

of anthropologists have interpreted dreams psychodynamically, as expressing the dreamer's inner wishes, fears, and conflicts.

### Dream Space and the Space of Waking Life

A dream takes place in a subjective space, different from the space of waking life. The relationship between these two spaces is problematic. We consider one "imaginary," the other "real," but both have the same kind of subjective existence. In certain cultures, both spaces are considered real, though they may or may not overlap. For some, dreaming is just a different way of acting in life space: an Ojibwa Indian, coming to a spot for the first time, said he had visited it in a dream. In other cultures dreams are an entry into a different level of reality. Yet no culture confuses dreams with waking reality or fails to make a distinction.

Dreams in some cultures may be considered real acts or channels of communication. The story is often told of the missionary who was astounded at the frequency of adultery confessed by his converts, until he discovered that they were confessing, as sins actually committed, acts of adultery they had carried out in dreams. Many cultures hold that dreams involve direct communication between the dreamer and the person dreamed of, who may be held to have dreamed the same dream. To dream of someone erotically may mean that person is thinking about the dreamer with desire (among the Parintintin of South America), or may even be considered an intimate contact (Arapesh of New Guinea). The effects of love magic may show up in the dreams of the man or woman targeted with the magic (Trobriand Islands). Sufi disciples in Pakistan may be called by their *pir* (holy man) in a dream.

Dreams may be unique windows into the "other side of reality"—sources of supernatural knowledge. The religious figures called *shamans*, who go into trance and contact spirits for healing, are often called to their role by "initiation dreams." Priests, mediums, or shamans may communicate with spirits in their dreams; but in some cultures, ordinary people can enter into contact with supernatural beings through dreams. "Anyone who dreams has a bit of shaman," the Parintintin say. The Azande of Central Africa perceive the process of being bewitched

### CULTURAL ASPECTS OF DREAMING

---

The emphasis on dreams and beliefs about them differ considerably across cultures. In certain societies, dreams are generally dismissed as unreal figments irrelevant to the important concerns of day-to-day life. In other cultures people consider dreams important sources of information—about the future, about the spiritual world, or about oneself. In some, dreams are considered to be a space for action like waking life, or a means for communication with other people or with the supernatural. Certain societies attribute such importance to dreams that they have been designated (by Alfred Kroeber) *dream cultures*.

Cultures in which dreams are taken seriously accumulate a depth of observations of their dreams, so their beliefs may be of value to understand dreaming. Freud appealed to such folk wisdom for confirmation of his theory of dreams as wish fulfillment (see FREUD'S DREAM THEORY).

How dreams are dealt with in different cultures may be examined from four perspectives: beliefs people hold about the nature of dreaming; conventional systems by which people interpret particular dreams; the social context in which dreams are shared (or not shared) and discussed; and the ways in which dreams are used in practice, especially in curing. In addition, a number

through bad dreams, and Parintintin dreamers sense the presence of demons by nightmares: The feeling of anxiety betrays the demonic presence.

Dreams may also serve as a domain for real action. In some South American groups dreams are a medium for shamans to exercise their power: Parintintin, Tapirapé, and Ye'cuana shamans cause events by dreaming them (Kracke, 1991, pp. 205–206). In the first two, shamans' dreams play an important role in the conception of children: The soul to be born appears in a dream to a shaman, who directs it to a woman's womb. In the Trobriands, the spirit of an ancestress appears to a woman herself to announce conception. Jivaro (Shuar) men in Ecuador acquire their *arütam*—a soul essential for success in hunting and warfare—in dreams or visions.

In many cultures, then, the world in dreams claims a reality as great as the world in which one wakes. The question has been raised, Which is *more* real? The Chinese philosopher Chüang Tzu raises it in the form of a now well-known parable: If I wake from a dream that I am a butterfly, am I a man who has dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that I am a man? For the Ye'cuana and Tapirapé of South America, major parts of creation took part in dreams of the culture heroes. In India, the reality of dreams may be considered equal to that of waking, and the Upanishads hold that the world is itself a kind of dream (O'Flaherty, 1984).

