

# Introduction: Dreaming as an Object of Anthropological Analysis

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*This article introduces a special issue on anthropological approaches to dreaming. A running history of dreams in the field of anthropology serves as a device for contextualizing the articles. The narrative identifies perennial areas of interest such as the question of why some societies value dreams while others do not. Anthropological approaches have varied from Victorian evolutionism to contemporary psychoanalysis and reflexivity. Each new theoretical paradigm has pushed the study of dreams in different directions, led to the study of new aspects of dreaming, and, sometimes, guided the exploration of new dimensions of social life. The presentation of ethnographic case studies of dreaming in specific cultural contexts constitutes one of anthropology's strongest contributions to the study of dreaming.*

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Dreaming has not been a consistent object of anthropological study. If, for a moment, we view anthropological studies of dreams as a publicly traded stock, it could be said that the issue launched at a solid share price in the late 19th century, dove in value at the time of the Great Depression, and showed minimal signs of life until its reemergence in the 1980s. Since then, dreaming has been a consistent performer, now paying healthy dividends in the form of journal articles, monographs, and edited volumes. Certainly, this special issue of *Dreaming* attests to the current vitality of anthropological interest in the ethnographic study of dreaming, dreams, and dream interpretation in world societies. In introducing this collection to the primarily nonanthropologist readership of *Dreaming*, I make reference to this historically fluctuating treatment of dreams within anthropology as a device for familiarizing readers with the discipline and as a means of contextualizing the particular articles in this issue.

Anthropology arose as part of the effort to understand the diversity of human societies encountered by Europeans during the age of exploration and subsequently brought into close and dependent relationship by the establishment of colonial empires. Enlightenment thinkers such as Linnaeus pushed for the classification of humans on the same principles applied to other animals. As the 19th century progressed, so also did debates about human variation and whether this was a function of "racial" or environmental factors. Social anthropology grew out of the position arguing for the unity of the human "race" as a single species and in favor of environmental plasticity. Victorian anthropologists drew on Darwin's ideas to conceptualize social evolution. According to their scheme, the small-scale societies

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of the Amazon and Melanesia occupied a level of “savagery,” societies with broader political organizations such as African kingdoms or Middle Eastern sheikhdoms represented “barbarism,” and European states reflected the attainment of “civilization.”<sup>1</sup>

Belief in the reality of dream experiences differentiated less evolved from more evolved societies.<sup>2</sup> In the words of John Lubbock (Lord Avebury): “Dreams are intimately associated with the lower forms of religion. To the savage they have a reality and an importance which we can scarcely appreciate . . . the savage considers the events in his dreams to be as real as those of his waking hours” (Lubbock, 1870/1978, p. 126). Herbert Spencer (1876/2003) further explained that those who believed in the reality of dreams lacked a theory of mind—“a hypothesis of mind as a distinct entity” (p. 157). The ability to distinguish purely mental phenomena (fantasies, delusions, imaginings) from real perceptions was clearly a prime criterion for having attained “civilization.” This represented fast evolution, since barely 2 centuries earlier Descartes had forged the distinction between mental and external worlds. Before that (and even after), the average European seemed to have some difficulty deciding this very issue, as can be seen from a look at the proceedings of witchcraft trials. The courts sometimes dismissed dreams of Satan as pure fantasy, whereas at other times they prosecuted the dreamer as an active witch (Pick & Roper, 2004; Stewart, 2002).

The earliest major work of social anthropology published by the first professional anthropologist, E. B. Tylor’s (1871) *Primitive Culture*, identified *animism*—the belief, supported by the evidence of dreams, that the natural world was filled with spirits and ghosts—as a distinctive feature of primitive societies. Roland Littlewood (2004) quotes Tylor at length on animism near the beginning of his article in this issue. Animism has been rejected as a serious idea within anthropology, yet this does not change the fact that people, everywhere, do draw fascinating inferences from visions, dreams, and other experiences in “altered states of consciousness.” These subjects therefore remain of great interest for those exploring indigenous assumptions about personal psychology, cosmic forces, and the interaction between these two. Littlewood’s contribution examining a new religion in Trinidad—the Earth People—offers a particular case study, as do most of the other articles contained here.

This interest in portraying the social meaning and the cultural form of dreams as they take shape in a local context is fairly representative of the current ethnographic approach to dreams. There is no a priori assumption of the superiority or inferiority of cultural systems of thought, and it is generally assumed that anthropological studies should address dreams as social and cultural phenomena. In Littlewood’s (2004) study, the leader of the Earth People, Mother Earth, suffered an episode of thyrotoxicosis that left her in a condition of hypomania, which is characterized by delusions among other features. Although one may identify this as a possible psychobiological baseline for her dream visions, Littlewood, a psychiatrist and anthropologist, sees this information as of limited value to the anthropologist: “Mother Earth’s psychopathology offers us no more of explanatory value than do the celestial mechanics of an eclipse of the sun determine the meanings which societies may erect on that event” (p. 103).

