common as far as dreams are concerned. M. Eliade describes: "The shaman is the specialist of the human soul: only he "sees" it, only he knows the "form" and the destiny. The shaman doesn't distinguish the dream dimension from daily life, seeing as dream activity isn't only bound to the night".

Therefore dream is reality itself, and due to the fact that the shaman considers life itself a dream, an ecstatic experience, he must live it.

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Lanternari adds to this point: “Amongst the Siberian population the calling of the shaman is often preceded by illness or psychological and physical changes. Examples of these are long periods of sleep, peculiar behaviour, convulsions. In these cultures, illnesses, convulsions, dreams and hallucinations lay out the pathway for the future shaman from an early age. These experiences consecrate the magic power and the vocation of the shaman. Often the illness in question isn’t a true and proper illness, but more a gradual change in the behaviour of the individual: the future shaman becomes meditative, he seems absent and has prophetic dreams.

An example of this is given by M. Eliade, a dream that was described by a shaman at the age of thirty:

“I dreamt a red horse with a white stomach, a leopard placed a leg on its shoulder, a snake was biting the horse, they’re all animals that play an important role in shaman dreams. After a while I began to tremble, I lost consciousness and began prophesising. It was the first sign of “election”; then I had to await twelve years before my consecration as *Kujur*”.

Whether it be a dream, an illness, an initiation ritual, the key element is always the same: the symbolic death and resurrection of the neophyte, dismemberment of the body in various ways (breaking into pieces, cutting, opening of the stomach, etc...).

An important function of dream for shamans is also that of a passage to other dimensions, a communication system with other worlds from which to receive unique teachings and illuminating intuitions. The apparition of these entities and visions within dreams are decoded with ease, as they are connected to their most evident characteristics, the same can be said in regards to the teachings that these figures offer to those that have the possibilities of seeing them. Dreams that portray animals have a protective and healing function, due to the fact that healing and recovery are the result of subtle and metaphoric comprehension of what torments the soul, whilst illness is a temporary absence of a suffering soul.

The development of ethno-psychiatry on behalf of Devereux was an important milestone for the studies of dream analysis. Devereux tried to integrate his fieldwork studies amongst the Mohave Indians with a clearly Freudian inspired approach: he applied the concepts of transference, the use and critical analysis of pathogenic dreams, he also understood how the cultural context was used in the therapeutic work with the patient. His research with the Mohave Indians led him to hypothesize how for this population dreams weren’t only an irruption into the unconscious that shatters social censorships, as much as defence mechanisms to counterbalance “bad desires”, in particular aggressive desires: a dreamer is always responsible for his own dreams forasmuch as they are connected to his past behaviour, to his social behaviour, that are the cause of this or that dream; the role of the dream interpreter consists in not so much explaining the true sense of the dream in as much as “manipulating” the dream in making it coherent with the system of values and with the *ethos* of the tribe. The dreamer is therefore

encouraged to make use of his nocturnal visions to liberate himself from his aggressive instincts, exteriorising them under the form of taboo.

The studies and research carried out by Barbara Tedlock in “*A new anthropology of dream*”, seem to be able to redefine the boundaries between psychology and social anthropology of dream. This is made possible due to the change in research strategy that is far from treating ‘non western dreams’ as totally ‘different’, and from treating dreams as objects that can be understood, gathered and compared to our ‘western dreams’, instead the change that Tedlock underlines is to concentrate on the representation, communication and interpretation of dream.

This change in strategy was necessary for various reasons. First and foremost many cultural anthropologists were becoming cautious of research that was being carried out to test western theories, that somehow aim to withhold universal laws of human psychology. Today, anthropologists aren’t so interested in gathering dreams as if they were simple ethnographic material to then compare and confront with ones own ‘western’ dreams, instead, during fieldwork, the anthropologist is in contact with the community, not so much by using a strategy that regards the observation of preordained objects (dreams), but on the contrary to study dreams in their natural situation (dream sharing, representation and communication).

Barbara Tedlock suggests that manifest content of dream:

“Must extend itself to include more than one dream narration. Ideally it should include a dream theory or theories, it must include the manner in which the dream is shared, the way in which the dream is told, and the cultural code of interpretation”.