### Cultural Beliefs About the Nature of Dreaming

Cultural beliefs about dreaming are varied and complex. A frequently encountered concept is that dreams are the experiences of the soul of the sleeping person that wanders during sleep. The nineteenth-century anthropologist E. B. Tylor considered this to be the most typical primitive conception of dreams, and in fact argued that the first concept of soul grew from such a belief. The Mehinacu of Brazil identify such a soul with the "eye soul," which is visible in the inverted human image one can see in someone's eye (Kracke, 1991, note 76). The Andaman Islanders see dreams as related to a soul manifested in one's smell (see below).

People in many cultures—even in some of those in which dreams are seen as existing in

some kind of real space—at the same time recognize that dreams are a kind of thought process. Quite common, in fact, is the observation that dreams are a continuation or transformation of a train of thought one was following as one went to sleep. Barbadians attribute their dreams to "studying"—thinking about something intensely. These beliefs implicitly recognize what Freud called the *day residues*, memories from the prior day that go into the dream.

### Interpretation of Dreams as Predictions of the Future

In many cultures, dreams are held to provide knowledge of the future—either literally or, more often, metaphorically, through symbolic references to future events (like the dreams interpreted by Joseph in the Bible) or by certain rules (such as "dreams mean opposite"). The interpretation of dreams as omens is very nearly a universal tenet of dream lore. Descriptions of such systems of dream interpretation abound in the anthropological literature on dream beliefs (Kracke, 1991, pp. 206–208). Barbara Tedlock (1981, 1991) and her husband Dennis were apprenticed to a Quiché Maya dream interpreter in Guatemala and earlier studied dream interpreting among the Zuni.

Why are such systems of dream interpretation so common? Certain conventional interpretations may help dreamers allay anxiety from a disturbing dream. In many systems of dream augury, emotion-laden dreams (violent, sexual, or frightening) are given relatively neutral or benign and positive interpretations: They foretell good hunting, for example, or general "good luck" or "bad luck." In Corsica and in Portugal, to dream of someone's death gives that person longer life. To explain disturbing dreams as "really" meaning something quite different may be reassuring.

### Social Embeddedness of Dreams

Telling a dream may be a significant social disclosure, and there are social rules that govern appropriate settings and the kind of dreams that may be told. The context in which a dream is imparted may itself add something to its meaning, which

may be conscious and intended (as when a man tells a woman he has dreamt of her) or may be unconscious (as is the transference message of a dream told in an analytic hour). Dreams in some cultures may provide important political arguments (as in ancient Rome according to Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*). In such a culture, for example, among the Sambia of New Guinea (Tedlock, 1987), the way a dream is told in a public, political context may be quite different from how it is told in private and may have a different meaning. Cultures differ, too, in the degree to which dreamers are held responsible for their activities in dreams. An erotic dream, among the New Guinea Arapesh, may be considered an adulterous act; the Sambia hold the dreamer accountable only for a dream he has told publicly. Dreams in some cultures contribute to the identity of the person: In Plains cultures one acquires one's guardian spirit and life path in a dream or vision; among the Jivaro of Ecuador, one acquires one's soul; and Pakistani Sufis may be led by a dream to their spiritual masters.

### Therapeutic Use of Dreams

Dreams are important in a number of cultures for activities that some observers have called psychotherapeutic. Various rituals have been treated as therapy, from peyote rituals among the Ute Indians to elaborate systems of dream interpretation by specialists among the Diegueño Indians (Bourguignon, 1972). The seventeenth-century Iroquois had a ritual, perhaps cathartic in nature, in which a dreamer told his or her dream and others fulfilled it (Wallace, 1959). A major distinction is between those cultures in which it is the dreams of the *patient* that are used in therapy (the Iban of Borneo, the Ute, ancient rabbinical cures, Euro-American psychotherapy); those in which it is the dreams of the curer or shaman that are important (Makiritare, Tapirapé, and Parintintin of South America); and those in which both are used, such as the Diegueño.