Historically, anthropological views of dreams entered a new phase with the writings of the French philosopher and anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1938) in the early part of the 20th century. He rejected the idea of the evolution of societies and criticized the Victorians, contending that “primitives” could easily distinguish dreaming from waking experience. This

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<sup>1</sup>See Stocking (1987) for a full account of Victorian anthropology.

<sup>2</sup>Jedrej and Shaw (1992) offer an excellent discussion of these issues.

did not, however, result in their rejection of the dream content as unreal. Instead, they viewed it as exceptional knowledge, sometimes more significant than normal waking knowledge. In dreams one could gain authoritative knowledge by communicating with totems or ancestors or by entering the time zone of myth. In various Australian aboriginal languages a single word meant “dreaming” and “mythical time” or “dreaming” and “totem” (Lévy-Bruhl, 1938, p. 105). What mattered, Lévy-Bruhl maintained, were the affective resonances of experiences, which he termed *mystical participation*. A dream scenario could be implausible on logical grounds, but if it felt and seemed real, then this sense impelled one to take it seriously.

Taking a dream to be “real” did not constitute an individual logical error, as Tylor (1871) and his followers maintained, rather it represented the subscription to shared cultural ideas about dream phenomena. Lévy-Bruhl was a member of Durkheim’s inner circle, which meant that he considered people to be governed by “collective representations”—historically developed sets of ideas and symbols within a given society. Unlike Tylor, whose goal it was to civilize the uncivilized and extirpate any trace of primitive “survivals” still lingering within civilization, Lévy-Bruhl advocated studying the social principles that underpinned different systems of thought and made them coherent. Lévy-Bruhl pointed the way to cultural relativism.

In this issue Murray L. Wax (2004) offers a fresh perspective on the basic issue for both Tylor and Lévy-Bruhl: Why do some societies take dreams seriously as sources of valuable personal and social knowledge, whereas modern Western societies, for the most part, dismiss them as insignificant “froth”?<sup>3</sup> In small hunter–gatherer societies, Wax contends, close cooperation and interdependency within the group and between the group and the natural world are crucial for survival. In this context dreams provide a medium for intersubjective contact, psyche to psyche, increasing the bonds between people and contributing to a shared perspective on the world. An illustrative example of this may be seen in Vishvajit Pandya’s (2004) detailed ethnography (in this issue) of the Ongee people of the Andaman Islands. The Ongee discuss their dreams and their experiences of the preceding day just before they sleep, and they take directions from these dreams to find food sources in their environment. They locate ripening fruit, for example, by registering the smell of it during the day, but it is their detachable soul that goes forth while they are asleep to confirm this knowledge and weave the dream that instructs them when and where to go to gather this fruit.

In industrial Western societies characterized by a pervasive division of labor, such close contact and cooperation within a broad community neither occurs nor is of particular value. Pandya notes that the once remote Ongee have not been able to maintain their hunter–gatherer mode of existence in the face of the encroaching Indian state and the development of coconut plantations on their island. Compelled to change from foragers to wage laborers, the Ongee have found that their system of interpreting smells through dreams no longer works as it used to. The Ongee are no longer able to walk in the forest and register smells or to go to sleep on open platforms within earshot of one another. This illustrates the lost dimension of intersubjectivity that Wax finds regrettable in complex societies. Indications are, however, that the Ongee are adapting their olfactory system of dreaming to interpret their current working conditions. They have dreams, for example, that register the smell of the foreman and indicate that he is about to fall ill, which means a day off work. Dreams for the Ongee are possibly on the way to becoming a “weapon of the weak”—a mode for interpreting and resisting the system that dominates them.

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<sup>3</sup>“Träume sind Schäume” (Dreams are foam), according to the German saying.

Dreams in developed Westernized societies are, it seems, taken most seriously by those pursuing New Age personal growth agendas and/or psychotherapeutic healing practices. It could similarly be contended that these constitute modes of resistance. Such practices, and the small communities following them, attempt to overcome the isolation of modern society and to regain the sort of intimate social communication and heightened environmental sensitivity found in small-scale, nonindustrial societies. Dreams also become important in new religious movements that criticize and resist mainstream social values in developing countries. The Earth People movement in Trinidad, which opposes and envisions the end of the capitalist domination of life, offers a particular example.

All of the studies contained in this issue are based on data collected through ethnographic research. In some cases, the author's own material is combined with comparative examples to explore a particular proposition or model, whereas in other cases, authors present and elaborate centrally on their own field research. The practice of extended solo fieldwork began around the time of World War I when Bronislaw Malinowski spent two lengthy periods of time studying the Trobriand Islanders off the coast of Papua New Guinea. He lived in his own tent amid the people where he observed and freely conversed with them in the local language rather than formally interviewing them through interpreters. After his return to London, he trained the next generation of anthropologists. Malinowski's type of fieldwork rapidly became standard on both sides of the Atlantic. Through the method paradoxically named "participant observation," the goal of the anthropologist was now to present a picture of the world as the local people understood it.