Tedlock denominates this as “a communicative dream theory”. This theory considers dream narration as an event that encloses three overlapping aspects:

1. The creation of narration
2. The psychodynamics of the narration
3. The interpretative work carried out by the culturally defined group

The communicative dream theory emphasises the importance of the social setting, and the interpretative frame that is used by the group, therefore the anthropologist is interested in the interpretative analysis that structures both narration and interpretation.

An example of this work is the research carried out by Barbara Tedlock with the Zuni population of New Mexico. The Zuni share their dreams in an informal manner amongst family and friends, and in a formal manner in social groups. Amongst the Zuni, only “bad” dreams are told, whilst “good” dreams are kept secret, sometimes for a whole lifetime. “Bad” dreams bring bad luck, “good” dreams will bring good fortune. When the Zuni speak about a “good” dream, usually they are speaking about a dream that happened a long while ago, they prefer not to share it immediately, so as to not disperse the good fortune, for this reason “good” dreams aren’t shared before the actual good fortune has occurred:

“ A Zuni lady dreamt that she was sitting under a tree, a deer moved closer to her and said: “Tie me up!” The following day the Zuni lady said to her husband: “Maybe today I’ll be lucky and you’ll bring me a deer”.

Even though the Zuni lady senses that her husband will be lucky that day, she keeps the dream to herself, on the other hand her husband grasps the hidden premonitory side of the words that his wife says, but he avoids any questions to not disperse the good fortune.

“Bad” dreams, on the other hand, must be told, they mustn’t be given the chance of coming true, and for this reason they must be externalised from the body of the dreamer.

A young man dreamt that he was walking through a cemetery, he saw an old lady with long, white hair. The following morning, the young man told his parents the dream, they advised him to immediately go to the shaman that would then whip him to exorcize such a bad dream. If the young man continued to have bad dreams, he would then be initiated into the *Kachina* society to be cured. The most common cure is to tell the dream whilst inhaling smoke from prayer sticks, the sticks are then offered to the deceased, asking them not to gather amongst the living.

The Zuni believe that whipping the person who has had a ‘bad’ dream will help disperse the bad thoughts and reverse bad fate into good. After the initiation into the *Kachina* society, the individual who has had ‘bad dreams’ must sow some seeds in a field, this event is closely supervised by other members of the *Kachina* society, to understand the fate of the individual in question.

The Zuni people put their dreams into action, the dreams become a performance. The communication of the ‘good’ dream and good fate are avoided, whilst ‘bad’ dreams and bad fate are publicly shown, by physically whipping the person that dreamt such a dream in order to disperse bad fate.

During her research amongst the Mapuche Indians of Chile, Degarrod (1990), gathered various dream reports and interpretations, of two families that were trying to overcome increased stress levels due to illness and witchcraft. By sharing and interpreting their dreams, the two families managed to express their fears and sorrow; they managed to express their sadness. Degarrod hypothesizes that this work was made possible due to dream sharing and for the interpretative system that they managed to use. By studying dream sharing and the transmission of dream theories in their social context as communicative events, many anthropologists have grasped that both the researcher and the community concerned in the fieldwork are both greatly involved in the creation of the social reality that implies them both.

The American anthropologist Gilbert Herdt mentions his surprise when he grasped the therapeutic dimension of his role as a “sensitive listener” during the period he spent in New Guinea. A young man felt the need to regularly tell Herdt his dreams, he felt that there was no one he could confide his dreams with such erotic content to, having someone listen to his dreams allowed the young man to feel understood and less guilty for having had the dreams.

Great importance has been given to dream sharing by various cultural anthropologists; Bruce (1975); Jackson (1978) ; Tedlock (1981), not only have they taken note of their own dreams, but they shared their dreams, and allowed the community involved in their fieldwork the opportunity of interpreting their dreams. Rather than underlining and comparing 'western dreams' versus 'non western dreams', Barbara Tedlock emphasises how cultural anthropologists have placed their attention on dream theories and interpretative systems, considering these as psychodynamic, complex communicative events.