Anthropological findings about uses of dreams in other societies have led to some developments in therapeutic practice in the United States. Kilton Stewart (1962) described a supposedly therapeutic use of dreams among the Senoi in the Malay tropical forest. This account stimulated the

development of dream groups in the 1960s to experiment with such practices, but recent evidence marshalled by Dentan (1985) and Domhoff (1985) has called Stewart's description into question. (See also SENOI DREAM THEORY.)

A particularly interesting and valuable contribution is that of George Devereux (1951), an anthropologist who was also trained as a psychoanalyst. Working as a therapist with a Plains Indian patient, Devereux worked out a process of psychotherapy based on Plains Indian dream beliefs and practices.

### Personal Meaning of Dreams

Dreams reflect the dreamer's feelings about events and relationships. If they are understood in terms of the very private code of expression that can only be unraveled through the dreamer's own associations to the dream, dreams can be used to get at a person's unconscious wishes, feelings, and fantasies about people and relationships. The wishes and fantasies may be incompatible with the person's cultural norms and values, although those values are not at all irrelevant to understanding the feelings and why they are repressed.

Some of the most sensitive interpretation of dreams of North American Indians has been done by the anthropologist Dorothy Eggan. Eggan got several Hopi Indians to tell their dreams and their free associations to them. In a series of finely crafted articles, she uses the dreams to get at their inner subjective experience of their cultural beliefs and values. Her premature death in 1965 left much rich material untapped. (For references to her work, see Eggan, 1961; von Grunebaum and Caillols, 1966.)

Sometimes culturally specific beliefs about dreams are essential in understanding what a dream means for an individual dreamer. Eggan wrote about the general meaning for Hopi dreamers of a particular mythical serpent that appears in their dreams. In Moroccan culture, some men are plagued with a possessive female spirit, Aisha Qandisha, who appears in their dreams and has sexual encounters with them and then demands their absolute faithfulness to her as her husband. Such dream elements, which can express various conflicts over sexual wishes, are termed



by Vincent Crapanzano (1975) "symbolic-interpretive elements for the articulation of conflict."

### Cultural Differences in the Dreams Themselves

Naturally, dreams in different culture have different subject matter, simply because people's experiences are different. But are there deeper differences in the *kinds* of dreams people have, or in *how* people dream?

Certain typical dreams (such as dreams of falling, flying, examinations, or being rooted to the spot when trying to run) seem to occur in all cultures, though some studies suggest they vary in frequency. Other dreams may be frequent in a culture because of that culture's beliefs about the meaning of dreams: In a culture where a "falling down house" is believed to predict death, it may become a typical dream in that culture.

There are also clear cultural differences in recall of dreams. In modern Western cultures, many people rarely remember their dreams. In some, such as that of the Parintintin, most people remember several dreams every night. Furthermore, in some cultures people dream quite openly of the sort of childhood memories and fantasies we rarely are in touch with: dreams of learning sexuality from watching parents, for example, or dreams that reproduce childhood ideas about childbirth. In psychoanalytic terms, dreams in these cultures tend to be less *disguised* than in ours (though there are no cultures where dreams are completely undisguised).

Reports from many cultures suggest the possibility of learning to *control* one's own dreams. If shamans are believed to be able to cause things to happen by dreaming about them, either directly or in symbols, then they must be able to dream at will of what they want to cause (or of its symbol). In the training of Quiché Maya dream interpreters, a novice may be instructed to await the recurrence of a certain dream on a given date and to complete an action in this dream that was left incomplete in the first (Tedlock, 1981, 1987). Stewart reported that the Senoi taught their children to change their dreams. Under the name of LUCID DREAMING, the notion of awareness and control of one's own dreams while in them has

been a source of controversy in modern dream research.