This simple goal is more difficult than it sounds. The ethnographers in this issue have mastered languages as diverse and difficult as Ese Eja (a western Amazonian language), Samoan, Yoruba, and the Ongee dialect of Andamanese. They have entered into endless conversations on the nature and meaning of dreaming and submitted themselves to the sleeping and waking regimens of their chosen societies. Their additions to our knowledge of human cultural ideas and practices represent one of the enduring contributions of anthropology. Daniela Peluso (2004), for example, explores the Ese Eja (Amazonian Peru) practice of naming children after animals seen in dreams. To understand the reasons for this requires awareness of local cosmology, according to which, in ancestral times, people and animals were undifferentiated. The personhood (*eshawa*) of a being could circulate between animal and human form; it was unstable. Eventually animals and humans differentiated, but a certain transformability—"multinaturalism"—between humans and animals was still assumed. Dreams in which an animal appears and identifies itself as a person's child are consistent with this worldview and entirely compelling to the Ese Eja.

The Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) Church in Nigeria, discussed in this issue by Elisha P. Renne (2004), is an independent African church that arose as an alternative to strict European and American missionary forms of Christianity. Dreams of angels or other spiritual beings frequently occurred to the early leaders of this church, and we might read this as another example of dreaming in the service of social opposition, both to other forms of Christianity and to traditional Yoruba religion. Renne examines the role of dreams in legitimating leadership and, specifically, in inspiring the white, star-ornamented robes worn by leaders. The designs of these robes derive from dream visions of angels, and the robes were thus emblematic of the leader's spiritual connection with heaven. As in the Amazon, dreams provide a conduit for communication with forces from beyond the human world, which authorize social orders. The difference is that Christian morality modulates this access, whereas in the Amazon or the Andamans, the ability to connect with the beyond through dreams is a given of human ontology and the normal life cycle; it requires no special piety.

By using particular forms of prayer and spiritual devotion, the C&S leaders differentiated themselves from traditional African religious leaders such as the *babalawo* and from other Christian denominations.

Renne includes an illuminating discussion of local distinctions between dream and trance and the experience of visions in either state. Such documentation of indigenous understandings of psychological functioning contributes to a developed area within anthropology known as ethnopsychology or ethnopsychiatry. Renne's work and similar passages in the contributions by Littlewood, Peluso, and Pandya, in particular, demonstrate how the study of dreaming illuminates ethnopsychiatry.

Prompted by his mentor, C. G. Seligman, Malinowski (1929/1987) collected dreams in the Trobriands, and he presented a fascinating discussion of erotic dreams in *The Sexual Life of Savages*. Despite his own publications, however, and those by others in his circle (Firth, 1934; Lincoln, 1935; Seligman, 1932), Malinowski ultimately exercised a negative influence on the anthropological study of dreams. This was a consequence of his dispute with psychoanalysts over the cultural variability of the Oedipus complex. In a matrilineal society such as the Trobriands, Malinowski contended that a boy grew up to hate his mother's brother and to desire his sister. Ernest Jones (1925/1974), Freud's close associate and biographer, strongly rejected this claim, contending that such cultural arrangements only disguised the true and deeper emotional attitudes to the father and mother. Many anthropologists subsequently considered psychoanalysis as incompatible with cultural relativism. British anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown (Kuper, 1983), furthermore, elaborated the Durkheimian viewpoint that the group and its collective representations, not individual psychology, constituted the proper level of anthropological analysis. Dreams were consequently avoided as an object of inquiry on the assumption that such study would lead into the no-go areas of psychology or psychoanalysis.

American anthropology took a different trajectory from the early 1930s by developing the study of culture and personality. This school of thought occupied a mainstream place in the discipline up to the 1960s, with Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead as its most famous exponents. Culture and personality studies attempted to demonstrate that child rearing and early childhood socialization practices led to the formation of shared personality characteristics in a given society. Despite the fact that this orientation shared much in common with psychoanalysis, the culture and personality school did not extensively pursue the study of dreams. Researchers in this tradition placed more emphasis on the application of Rorschach tests or Thematic Apperception Tests to gauge personality. Dreams did feature occasionally in these studies (Eggan, 1952), and dreams were the central topic in a number of disparate books and articles exploring psychoanalytic and, later, structuralist approaches (e.g., Devereux, 1951; Kuper, 1979; Róheim, 1952).