By studying dream sharing, and the transmission of dream theories in the totality of the social context, anthropologists have grasped how both the researcher and the community concerning the research create a social reality that binds them both in a fundamental manner.

Kracke (1978): "Maybe with time, anthropologists like psychoanalysts, will develop the necessary tools to listen to the emotional communication of the dreams of others, and their own feelings in all of this."

### **Group and dream**

The topic of dream is introduced in "*Group*" by C. Neri referring to Lotman's representational model. Lotman underlines how behaviour and feelings that people belonging to a certain society and a certain culture live in their everyday life are in constant relationship with various self representation systems.

He states that within each social group there are various active systems of self representation that are in interaction amongst themselves and with everyday language, they develop the function of reflection and more generally speaking produce a sense of meaning.

Neri regards the self representational systems that Lotman considers to be theatre, literature, cinema, to be essentially made up by dreams, by fantasies, by imaginative speculation in the small group... by considering dream a self representational system means that we can consider dreams not only as a 'product' that can be interpreted, but as a truthful representation of 'something' that the person has grasped and elaborated (in an unconscious and preconscious manner).

More precisely an expression, representation and elaboration of what occurs in the internal world or also in the analytic situation that the individual is living.

In the small group the self representational systems are above all dreams, fantasies and imaginative speculation... the concept of semiosphere allows the therapist to calibrate in an optimal manner certain dimensions of his own interpretative function.

### **Conclusions**

Dreams in traditional societies are intimately bound to myth with vital functions such as guide, source of knowledge, communication with other worlds through magical therapeutic rituals and shaman ceremonies. For a considerable amount of time many anthropologists ignored the importance of the communicative context,

and the manner in which the research was carried out. Thirty years ago, the British anthropologist Seligman asked the colonial officials to report all the dreams of the 'natives' then to compare them with the Freudian concepts of 'dream types', for which the manifest content should have expressed the same meaning in regards to trans-cultural analysis. The total lack of sensitivity to context and communication, on behalf of the colonial officials, resulted in a list of manifest content dreams that had been categorized and tabulated, and were then to be compared with western dreams.

To understand the culture and the experience of dream it is necessary not only to understand what people are dreaming, but also which part of these dreams they share. Above all dreams shouldn't be gathered like simple ethnographic objects to be used and compared, but the research carried out during the fieldwork should aim at entering into contact with the community, not using a strategy that presumes the observation of objects (dreams), but by studying their evolution in natural situations as in the case of dream representation, interpretation and sharing.

Barbara Tedlock suggests that the manifest content of dreams: "should extend itself to include more than one dream narration. Ideally it should include a dream theory or theories, it should include the manner in which the dream is shared, the manner in which it is told and the code of interpretation".

Having studied dreams from an anthropological and psychological perspective, during my research I've understood how the primary source of dreams is often inaccessible, the dream itself, must be translated from an image to narration in order to give it meaning and to communicate it to others. Even the original images of dreams must be filtered through language and through cultural associations in order to give them meaning.

The construction of dream meaning is inevitably linked to culture, dreams are in fact the transformation of cultural symbols, and their de-codification and interpretation are examples of the 'work of culture'.

Dream images have transformed themselves into 'cultural products' that have an effect on the life of people, as Obeyeskere states in *The work of culture* (1900). In this sense dreams are not a text to be analysed but a lived performance. The 'nonsense' of dreams becomes the meaning of daily life, anticipations and future actions.

The various functions and therapeutic practices enacted through dreams, as described and highlighted by many anthropologists introduce us to other concepts of dreams that are distant from those used in psychoanalysis, but are all the same the work of 'cultural products'.

Its not surprising that both in western societies and traditional societies, dream interpretation is contextualized socially and culturally. Dream is a human experience, that is filtered through the lenses of our language, our social values, and cultural symbolism.

"But the deriving dreams and symbols are not easily comprehensible. They refer to 'things' that can't be said in other ways. Oneiric symbols also highlight the most

opaque and mysterious side of humanity... they contain an excess of meanings". Ricoeur, 1981.

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