### Dream Beliefs as Theories of Dreaming

To recognize a set of cultural beliefs about dreams as constituting a theory of dreaming requires a very close understanding of the native theory itself and of the precise aspect of the dream to which each specific term or belief refers. Few anthropological studies of dreaming have achieved this level of precision as yet, though a few anthropologists have noted parallels with the dream theories of our own culture, especially with Freud's.

The notion that one's thoughts continue into sleep and turn into a dream recalls not only Freud's notion of day residues, but also the dream-laboratory observation of a continuous train of thought that develops through dreams and the nocturnal thoughts between REM periods. The idea that dreams are wish fulfillments also recurs in many cultures.

An especially interesting dream theory comes from a hunting culture of the Little Andaman Island. The Ongis believe that a vital constituent of the person is one's personal smell, which tends to disperse and must be conserved to avoid depletion and consequent illness. During sleep, the spirit or soul associated with the person's smell comes out and goes to each spot the sleeping person has visited during the day, collecting the smell the person left there and bringing it back to the sleeper's body. One must not awaken a sleeping person lest this dreaming process be interrupted, exposing the person to grave danger of illness.

This idea of part of us wandering and visiting in dreams the places we have been during the day can readily be recognized as the day residues that go into the composition of a dream. But the reintegrating process described in this theory may be compared with recently proposed theories that dreams serve the function of sorting through the experiences of a day and integrating them with past experiences stored in memory. The Ongi speak of the process of reintegrating the smells with the body as *dane korale*, "spider home," suggesting how the dream weaves the past day's experiences back into the web of the self.

Careful study of such theories of dreaming in other cultures may lead us to new ideas about the nature of dreaming.

## REFERENCES

[Note: Many articles on cross-cultural study of dreams may be found in the journal *Dreaming: Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams*.]

- Bourguignon E. 1972. Dreams and altered states of consciousness in anthropological research. In Hsu FLK, ed, *Psychological Anthropology*, 2nd ed, pp 403-434. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman.
- Crapanzano V. 1975. Saints, *jnun* and dreams: An essay in Moroccan ethnopsychology. *Psychiatry* 38:145-159.
- Dentan RK. 1985. A dream of Senoi. Buffalo, N.Y.: SUNY Buffalo Council on International Studies.
- Domhoff GW. 1985. The mystique of dreams: A search for Utopia through Senoi dream therapy. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Devereux G. 1951. *Reality and dream: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Eggan D. 1961. Dream analysis. In Kaplan B, ed, *Studying personality cross culturally*, pp 551-577. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hollan D. 1989. The personal use of dream beliefs in the Toraja Highlands. *Ethos* 17:166-186.
- Kracke W. 1979. Dreaming in Kagwahiv: Dream beliefs and their intrapsychic uses in an Amazonian indigenous culture. *Psychoanalytic Study of Society* 8:119-171.
- . 1991. Languages of dreaming: Anthropological approaches to the study of dreaming in other cultures. In Gackenbach J, Sheikh A, eds, *Dream images: A call to mental arms*, pp 103-224. Amityville, N.Y.: Baywood.
- Lincoln JS. 1935. *The dream in primitive cultures*. London: Cressett.
- O'Flaherty WD. 1984. *Dreams, illusions and other realities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- O'Neill CW. 1976. *Dreams, culture and the individual*. San Francisco: Chandler & Sharp.
- Stewart K. 1962. The dream comes of age. *Mental Hygiene* 46:230-237.
- Tedlock B. 1981. Quiché Maya dream interpretation. *Ethos* 9(4):313-350.
- . 1987. *Dreaming: Anthropological and psychological interpretations*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1991. The new anthropology of dreaming. *Dreaming* 1:161-178.
- von Grunbaum GE, Callois R, eds. 1966. *The dream and human societies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wallace AFC. 1959. The institutionalization of cathartic and control strategies in Iroquois religious psychotherapy. In Opler MK, ed. *Culture and mental health*, pp 63-96. New York: Macmillan.

Waud H. Kracke