Dreams reemerged as a topic of more concerted interest with a special issue of the *Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*, *Ethos* (Kennedy & Langness, 1981). By this time, American psychological anthropologists had largely moved beyond the culture and personality framework and begun to explore dreams in a more humanistic mode, drawing on symbolic anthropology and also showing more willingness to engage with notions of the self and the unconscious developing out of the psychoanalytic tradition. With the publication of Barbara Tedlock's (1987) edited collection *Dreaming*, the study of dreams had clearly returned as a recognized object of ethnographic study. In the following decade, dreams stood at the center of several full-length monographs (e.g., Graham, 1995; Stephen, 1995).

Stimulated by particular ethnographic examples, Jeannette Marie Mageo and Douglas

Hollan's contributions both seek to identify processes that might figure in dreams everywhere. Mageo (2004) offers the striking idea that dreaming functions like holography, in which whole images can be projected from a small fragment. Dream narratives result from the provocation presented by a fragmentarily remembered image, which a person then feels compelled to elaborate. Dreams themselves are taken to be ruminations on emotionally upsetting incidents for which the self does not possess a ready schema or cognitive handle. Mageo points out that in Samoa many such disturbing experiences have occurred as consequences of the rapid, forced cultural change of the past century. The conversion to Christianity, the presence of large numbers of U.S. marines during World War II, and general Americanization occurred so rapidly that social values have not fully stabilized. The American insistence on gender and social equality, for example, still has not fully supplanted the traditional Samoan value of hierarchy. People are caught in double binds that result from this disjunctive cultural history, and these contradictions produce emotional vulnerabilities. The holographic dream represents a mode in which people grapple with this situation and produce new cultural forms and ideas in the process.

Douglas Hollan's (2004) contribution provides considerable nuance to Littlewood's earlier quoted assertion that knowledge of psychobiology offers little insight into the meaning of dreams. He cites cases in which American women experienced dreams indicating the onset of cancer. These examples support the contention that dreams, at least sometimes, do represent the state of the body–mind. Hollan considers such dreams to belong to a category of “selfscape dreams” in which one surveys one's own state of being, both in relation to others (i.e., socially), and in relation to one's own internal physical condition. Selfscape dreams work at the manifest level; their meanings are direct and relatively literal. A trained psychoanalyst as well as anthropologist, Hollan does not draw on classical Freudianism, which tended to focus on the latent content of dreams, but rather develops his approach from the ideas of the psychoanalysts Kohut and Fairbairn. Hollan's article also points toward the need for increased cooperation between anthropology and neuroscience in exploring the articulation of physical processes with cultural representations of dreaming.

Perhaps the most profound and contentious development within sociocultural anthropology over the past 20 years has been the impact of postmodernism. The book *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) advanced the case that ethnography is not an accurate science but the product of an individual's encounter with another society. The idea of “reflexivity” addressed this by advocating more representation of the researcher's personal and subjective engagement with the research as well as an indication of the effect of the researcher's presence on the data collected. Over the past 2 decades the discipline of anthropology also became more receptive to the idea of ethnographic study in Western societies, and even to studies done in the researcher's own society—“anthropology at home.”

This helps contextualize Barbara Tedlock's (2004) contribution. She relates the story of how she learned to dream according to the Ojibway Native American tradition of her grandmother. She narrates early childhood dreams, the acquisition of the turtle as a guardian spirit, and the way she overcame polio with the help of her grandmother's therapeutic techniques. The elements of this autobiography resemble the life histories of shamans in many parts of the world. This account is particularly valuable for not solely being a firsthand, reflexive account of a shaman's own internal development but also contributing to the small but growing literature on female shamans.

This example brings us full circle from the first article in this collection, in which Wax (2004) observes an opposition between societies that believe in the power of dreams and the (mainly) Western societies that do not. Clearly the situation is complicated. A society like

the United States is multicultural and porous to influences from Native American traditions as well as to the traditions of incoming populations. In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, pre-Christian traditions involving dreaming, such as Wicca, shamanism, and magic, may be revived or reinvented (Luhmann, 1989; Woodman, 2003). Another impetus to involvement with the power of dreams may come from advanced research in academic psychology, such as that conducted by LaBerge (1985) into lucid dreaming.

Tedlock (2004) is surely right that people embrace lucid dreaming for different reasons and in different ways. The enactive theory that she identifies, in which dreams serve as a motive force in personal and social development, is potentially a generalizable theory. In this article she only claims it for Native Americans (and presumably other societies such as the Ongee), who are connected to a culture in which dreaming is a socially recognized, everyday mode of relating to both the natural and social worlds. The formulations of the Victorians, Lévy-Bruhl, Wax, and ultimately Tedlock are all somehow fundamentally addressing the topic of how and why dreams are important in some cultural worlds and not in others. This is an enduring topic that stimulates newer and ever more subtle observations. We can expect anthropologists to continue to develop and refine their approaches to this subject in decades to come.

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